Self-Initiated Repatriation: A Cross-Country Comparative Study Between Denmark, France, and Germany

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Abstract

Self-initiated repatriation (SIR) remains an under-researched topic. Applying Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1972), we conducted a qualitative study and investigated SIR into the Danish, French, and German career field. We found that expatriation leads to a modification of the habitus and career capital. While economic capital issues were not found to play a major role, the modified habitus only appeared to affect the return into the Danish career field where self-initiated expatriation was valued negatively. Especially the modified set of cultural and social capital was pertinent for re-entering the French and German career field. Theoretical and practical implications are illustrated.

Key words: Assigned expatriates; Bourdieu; career capital; career field; content analysis; deductive; Denmark; economic capital; France; Germany; incorporated cultural capital; inductive; institutionalized cultural capital; network; portfolio; rules of the game; self-initiated expatriates; self-initiated repatriates; social capital; theoretic generalization; theory of practice; qualitative; value.
Introduction

Research about careers upon repatriation has largely focused on the intra-company return of traditional assigned expatriates (AE) who have been sent abroad by their employer (e.g. Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Thomas, 2002). Professionals nowadays often initiate their own expatriation (Myers & Pringle, 2005) and leave their country without company aid (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). These self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) of whom many thousands are circulating around the global economy (e.g. McKenna & Richardson, 2007; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010) have become a focal point of interest in the last few years. While the area of foreign experiences initiated by the individual is now rudimentarily understood, the area of self-initiated repatriation, i.e. the repatriation without company support at the behest of the individual (Begley, Collings, & Scullion, 2008) is an under-researched area (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). In this paper, we aim to enlarge our understanding about this heretofore neglected topic in academic research by investigating the modification of highly skilled expatriates’ habitus and career capital, i.e. economic, cultural, and social capital abroad and its effect for the re-entry into the Danish, French, and German labor market. As theoretical framework, we use Bourdieu’s (1972) theory of practice since it allows a context-sensitive view of careers (Mayrhofer & Schneidhofer, 2009). It considers institutional and organizational factors as well as individual aspects (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003; Mayrhofer, Meyer, Steyrer, & Langer, 2007) of international careers and therefore permits a holistic approach which is crucial for understanding (Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldmann, 2007).

1 The literature provides many definitions for ‘highly-skilled’ professionals. We refer to the common definition given by Iredale (2001) who defines them as “having a university degree or extensive / equivalent experience in a given field” (p. 8).
Our research is significant for several reasons. First, it enlarges our understanding about self-initiated repatriates’ (SIR) attributed value upon return into the home country labor market (see Doherty & Dickmann, 2009 for the symbolic capital of AEs). This is of special interest for SIRs since they have to compete for jobs with local talent as they are not repatriated into a sending institution and have to seek a job back home. Second, highly-skilled SIRs can represent a valuable human resource in filling key-positions (Begley et al., 2008). Home-country companies seeking for talent should have an interest to know in how far SIRs’ career capital meets their requirements. Last, the debate surrounding the concept of self-initiated repatriation goes well beyond the frontier of business organizations (Forstenlechner, 2010). Our theoretical framework allows us to investigate to what extent the re-entry value of SIRs’ modified habitus and career capital differs with respect to the country of return. Comparative career research being virtually non-existing (Mayrhofer & Schneidhofer, 2009), we hereby contribute to a better understanding of career fields, especially in a European context.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. We start by briefly reviewing the pertinent literature on self-initiated repatriation and career (fields) on the basis of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice (1972) and deduce our research questions. Subsequently, we present our study and its results. We finish with implications for theory and practice and limitations of our research.

