Anchoring abroad: Exploring the composition, diversity and roles of Portuguese self-initiated expatriates' social networks

Running title: *Self-initiated expatriates' social networks*

Abstract

This exploratory study focuses the social networks established by Portuguese self-initiated expatriates. Based on a constructionist approach we examine the narratives of self-initiated expatriates about the composition, diversity and roles of their social networks. The research revealed that despite the support provided by home connections before and during relocation, host connections become fundamental. The research highlighted that whereas the existence of a social connection abroad facilitated the decision to relocate, assisted in the job search, and eased adjustment; the Portuguese diaspora was absent from these host networks. As extant research has mainly focused corporate expatriates working for multinational corporations, this research is significant in extending the literature to an analysis of the home and host social networks established by self-initiated expatriates. This study contributes to the literature by examining an under-research topic such as international social networks, through the experience of Portuguese self-initiated expatriates, who are one of the largest communities of international workers in Europe.

Keywords: Portuguese self-initiated expatriates, social networks, composition, diversity, roles

Introduction

The world globalization is changing workplaces and requiring the international transfer of human talent. The attraction and retention of talent is essential to organizations and is an opportunity for global exposure and career development to individuals. According to the OECD World Migration Outlook 2013 (OECD, 2013a), some 232 million international migrants are living in the world today, and about six out of ten reside in the developed regions. The proportion of highly educated immigrants in OECD countries has risen in the past decade (+70%), reaching 27.3 million in 2010/11. Over the last few years, Portuguese emigration has also grown in consequence of the economic crisis, with roughly 70.000 departures per year (OECD, 2013b). Today, 1,492 million Portuguese emigrants aged 15 and above are residing in another OECD country, which represents one of the highest emigration rates (14.2%) in Europe (OECD, 2013b). The emigration of the Portuguese highly-skilled represents already 12.9% (OECD, 2013b). While available data do not differentiate the migrant population, there is theoretical grounding for new forms of international work (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013; McKenna and Richardson, 2007), such as international business travelling (IBTs), corporate expatriation (CE); and self-initiated expatriation (SIE). A corporate expatriation is a long-term assignment for a 3-5 year period, of company initiative (McKenna and Richardson, 2007); whereas self-initiated expatriation is usually started without organizational sponsorship and for an undefined period of time (McKenna and Richardson, 2007). Self-initiated expatriates have often been considered migrants, which disregards their specificities, namely the fact that they tend to be highly qualified (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Doherty, Richardson and Thorn, 2013); and do not aim to relocate permanently (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013). Yet, as SIEs are numerous among the migrant population (Myers and Pringle, 2005; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010), we presume that the increasing number of departures from Portugal (INE, 2013) includes a growing number of

corporate expatriates (CE) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). Scant statistics combined with researchers' focus on corporate expatriates and migrants; and the absence of conceptual coherence in defining international movers (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013) result in an insufficient knowledge of SIEs (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013).

A growing body of literature has underlined the characteristics that distinguish SIEs from other international workers, such as their motivations, their career type and the challenges involved in their repatriation (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Doherty *et al*., 2013, Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen and Bolino, 2012). Among these recent studies, there is an increasing awareness of the need to understand SIEs in context (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Doherty *et al*., 2013). As SIEs are embedded in home and host social groups, knowledge gained from their social interactions may help understand their specific cross-cultural experience. To the extent that SIEs decide to move and work abroad (Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013) for a limited period of time (Thorn, 2009); and are hired under local, host country contracts (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Lo, Wong, Yam and Whitfield, 2012); the establishment of social networks and social support are fundamental (Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater and Klein, 2003; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008; Stroppa and Spieβ, 2011). As SIEs are known for their self-directedness (Doherty, 2013; Lo *et al.*, 2012) and lack of corporate support (Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010), their social networks are expected to have a stronger influence on their decision to relocate, their career development; and their host adjustment (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how SIEs build social networks and whether these connections facilitate cross-cultural transitions. This aim is achieved through the narratives of Portuguese SIEs, as Portugal has one of the highest emigration rates in Europe (OECD, 2013b), including a growing number of SIEs. In detail, we aim to answer the following research questions:

(1) What is the composition and diversity of social networks?

(2) Which roles are performed by social connections; and how do they influence cross-cultural transitions?

The following sections present the literature relevant to this study, including the topic of Portuguese SIEs providing the context for this research. The subsequent sections offer an overview of the methodology, followed by the description of the findings and their discussion. Conclusions and both theoretical and practical implications are presented in the final section.