**Self-Initiated Repatriation**

SIRs have been defined as self-initiated expatriates repatriating on their own behalf and without company aid (e.g. Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). For our research purpose, we enlarge this definition and define self-initiated repatriation as the repatriation of former expatriates who initiate their return on their own without company support. This broadened definition allows us to include former SIEs as well as AEs.
Studies about SIRs investigated reasons and motives for a return of expatriates that are characterized by a mix of weak host country pull and strong home country pull factors (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Governments were only found to be able to incentivize repatriation or ease its process (Forstenlechner, 2010). Begley et al. (2008) analyzed the career re-entry to the Republic of Ireland and worked out that compared to repatriating AEs SIRs are likely to suffer greater financial and emotional pressure as they have to seek themselves a job in their home country. The authors showed that employers did not value the SIRs’ international experience. In order to make themselves more attractive to potential employers, SIRs downplayed their international experience and tuned down their CV.

**Application of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice to Careers**

Applying Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice (1972) to the career context, careers unfold in career fields with specific logics and where certain rules apply. Agents endowed with field-relevant career capital try to maintain or improve their position by acquiring and applying career capital wherefore a specific habitus is required (Mayrhofer, Meyer, Steyrer, Maier, Langer, & Hermann, 2004c). The global or general habitus consists of a system of dispositions and refers to a person’s way of thinking, feeling, evaluating, speaking, and acting that pre-formats all the expressive, verbal, and practical manifestations and utterances (Krais, 1988; Lindh & Dahlin, 2000). The career habitus is that one habitus which fits to a specific career field. It is developed through socialization and experience and ensures that actors act according to the rules and invest the ‘right’ combination of career capital on the respective field (Mayrhofer et al., 2004a). If all actors believe in the field-specific illusio (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), i.e. the sacred value of the stake of the career field, and act “intentionally without intention” in conformity with the rules of the game (doxa) (Bourdieu, 1998), the structure and basic assumptions within the field are
confirmed and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1992a; Crossley, 2001). The fact that involvement in a field shapes the habitus (modus operandi), which, in turn, shapes the actions reproducing the field (opus operatum), shows the circular relationship between the two Bourdieuan elements field and habitus (Iellatchitch et al., 2003). In addition to the career habitus, agents also own a set of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) which, depending on the rules of the game, gets a certain value and thus becomes (symbolic) career capital. It is the amount of capital as well as the composition of the portfolio, i.e. the relative parts of the different sorts of capital, which determines, where each agent is located in the career field (Schneidhofer, Schiffinger, & Mayrhofer, 2010). Economic capital, e.g. income, appears in the form of general, anonymous, all-purpose convertible money and can be more easily converted into social and cultural capital than vice versa (Postone, LiPuma, & Calhoun, 1993). Social capital involves relationships of mutual recognition and acquaintance and is based on networks (Mayrhofer et al., 2004a), whereas cultural capital takes the form of incorporated cultural capital, e.g. competences or skills, objectified cultural capital, e.g. books, and institutionalized cultural capital, e.g. academic titles and degrees (Iellatchitch et al., 2003).