Self-initiated expatriation

An expatriate is 'someone who left his or her homeland to live or work in another country, usually for a long period of time' (Vance, 2005, p. 375). However, this definition is too vague to embrace the multiple forms of cross-border mobility, so research has aimed at other labels to delimit each type of foreign experience (Shaffer *et al*., 2012). For instance, Inkson and colleagues (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry, 1997) have contrasted two types of international work – expatriate assignment (EA) and overseas experience (OE) – in terms of initiation, goals, funding and career type. These authors have drawn attention to the fact that most expatriates around the world are not sent away by their employers, but decide on their own to work abroad. This delimitation has opened a new line of research that enlightened the differences between company-backed expatriates (Doherty, Dickmann and Mills, 2011) and self-directed expatriates (Felker, 2011). Suutari and Brewster (2000) expanded this seminal contribution and stressed the initiative as the defining characteristic: expatriate assignments happen within a corporate environment whereas 'self-initiated foreign work experiences' occur by individual directedness. They add – summarizing the findings from Inkson *et al*. (1997) – that in terms of goals, corporate expatriates have to complete an organizational project while SIEs pursue individual motives. Regarding funding, unlike corporate

expatriates, SIEs have to fund the transfer. Lastly, a corporate expatriate is focused on an organizational career while SIEs engage in a boundaryless career and manage their own repatriation arrangements (Doherty, 2013).

To date, the conceptualization of SIEs has been made through the comparison with other expatriate populations (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013). For instance, Shaffer *et al.* (2012) are responsible for a meta-analysis of global work experiences, summing up what is known about corporate expatriates (including traditional corporate expatriates, flexpatriates, short-term assignees and international business travelers) and SIEs. The outcome of this conceptual framework is an outline of the profile of a SIE: prior to the decision to leave the country, SIEs take into consideration the cultural proximity and the security of potential destinations, together with the living conditions, the status of the place and the reputation of its inhabitants. Furthermore, SIEs tend to be young and free from work-family conflicts that usually assist corporate expatriates. These individuals driven by the excitement of a challenge and/or previous international experiences – either personal or professional – are more likely to engage in what they believe is an opportunity that will pay off in terms of development, acquisition of global career competencies and financial progression. This is mainly a male perspective, although women do start their own expatriation process more often due to a lack of compatible opportunities in their home countries (OECD, 2013b; Shaffer *et al.,* 2012). According to the same meta-analysis, SIEs are generally willing to embed in the local culture and overcome the stress factors emerging from such a life-changing event (Shaffer *et al.,* 2012). While these attributes are relevant to distinguish SIEs from corporate expatriates, they are insufficient to single out SIEs from immigrants and other qualified sojourners (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013; Zikic, Bonache and Cerdin, 2010). The criteria of being temporarily deployed and being regularly employed at destination are additionally required to understand how SIEs distinguish from immigrants (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013). Throughout this study, we use the

term 'self-initiated expatriate (SIE)' to refer to all international movers who are skilled professionals and are individually motivated to take the lead of their career and fund a temporary stay abroad, engaging in foreign and regular employment opportunities (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Cerdin and Selmer, 2013; Doherty *et al.*, 2013).

In recent years, there has been a noteworthy amount of literature on the profile of the SIEs. The first attempts approached self-initiated foreign experiences from a culturally-based perspective. Myers and Pringle (2005), for instance, refer to those international experiences as overlapping a New Zealand tradition according to which youngsters travel overseas to explore different cultures and to reflect upon their options, taking some jobs along the way but with no strategic career purpose. Gradually, however, the literature started to address self-initiated expatriation as a valid career choice. The effort to understand SIEs goes now beyond an analysis of who moves abroad to the attempt to understand why and how people move (Cerdin and Le Pargneux, 2010). Being a SIE is demanding in terms of career building because the individual has to manage his/her professional path, from the maintenance of the motivation levels to the resolution of administrative contingencies and conflicts triggered by stereotypes or prejudice (Cao, Hirschi and Deller, 2012). As a consequence of the international experience, SIEs launch global social networks that strengthen their skills, and know-how, which may improve their employability upon return (Shaffer *et al.,* 2012).

Although these approaches have deepen our understanding of SIEs, they also indicate that there is not a homogeneous profile of SIE (Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Tams and Arthur, 2007) and this diversity deserves to be explored (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013). Given this heterogeneity, still little is known about how the social context influences SIEs decisions to relocate, and how influential are SIEs social networks. Thus, additional research is required to explore how SIEs use their social connections to find a regular employment at the destination,

and how social networks are built and maintained. To address these research gaps, this study explores the composition, diversity and instrumentality of SIEs social networks.

Social networks

A social network refers to the relational ties connecting individuals and it is the basis for an individual's social life and career development (Li and Rothstein, 2009). The strength of such ties varies according to how time-consuming, intense, reliable, and reciprocal they are (Granovetter, 1973).

In the context of international mobility, 'social networks refer to relational ties between the expatriate and other individuals, such as family, peer expatriates, local working partners, or local friends' (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008, p. 33). To date, expatriates' personal networks have been examined, in particular their size, diversity, localization, closeness and frequency (Wang and Kanungo, 2004); while on-line social networks have been overlooked. In addition, the link between expatriates' networks and expatriates' adjustment and performance has been explored (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008); and previous research has found a positive correlation between the establishment of social networks and expatriates' outcomes, such as adjustment, performance and well-being (Li and Rothstein, 2009; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008; Stroppa and Spieβ, 2011). Apparently, social networks have an impact on expatriates' effectiveness through the provision of cultural information and social support, which means that expatriates decode the expected behavior in the host country and develop their sense of belonging through their contacts and local interactions (Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991; Li and Rothstein, 2009; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008). In this process, informal social interactions also play a major role in cross-cultural transitions (Van Bakel, Gerritsen and Van Oudenhoven, 2011).

Concerning the roles performed by social networks, former studies have mostly contrasted the social networks of corporate expatriates and SIEs. While company-assigned expatriates rely heavily on intra-organizational networks (Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011; Shen and Kram, 2011), SIEs build more extra-organizational networks and keep a broader range of professional and social ties with locals (Mäkela and Suutari, 2012). Expatriates tend to socialize with whom they relate more easily and with those who have gone through similar life events (Li and Rothstein, 2009); while SIEs report greater motivation to build stronger friendship and professional local ties (Mäkela and Suutari, 2012); and report higher cultural adjustment (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). Nationality remains a key feature in the roles performed by social connections: despite the closeness with home country nationals and other expatriates, host national networks are still the main providers of host cultural information and social support (Li and Rothstein, 2009).

In a recent study target to SIEs, Froese (2012) made an attempt to explain the functions of SIEs social interactions. He explored the motivation and cross-cultural adjustment of academics from different nationalities working in South Korea and concluded that 'SIEs receive social support and draw satisfactory interaction adjustment from social interactions with fellow nationals or other foreigners' (p. 1108). Apparently, social interactions provided informational, instrumental and emotional support, which is consistent with the predictions of social capital theory (Adler and Kwon, 2002).

Studies based on the social capital theory have typically examined how the characteristics of the social network, such as size and strength of ties, influence expatriates adjustment and well-being (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008). The general assumption is that social networks provide the support required to decrease uncertainty and ease cross-cultural transitions. This support can be through the form of information (e.g., informational support), resources (e.g., instrumental support), indication of appropriate behaviors (e.g.,

feedback support); and emotional support (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008). Thus, social capital theory would predict that the size of host SIEs social networks and closeness of ties would influence SIEs cross-cultural transition.

So far, the existing accounts fail to indicate what are the composition, the diversity and the roles performed by SIEs' social networks and how influential they are. For instance, prior research has shown that corporate expatriates and SIEs get support from more than one social source, and that relationships extend to home and host countries (Mäkela and Suutari, 2012; Shen and Kram, 2011). Likewise, there is evidence that home country social relationships fade, while social capital develops over time as expatriates interact. Yet, research to date has not conveniently explored the content of SIEs' social networks from a relational and contextual perspective. Because skilled SIEs have voluntarily initiated an expatriate assignment with the intention of a temporary stay, and have found a regular employment at destination, they are more likely to have developed and maintained host social interactions. The more contact SIEs are having with locals, the higher the size and the more culturally diverse the social networks are. Thus, we draw on these assumptions from social capital theory to examine the composition, diversity and roles of the social networks established by Portuguese self-initiated expatriates.

The research focus: social networks of Portuguese self-initiate expatriates

Portugal has been a country of emigration since the XV century (Klimt, 2000; Peixoto, 2012), and today, 1,492 million Portuguese emigrants are residing in OECD countries (OECD, 2013b); over estimates of 2.5 million Portuguese-born and 2.5 million Portuguese descendants - forming the Portuguese diaspora in the world (Malheiros, 2011). Over the last few years, emigration rates have grown in response to the economic crisis (Arroteia, 2010; Peixoto, 2012), mobilizing mainly the highly-skilled. While the Portuguese emigration wave

of the 1960s and 1970s were directed toward some industrial European countries, such as France, Belgium, Germany and Luxemburg (Klimt, 2000); the present wave includes new European destinations. Official data released by INE (2013) confirms the recent intensification of the emigration flows, including both temporary and permanent movements. Data from the Observatório da Emigração (2013) confirm that six out of the ten top countries receiving Portuguese emigrants are in Europe; and new destinations, such as the United Kingdom and Spain, coexist with the revival of existing routes to Luxemburg, Germany or Switzerland (Malheiros, 2011). Outside Europe, Africa and Brazil are especially attractive (Peixoto, 2012). It is generally accepted that these trends are due to the country's economic crisis (Arroteia, 2010), combined with the promise of a European identity and citizenship (Luna-Arocas, Guzmán, Quintanilha and Farangmehr, 2001; Malheiros, 2011) and the quest for social mobility (Peixoto, 2012).