**Boundaries of Career Fields – A Country Perspective**

Boundaries of career fields have to be investigated by empirical research (Mayrhofer, Meyer, Iellatchitch, & Schiffinger, 2004b). Bourdieu considers a boundary to be situated where its effects end, i.e. where the stakes of the game lose their impact. Within Europe, we can find cultural differences between different clusters, e.g. the Nordic cluster, the Germanic cluster or the Latin cluster. Careers are influenced by national culture (e.g. Thomas & Inkson, 2007). It has even been suggested that the very concept of careers has different meanings across cultures (Derr & Laurent, 1989; Laurent, 1986). In France, internal labor markets are highly important and
traditional organizational career paths are far from having disappeared (Dany, Mallon, & Arthur, 2003). According to the French career model, the selection of potential top managers takes place at entry and is mostly based on elite educational qualifications gained in “Grandes Ecoles” (Evans, Lank, & Farquhar, 1989) which are considered as “talent hotbed” (Alexandre-Bailly, Festing, & Jonczyk, 2007). Networks (Burt, Hogarth, & Michaud, 2000) which are often built up during study period (Barmeyer & Mayrhofer, 2007) are determinant factors to succeed in the French (political) tournament career (Rosenbaum, 1979). This French career model is based on elitist values and appears to be unique in Europe (Hartmann, 1997, 2007). It has been suggested that recruitment and career development in Germany is more based on expertise and functional competences and is rather egalitarian in nature (Evans, Pucik, & Barsoux, 2002). However, in the last few years, this has to some extent been questioned. Especially Hartmann (2007) argued that the German initiative of excellence (2004) has lead to a distinction between “excellent” and “average” universities in the German education system (p. 81) which is likely to lead to a more elitist recruitment in the future. Hence, the heretofore existing Germanic career model needs to be confirmed by further empirical research. In Denmark, the labor market is characterized by flexible hiring and firing rules (Datta Gupta & Smith, 2002), active labor market policy, and a generous social safety net (Andersen & Svarer, 2007). Compared to France and Germany, job tenure in Denmark is low, whereas job mobility is rather high (Andersen, Haahr, Hansen, & Holm-Pedersen, 2008), which is why especially the external labor market plays an important role. In Scandinavian countries, management development appears to be generalist (Evans et al., 1989). Recruitment takes place for technical or functional jobs and is, comparably to the recruitment in the above postulated Germanic model, not elitist.
Considering the cultural dependency of careers and the labor market specificities in Denmark, France, and Germany, we expect to find differing rules of the game on the respective national career fields. Hence, we have reasons to believe that national borders represent virtual boundaries of career fields.

**SIRs at the Interplay Between Field, Capital, and Habitus: The Research Focus**

If self-initiated repatriation represents a move between career fields, SIRs are likely to face different re-entry conditions depending on their country of return. Figure 1 shows the self-initiated repatriation process through the lens of our theoretical framework.

**INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

The individual’s re-entry success on the native career field depends on the fit of the habitus as well as the amount and composition of career capital, i.e. the relative parts of economic, cultural, and social capital in the entire career capital portfolio, to the career field. Its value is defined by the specific rules of the career field which are likely to be different within our investigated countries. Hence, we expect the international experience in general as well as the habitus and the career capital portfolio to be valued differently with regard to the country of return.

When moving abroad, agents are endowed with a career capital portfolio of economic, cultural, and social capital. During expatriation, the agent’s set of capital is likely to change (e.g. Jokinen, Suutari, & Brewster, 2008) also leading to a change of the respective capital fractions. Further, Iellatchitch et al. (2003) have argued that “habitus has a dynamic quality” (p. 739) and
will develop. Abroad, the agent’s career capital portfolio and habitus is evaluated based on host
country-specific rules resulting in the value of the expatriate’s career capital and habitus in the
foreign career field. Upon return, however, SIRs import their (modified) career capital portfolio
and habitus, which is evaluated based on the rules of the native career field and which then
results in the re-entry value on the home country career field.

In summary, agents endowed with (modified) career capital and habitus continue their
careers under home-country rules and are therefore in competition with local agents. In our
study, we focus on three main research questions:

1. How do the career capital portfolio and the (global and career) habitus develop abroad?

2. Do national frontiers represent virtual borders of career fields?

3. In how far do the SIRs’ international experience and (modified) habitus and portfolio of
career capital affect the return to Denmark, France, and Germany?