Despite the dimension of the Portuguese communities living abroad, few management studies have target Portuguese international workers, such as corporate expatriates (Martins, Rego and Proença, 2012; Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso and Werther, 2012) and SIEs. Thus, this study examines the social networks of Portuguese SIEs, in particular their composition, diversity and roles, aiming to further the study of the SIE population. To date, little is known about SIEs social networks and even less is known about Portuguese SIEs; so these are two relevant contributions of this research.

Method

Procedure

The present study follows a constructionist approach and an analysis person-centered to focus the social networks established by Portuguese self-initiated expatriates. We gathered data through semi-structured interviews. We considered the interview an appropriate approach

(Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) to reveal how SIEs describe their existing social connections, and the composition, diversity and roles of their social networks.

We used a non-probability sampling method to target Portuguese SIEs, selected according to the following criteria: (1) holding the Portuguese nationality; (2) being highly qualified workers; (3) having financed the relocation to a country of their choice without corporate support, seeking for professional and personal development; (4) aiming to work and live abroad temporarily; and (5) being open to participate in this study by taking part in an interview.

The final set of research participants included thirteen Portuguese SIEs. This sample size meets the minimum requirements for an exploratory approach to a research topic (Rowley, 2012). Two interviews were face-to-face and the remaining eleven were done through Skype, given the location of the interviewees. All interviews were held in Portuguese, from March to July 2013. The interview protocol covered a wide range of topics, such as the composition, diversity and roles performed by the social connections established and maintained at home and at destination. The shortest interview took thirty minutes and the longest lasted one hour and a half. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed. Only transcripts appearing in this manuscript were translated.

Participants

Thirteen Portuguese self-initiated expatriates participated in this study. From this, nine participants (69%) were male and four (31%) were female. Ages ranged from 24 to 54 years. Nine participants were single (69%) and two were married with children (15%). All participants were employed at the moment of the interview, and seven went abroad when they were unemployed. As we purposively sought skilled professionals, all participants occupied qualified positions at destination, such as teachers, nurses, and engineers. On average, they

have been working and living abroad for one year and a half and the main destinations were in Europe. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of research participants.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data analysis

The interview material was collected, transcribed, and content-analyzed in Portuguese. Direct quotations were translated into English by one of the authors and later back translated into Portuguese by another researcher to preserve data integrity. The process was double-checked and revised whenever disparities arose. We followed a four-step procedure to ensure a reliable content analysis. In the first step, we included data preparation to ascertain that all interviews and transcripts were included. In the second step we established the rules applicable to content analysis. We selected the paragraph as the unit of context and the theme as the unit of analysis. In the third step we performed data coding. We established an initial coding scheme based in the literature (e.g., home and host social networks; composition, diversity, and roles performed by social connections); which we later refined according to the findings from iterative reading. Finally, in the fourth step, we covered data examination and interpretation, resulting in final recodification and refinements. This thematic content analysis assisted in the description and interpretation of research findings and was performed with the aid of NVivo 10.

Research findings

This study examines the social networks established by Portuguese SIEs. This section presents the main findings for each research question.

Social networks of Portuguese SIEs: composition and diversity

The testimonies regarding the networks maintained by Portuguese SIEs while working abroad reveal the existence of home and host networks. Both networks include interpersonal and organizational contacts, and expectedly for SIEs, organizational connections were less frequent.

Regarding home country networks, the interviewees agree that family/partner and friends composed the interpersonal networks based in Portugal, while home organizational contacts included a few pre-departure connections with recruitment agencies, employer companies, and diplomatic institutions. In relation to host country networks, the interpersonal networks encompassed close friends, co-workers, acquaintances and partner. Some host contacts were initiated while the SIEs were still in Portugal, whilst others were new contacts, started upon arrival. Host organizational connections were not frequent, apart from the host employer organization. In addition, three participants mentioned they had dealt with either Portuguese or host country diplomatic institutions, and one person referred the local union.

Overall, our findings reveal that this group of Portuguese SIEs shares many similarities in terms of network composition. All had networks based in Portugal and in the host country and in each country the networks were structured around interpersonal and organizational ties, which is consistent with the experience of other SIEs (Mäkela and Suutari, 2012; Shen and Kram, 2011). The new lifestyle made it difficult to maintain regular contacts with friends in Portugal, and host connections gained importance as home interpersonal networks fade over time, despite of homeland friendships.

Regarding the cultural diversity of host SIEs networks, it was much influenced by the profile of the employing organization. Participants working for multinational corporations enjoyed the benefit of building professional ties with locals and third country colleagues; while participants working for national-based companies only interacted with host country

nationals. Only three participants working for local companies developed connections with a multicultural staff. There was also some cultural diversity among the group of acquaintances and friends at destination. While a few SIEs said they got along mainly with other Portuguese for the cultural proximity and/or because they were recruited together, they seemed to use these bonds to extend their connections with locals and third country expatriates. This bridging mechanism was achieved through a snowball process of meeting other people in social events:

One thing that works all the time is friends introducing new friends. (Male SIE in New Zealand).

Yet, the group of 'best friends' was largely formed by fellow nationals and only exceptionally by locals and third country nationals:

The network is now larger because I have co-workers, but at the end of the day everything turns out to be basically between us, the social moments are spent with one another… (Female SIE in France).

Summing up, all participants acknowledged that living and working abroad added multiculturalism to their networks. Yet, our findings suggest that SIEs networks and social capital depended much on the nature of the employment relationship found abroad.

Social networks of Portuguese SIEs: roles and influence on cross-cultural transitions
The interviewees provided several examples of how interpersonal and organizational networks were helpful to secure a regular employment at the destination and to settle in.

In general, home connections were especially influential in the decision to relocate and in the process of securing a job abroad. While the majority of the participants took the decision to leave Portugal on their own, five SIEs mentioned the important role of the family, including parents' influence:

Therefore, this process was very …I gave it a lot of thought, it was rational, because I have always put this choice aside. I have always said that I didn't want to go, so this also results from some pressure from my parents and then I ended up making my decision… (SIE in France)

The organizational networks established during the pre-departure stage with either recruitment agencies or host employers were also much influential: nine out of the thirteen interviewees left Portugal with their employment abroad secured. In addition to guaranteeing a job, these organizational contacts provided informational and instrumental support regarding legal aspects, housing and language courses, as explained:

'…all the companies offered the trip, housing, handled the paperwork and some companies even offered a free French course. Although I have already attended three French courses, I felt the need to learn more. And so I chose the company that offered the course.' (Female SIE in France)

'...the moment we got to the hospital, there was a welcoming program by Portuguese colleagues who worked there for over a year and that reception included information shared by a Portuguese colleague on what we ought to do to become legal, where to go, how to get there, simple things like this, but that can make our lives more difficult if we don't know where they are.' (Female SIE in England)

Some participants reported having on-line networks that helped them in establishing preliminary contacts. A male SIE in New Zealand summarized his experience in few words:

'Honestly …100% of my stay here is due to LinkedIn. Professionally… both me and my wife, it is 100% LinkedIn.' (Male SIE in New Zealand)

Another SIE added how internet was useful to assist in the relocation process:

'The only resource I used was simply internet, because…for example, I knew in advance where I was going to work, so I used it to get to know the city, which buses, which city areas, that was it.' (Male SIE in Republic of Ireland)

The remaining SIEs secured a job at the destination mostly through personal connections with Portuguese residing abroad that provided information and references:

'I came here empty handed. I had to knock at the doors, introduce myself, ask for interviews, attend interviews, it was search, search. […] she [a host Portuguese friend] was the person I indicated in the curriculum as a reference contact.' (Male SIE in Norway)

These host interpersonal connections were activated prior to departure and then maintained and intensified during the stay, as explained:

'As a matter of fact, she [a host Portuguese friend] made it much easier to understand and fit in the so called Norwegian culture, indeed, and in many different aspects I would be completely lost without this background.' (Male SIE in Norway)

It is clear from our data that all participants had, before departure, one main connection at destination - whether professional or interpersonal - that became an 'anchor tie'. This 'anchor' differed in terms of closeness and nationality: while a few SIEs started the move through the contact with a few locals, most participants used their social connections with other Portuguese, whether acquaintances, friends and family members living abroad or even Portuguese friends who relocated together. All participants agreed on the relevance of these initial contacts as they provided useful advice and settlement support. In addition to welcoming the newcomers, this anchor tie was also a privileged connection to expand SIEs' host social network. Table 2 identifies these additional roles provided by host connections; distinguishing them in terms of cultural closeness.