The Study

For our comparative study, we adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-
structured interviews with 22 highly skilled SIRs to Denmark (N=3), France (N=10), and
Germany (N=9) (King, 2004). Qualitative approaches offer in depth understanding (Denzin &
Lincoln, 2008) required due to a dearth of studies and a lack of theory about self-initiated
repatriation. Our sample is constituted of 17 male and 5 female respondents; the average age is
39.5 years. 17 respondents held a Master’s or MBA degree, 4 interviewees held a Doctoral
degree and one had studied on Bachelor’s level at the time of the interview. All respondents were
SIRs, i.e. they had repatriated on their own volition without company support. Nine of them had
gone abroad with company support whereas 13 respondents were SIEs.
All interviews were conducted via telephone or skype. We followed a pre-tested semi-structured interview guide which had been elaborated in English, French, and German. Kruse (2010) suggests that ideally, interviews should be conducted in the respondents’ mother tongue. Therefore, we conducted all interviews with German SIRs in German and all interviews with French returnees in French. As one Dane’s (I10) German level was almost equal to that of a native speaker, we conducted the interview with this respondent in German. The interviews with our remaining Danish SIRs were conducted in English which represented a foreign language for both the interviewees and the interviewers. Our interviews lasted between 37 and 113 minutes (69 minutes on average). All interviews were type-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Verbatim quotations were translated into English by the authors if necessary.

We used qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Mayring, 2003) to analyze our collected data. MaxQDA-software was used to arrange and code the interview transcripts (Kuckartz, 2009). For generating and structuring our coding frame, we combined the concept-driven (deductive) way with the data-driven (inductive) approach (Schreier, 2012). In a first step, we drew upon our theoretical framework which provided our main categories, e.g. the creation of cultural capital during expatriation or the role of social capital for re-entering the native labor market, and subcategories. Additional main- and subcategories emerged inductively from the data, which allowed an in-depth description of our material.

**Results**

**Self-Initiated Repatriation – A Career Capital and Habitus Perspective**

Expatriation modified the absolute amount and relative parts of the different types of career capital of our respondents. Hence, SIRs were endowed with a different capital structure upon return than before expatriation. We found mixed results vis-à-vis the development of
economic capital. The majority of our respondents (N=16) reported a positive development of their economic capital basis. Most mentioned was the fact of receiving an attractive income that was due to a higher base salary (N=7), allowances granted by their employer (N=4), and lower tax-levels (N=5). Two former expatriates mentioned lower expenses than in their native country due to lower living costs. During their time abroad, some expatriates (N=7) were able to save money. By contrast, a minority reported low salary levels abroad (N=6; all former SIEs) and that being abroad made them spend more money than at home due to a more extraverted lifestyle (N=2) or higher living costs than in the native country (N=6). Another emerging topic especially pertinent for one former SIE was a negative effect on the pension at home as she did not pay into the home country pension scheme during her time abroad.

As expected, our data shows a positive effect of expatriation on the cultural capital basis, especially vis-à-vis the incorporated cultural capital. Following Fink, Meierwert, and Rohr’s (2005) typology which has also been applied by e.g. Berthier and Roger (2011), we found out that expatriates had acquired market-specific knowledge (e.g. foreign language skills, especially with regard to English as this was often their working language, or knowledge about the legal and system differences; N=11), job-related management skills (e.g. professional, communication, and leadership skills; N=16), personal skills (e.g. international and intercultural skills, self-confidence, especially due to challenging tasks abroad, and social competences; N=20), and general management capacities (N=5). The latter were mentioned less often because only a few of our sample worked on higher management level and had the opportunity to acquire this type of competences. Interestingly, one person (I19) also reported that expatriation had had a negative effect on his incorporated cultural capital. This former French AE illustrated that his English
skills had been negatively affected due to the fact that he had to interact in English with other non-native speakers on a day-to-day basis.

*At the age of 25, I spoke four languages: French, English, Italian, and Spanish. At the age of 50, I still speak French, my mother tongue, but my English level is weaker than when I was 25. The reason is quite simple. The English which is spoken on an international level needs to be applicable to everybody. (…) you have to speak Globish, i.e. English with a simple, limited vocabulary, basic English.* (I19, French)

In order to document their international experience, SIRs mainly reported to have received employers’ references or certificates (N=12). Two persons also received a letter of recommendation from their former employer. However, several respondents (N=7) indicated not to have received any written acknowledgment of their work abroad. Hence, these expatriates had not acquired any institutionalized cultural capital. In order to demonstrate what their work had been about, a few (N=3) decided to describe their tasks in their CV in a very detailed way as it was the case for one German manager:

*I wrote it down for myself in my CV. My CV is very descriptive. I have one short version and one long version where I document everything since I have no written acknowledgement from my employer.* (I9, German)

Investigating social capital issues, we found mixed results vis-à-vis the maintenance of the existing network. A couple of SIRs (N=11) indicated they had maintained their old network during their time abroad, whereas others were not able to or interested in keeping their network alive. Of special pertinence for SIEs seemed to be to stay in contact with (former) colleagues (N=4) and former fellow students (N=5) or friends at home (N=3). While only one respondent had not created any new professional network at all, the majority (N=21) of the respondents
illustrated they had been able to create an international network within (N=4) and particularly outside (N=17) the employing organization with other expatriates in the host country, locals or built up an international network across countries. Sometimes, relationships with locals were weaker than in the home country.

Our data also shows a modification in the respondents’ global habitus and career habitus abroad. Some expatriates adapted their mindset and behaviors to the host country and even reported to have changed their identity:

I also had this experience that I started to dream in English and my identity changed because indirectly, I was forced to because I used to have this very national thinking and naïve way of behaving with honesty here from Denmark and that didn’t help me a thing (...). So I quickly found out how to become another (name of the person) (...). (I12, Dane)

For some of the respondents (N=4), the career habitus also changed or was clarified during their time abroad. One German manager (I9) who worked in the USA and UK illustrated that instead of planning everything into great detail as it is common in Germany, she is now more willing to take risks.

Self-Initiated Repatriation – A Career Field Perspective

Re-entering the Danish career field. All Danes of our sample adopted the strategy to repatriate and seek employment when already back at home. One (I10) engaged a coach for his job hunting on the Danish career field. International mobility appeared to be valued very negatively by Danish employers. All Danes (all former SIEs) had serious re-integration problems into the Danish career field.
In Denmark, strange enough, it is quite commonly known among us who have been working overseas that you cannot get a job in Denmark. They don’t want you. (I8, Dane)

One returning Dane (I10) thought that due to his experience abroad, he would be an interesting candidate for international Danish companies. Therefore, he was all the more surprised when he recognized that his profile was not sought after at all. This can to some extent be explained by the ‘Janteloven’ which is an implicit law deeply rooted in the Danes’ habitus.

Because of this phenomenon, I don’t know if you have heard it, but it is something called the Jante Law. They have it in many different countries, but most of it exists in Scandinavia. It is a rule, it is a hidden rule like, because the country is very national. So it is like you cannot stand out, you cannot be stronger than others, you know. You have got to be like everyone else and that sort of mental thinking. (I12, Dane)

Especially the fact of having expatriated on their own behest (SIE) seemed to be very detrimental for Danish returnees. One Danish SIR (I10) had the impression that if a Danish company had sent him abroad, he would have had an “excuse” for having left the country. On the other hand, he also reports that having repatriated on his own initiative was seen very positively as it was perceived as final comprehension that it is best at home.

Another Dane (I2) who had been in America explained that due to her expatriation she did not have enough networks in Denmark anymore, which made her re-entry problematic. Acquired incorporated cultural capital seemed not to be valued upon return, which sometimes led to frustration. A specific problem was that Danish companies were not open to things which were not familiar to them. Therefore, acquired incorporated cultural capital was apparently difficult to express.
So it was more like a work-life experience that I could put on my CV. In Denmark, they are not that open to things they don’t know, “what is this work, what is this school, what is this course?” (I12, Dane)

Finally, all Danes reported habitus-related difficulties upon return. Their habitus, i.e. their way of thinking and acting was not appropriate upon return to Denmark. While specific career habitus-related problems were not mentioned, respondents especially reported difficulties re-adapting to the Danish global habitus.