Insert Table 2 about here

While Portuguese SIEs seemed to derive informational, instrumental and even emotional support from all their host connections, whether friends, family or just social acquaintances; feedback support seemed to be taken from their closer personal ties. Feedback provides an indication of the appropriate and acceptable behaviors at destination that help SIEs reduce their level of uncertainty and stress. According to our findings, this type of support was more easily provided by those who were fellows already living abroad and with whom SIEs had stronger ties. By sharing a common set of values and language, these closer connections were better able to grasp what could be a source of cultural conflict and cause of behavior concern alerting SIEs, who willingly accepted the feedback as valuable and reliable:

"She [a Portuguese friend] arrived in Germany before me, she is living in Germany for six years and, so, when I was searching for a job, for instance, she gave me a few tips on how to prepare an application and on what is more acceptable in Germany than here, for example, the type of photograph that shall be included in the curriculum." (SIE in Germany)

Yet, it is worth mentioning that eleven participants referred to their own experience and observation as sources of information to figure out the host country's *modus vivendi*. In other words, they recognized that the learning process at the host country had a component of solitude. A Portuguese female living in Germany summarized this idea as follows:

'At the end of the day, it is all about learning by comparing this one with my own country. (…) For better or worse I am all alone and in order to survive I have to be independent.' (Female SIE in Germany)

Despite the initial bonds with fellow nationals who were instrumental in the relocation process, the participants in this study said they did not approach the host Portuguese migrant

community. They presented two main reasons for their choice: the social differences that grew different generations apart and the will to assimilate into the host society:

'…the difference in the academic qualifications causes a significant difference in our lifestyles and the places we attend and the activities we do…' (Female SIE living in England)

'…I think that once I am here, I have to melt into the country and not get stuck to Portugal. Therefore, I think that the more we move away from the Portuguese community, the easier it is to our adjustment…' (Male SIE in Brazil)

Because these SIEs had voluntarily initiated an international assignment, they showed a high level of self-directedness for the creation and mobilization of social ties to improve their cross-cultural adjustment and well-being.

Discussion and implications

This exploratory study focused the social networks established by SIEs. Drawing on the social capital theory, we contribute to the literature by exploring the composition, diversity and instrumentality of Portuguese SIEs social networks that assist in finding a regular employment abroad and adjusting to the host country.

Our findings revealed that Portuguese SIEs had home-based and host-based networks, with both professional and interpersonal connections. While home networks were essentially formed by interpersonal connections with family/partner and friends; connections with diplomatic institutions and recruitment agencies were instrumental to find a job abroad. In turn, the composition and cultural diversity of host networks were much influenced by the characteristics of the employer. Similarly to the findings of Mäkela and Suutari (2012) with Finnish SIEs, the development of social capital among Portuguese SIEs remained largely work-driven. To the purpose of securing a regular job and smooth cross-cultural transitions most participants triggered a preferential connection abroad, usually a Portuguese fellow, who

provided further support. Over time, the host network of Portuguese SIEs become higher in size and wider in cultural diversity, while the influence of home ties faded. Overall, these findings are consistent with previous empirical evidence regarding the characteristics and roles of social networks engendered by different international movers (Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011), including corporate expatriates (Stroppa and Spieβ, 2011) and SIEs (Froese, 2012; Mäkela and Suutari, 2012; Shen and Kram, 2011). Our findings also support the propositions of the social capital theory (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008): the more contact SIEs had with locals, the higher the size and the more culturally diverse the social networks were. Adding to these predictions, our findings show that this cultural diversity is influenced by the cultural diversity of the host-country and host-employer.

Yet, this idea that the size and diversity of sojourners' networks depend on the structure and cultural diversity of the context is less shared (e.g. Bozkurt and Mohr, 2011), as earlier research have emphasized the importance of individual characteristics and preferences (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008) as antecedents of social networks; and have explored the benefits of larger networks (Wang and Kanungo, 2004). Likewise, research has overlooked how SIEs seek and build network ties at destination and the role of these ties, which are key contributions of this research.

The findings of this study also lend empirical support to the theory of network tie formation developed by Farh and colleagues (Farh, Bartol, Shapiro and Shin, 2010). Through the experience of Portuguese SIEs, we have shown that: (1) tie formation with locals is influenced by SIEs motivation to seek support (thus supporting Stage 1 of the model); (2) SIEs approached distinct host connections with the purpose of getting different sorts of support (which supports Stage 2 of the model); (3) over time, host connections provided informational, instrumental, emotional and feedback support, according to their ability and willingness to help (thus supporting Stage 3); (4) host support assisted SIEs cross-cultural

transition and adjustment (Stage 4); and (5) the repetition of the interactions with supportive locals further extended SIEs host networks (Stage 5). In addition, the model distinguishes the paths through which expatriates seek and build informational and emotional support. To this theory, the process of building ties to get emotional support requires connections with knowledgeable and emphatic hosts, who are 'perceived to have adjustment empathy' (Farh *et al*., 2010, p. 436). Hence, host connections can be valuable sources of support when they are perceived to have gone through a similar adjustment experience. Indeed, our data partially support these arguments, since we have shown that distinct host connections provided informational, instrumental and emotional support, but only fellow nationals from a similar social status and generation were sought to provide feedback. We further argue that this suitability to provide support is related with the extent to which fellow nationals are perceived as similar in terms of cultural background, generation, language, occupational status, and relocation experience, which explains why Portuguese from the diaspora did not belong to the social networks of our sample. While the current study is exploratory, it contributes to our knowledge of SIEs social networks by exposing how network ties are formed to ease cross-cultural transitions. It also extends our understanding of Portuguese SIEs.

Implications for research

Despite the contributions of this study, further research is warranted on the social ties that SIEs are likely to seek and build abroad (e.g. antecedents of social networks), as well as the roles of these ties (e.g. outcomes of social networks). Future research may explore which attributes influence how SIEs select host connections and add them to their social network, and which factors may be differentially important to distinct instances of support. In particular, given the self-directedness of SIEs, future work might explore which connections are perceived to be willing and competent to provide different types of support.

It is generally known that social networks are expanded through international assignments (Osman-Gani and Rockstuhl, 2008), and that social connections abroad are fundamental to drive the move. In particular, our results suggest that the connection with an anchor tie at destination impacts the decision to go abroad and influences the cross-cultural transition. Yet, little is known about how social connections drive the move, or how network ties contribute to the adjustment, and ultimately influence SIEs intentions to stay or repatriate. Thus, studies further examining the outcomes of social networks are welcome.

Finally, in this study, interviewed Portuguese SIEs were not motivated to seek support through the Portuguese diaspora. According to the diaspora literature, three criteria are usually associated to a diaspora: dispersion in space, orientation to a homeland and boundary delimitation (Barnard and Pendock, 2013; Brubaker, 2005). Hence, a Portuguese diaspora would aggregate all nationals living outside the country who maintain a homeland orientation and preserve the boundaries of the community to the preservation of a distinctive identity. Indeed, our findings reveal that these criteria do not apply to queried Portuguese SIEs, who purposefully pursued their professional interests abroad aiming to be fully integrated into the host society. Thus, seeking and maintaining ties with the diaspora could be counterproductive. Yet, given the heterogeneity among SIEs and diasporas we may question whether the same behaviors translate to other contexts and nationalities. For instance, a SIE relocating to a destination where his/her diaspora holds a distinctive and positive image in society may be more motivated to seek and gain diaspora support, while a SIE relocating to a country where fellow nationals belong to an ethnic and disfavored minority may not. Also, little is known about the willingness of diaspora members to provide support to SIEs from the homeland (Barnard and Pendock, 2013), which is another interesting avenue for future research. As one limitation of this study is the sample of international workers, which was small and not meant

to be representative of SIEs, the extent to which our findings are specific of this sample or are replicable is something requiring further research.

Implications for practice

Despite being exploratory, our findings offer a few practical contributions for employers, for Portuguese SIEs, and for migration policy-makers. For employers wishing to play the competition for global talent, this study shows how Portuguese SIEs secured a regular employment before departure through connections with recruitment agencies and host friends and acquaintances. Because of their dependence on social interaction and relationships, to prepare and concretize a self-initiated assignment, SIEs use 'anchor ties', which are privileged host connections. This finding warns organizations to the importance of trust. Human Resource Professionals aiming to attract, select and retain global talent have to be part of these professional networks and have to understand how they can activate home and host social networks to support these talented newcomers. In addition, surveyed SIEs reported that the size, composition and cultural diversity of their host social networks were largely influenced by the employing organization. According to their testimonies, coworkers and colleagues are sources of legal, logistic, technical and cultural information that facilitate integration and adjustment. These are resources that employers can easily mobilize to develop specific welcoming programs, thus fostering the adjustment and well-being of newcomers (Li *et al.*, 2009; Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010).

For Portuguese self-initiated expatriates, this study demonstrates the usefulness of forming professional and interpersonal network ties in the host country to obtain informational, instrumental, and emotional support, and valuable feedback. An important implication of this research is that if Portuguese SIEs aim to secure a job abroad and adjust well to the host country, they have to seek and maintain host professional and interpersonal

connections, which can easily start through home connections. Fellow nationals having gone through a similar transition are usually a helpful starting point.

Finally, this exploratory research provides insights to migration authorities and policy-makers. This study illustrates how fellow nationals serve as anchors to other highly-skilled people wishing to initiate and develop an international career. As these qualified nationals working abroad serve as attraction poles, migration authorities can trace future international movements and thus provide better administrative, legal, labor and/or diplomatic assistance. Furthermore, they can design policies target to withstand this 'brain drain' and incentivize the return of SIEs.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how the composition, diversity and roles of the social networks established by Portuguese SIEs influence their cross-cultural transition. Drawing on the social capital theory and following a qualitative approach we found that Portuguese SIEs were purposeful in engendering home and host social networks, and that these networks are diverse in terms of nationality, size and support roles, which confirm the heterogeneity among self-initiated expatriates (Cerdin and Selmer, 2013; Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Tams and Arthur, 2007). The present study makes also unique empirical contributions to the five-stage process model of tie formation of Farh and colleagues (Farh *et al*., 2010). In addition, our research highlights that Portuguese SIEs hold to one main host connection from pre-departure onwards but Portuguese diaspora is not a source of information or support to these contemporary SIEs, which warrants further investigation. Thus, we hope that this research prompts the interest for future studies that advance our understanding of SIEs networks in general, and Portuguese SIEs in particular.

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Table 1 – Participants demographics

Identification	Age (years)	Gender	Marital status	Assignment Tenure (years)	Destination country	Occupation at home	Occupation at host
Interviewee 1	33	F	Single	2	Germany	Teacher - Trainer	Teacher - Client Services Adviser
Interviewee 2	24	M	Single	1.4	Spain	Unemployed	Civil Engineer
Interviewee 3	25	M	Single	1.5	Brazil	Unemployed	Civil Engineer
Interviewee 4	24	M	Single	0.1	Brazil	Unemployed	Civil Engineer
Interviewee 5	34	M	Married with 1 child	5	Republic of Ireland	Pharmacist	Pharmacist
Interviewee 6	32	M	Married	0.9	New Zealand	IT Engineer	IT Engineer
Interviewee 7	54	M	Married with 1 child	0.8	Angola	Unemployed - Civil Servant	Consultant
Interviewee 8	24	F	Single	0.7	England	Unemployed	Nurse
Interviewee 9	25	F	Single	1.8	France	Unemployed	Nurse
Interviewee 10	33	F	Single	1.5	East Timor	Student Adviser	Teacher Translator
Interviewee 11	28	M	Single	2.5	Czech Republic	IT Engineer	IT Engineer
Interviewee 12	24	M	Single	0.9	Brazil	Unemployed	Civil Engineer
Interviewee 13	35	M	Married	0.9	Norway	Architect	Architect

Table 2 – Types of support by anchor tie

Support by anchor tie	Locals - Portuguese		Locals – Non-Portuguese	
	Family/Friends	**Acquaintances**	**Friends**	**Acquaintances /Coworkers**
Informational support	*'There is always the language issue and when we deal with governmental institutions, they don't use English… This is just an example of how easier it was because she was there for me.'* (SIE in Norway)	'[She gave me tips] *at different levels, how to look for a house, etc… '* (SIE in Germany)		*'…going to the bank and figuring out how that works and how to withdraw money and deal with the paperwork… even the driving, the rules, how to deal with the policemen…'* (Male SIE in Angola)
Instrumental support	*'I've sent my CV in advance to D. and he sent it to a couple of places, so I first came here to attend interviews. Then one day one of his suppliers said he needed an engineer and he recommended me.'* (SIE in Brazil)		*'…that friend picked me up by car and I stayed a couple of days at her place. Then we came here a day before New Year's Eve so that I could find a house…'* (Male SIE in Spain)	
Feedback support	*'…it was my first time in Brazil, I knew nothing about Brazil, I had a terrible opinion about Brazil, so, having someone here who offered me a place to stay and who told me "look, if you want to get a job you'd better do this, this and this'…* (SIE in Brazil)			

Support by anchor tie	Locals - Portuguese		Locals – Non-Portuguese	
	Family/Friends	**Acquaintances**	**Friends**	**Acquaintances /Coworkers**
Emotional support	'...she helped me, (…) she introduced me to some of her Portuguese friends...' (SIE in Republic of Ireland)	'...the main advantage we've with this couple is that we speak Portuguese whenever we meet them, we are culturally closer to them than to anybody else...' (Male SIE in New Zealand)	'…at first I got along with the people introduced by that couple who received me, their family, their friends.' (SIE in East Timor)	'He was always a great guy, in fact he picked me up at the airport, which was totally unexpected, but had a huge impact on me.' (Male SIE in Brazil)