That is tough, because you have to put yourself into a box again. But repatriates, they don’t fit into boxes, because they have another identity, another image, they have a triangle identity (...). Now I am not (name of the person) the Dane, now I am (name of the person) the British-American Dane. (I12, Dane)

Re-entering the German career field. The majority of the German SIRs (N=5) searched a job from abroad and did not wait until coming home. One respondent (I9) took a sabbatical and only started her job search after one year. Contrary to the return into the Danish career field, the German SIRs' international experience was seen a lot more positively by home-country employers. Almost all German SIRs reported that, regardless of the country or the sector of activity, their international experience had a positive effect on their re-integration into the German labor market.

It was very important for the fact that I finally got a job at (name of employer). One of the requirements in the job advertisement was that the candidate had studied or worked abroad, ideally both. (I15, German)
While the majority of the respondents had to justify their self-initiated repatriation during job interviews, almost all reported a positive or at least no negative effect. For one German manager (I21) it was seen as an intelligent decision to quit his old employer as the image of this company had deteriorated. However, one German engineer (I6) also pointed out that, due to the fact of having changed company, he had to make his proofs again. His positive professional reputation he had built up abroad was of no use anymore and he had to start over again.

Only for one respondent (I21), financial issues had an effect on his re-entry into the German labor market. This former AE illustrated that his high salary abroad represented an obstacle to finding a new job since home-country firms had difficulty keeping up with such high salaries. Regarding the pertinence of social capital, we found mixed results. Four of our nine German SIRs reported not to have used social capital for their re-entry into the native labor market at all, whereas five respondents clearly expressed to have drawn on their network, especially on contacts they had already had before expatriating.

And they (former fellow students of responding engineer) talked to the respective firms and said “he is a fellow student of ours. He is very able; you should have a closer look at him.” So they campaigned for me. (I6, German)

Incorporated cultural capital issues which were mentioned by all German SIRs were especially pertinent for re-entering the German career field. Acquired personal skills, market-specific knowledge, e.g. language skills, and job-related management skills, mainly intercultural and professional skills were found to play an important role for a successful re-entry. One former SIE (I17) reported that his language skills and intercultural skills were specifically tested during his job interview and were the major reason why he got his job. Interestingly, this same person also mentioned a negative effect of absent institutionalized cultural capital for finding work. The
fact of not having any detailed written confirmation of his international experience led to skepticism among his future employer. Another former AE (I21) said one major reason why he had been selected was that he had acquired product-related and selling competences. Acquired project management or communication skills were further pertinent competences which emerged during our interviews.

One German manager who had been to the USA (I16) reported that his modified career habitus was not applicable back home in the native career field. While in the USA it is quite common to publish good (financial) results one has achieved and to highlight one’s incorporated cultural capital, this is not appropriate on the German career field. However, this manager did not report to have had any re-adaptation difficulties. The majority reported they were somehow missing the German global habitus and back at home, things went more easily for them again.

(…) and I have to say, I came back home to Germany after six years and I never had the feeling I had been away for six years. (…) And this gave me a lot of security. Here, life is simply easier, you know the rules and you do not need to pay attention to everything. (I9, German)

Re-entering the French career field. Similarly to the German respondents, five French SIRs searched a new job already from abroad, whereas only two started their job search back at home. Mixed results were found about the value of international experience on the native career field. For half of the respondents having worked abroad was valued positively. The value of the international experience apparently depends on the sector of activity and the country where the expatriate was. It came up that having worked for big prestigious companies abroad was seen positively whereas having worked as a volunteer in a NGO was penalized upon return. One French engineer (I1) reported that his international experience in an NGO was considered as
having been on holidays. Another French engineer (I13) illustrated that French private-sector companies did not understand the activities of former expatriates in NGOs abroad. Hence, they somehow tried to translate their experience into a more comprehensible language.

_So I did this translation work behind. You are partner. You are always partner during your development project. But you don’t say you were partner, you talk about CLIENT._

_So when you said CLIENT, they didn’t ask. (…) You need to adapt (your language) so that your dialog partner understands._ (I13, French)

The value of the international experience also depended on the host country. While it was reported that African countries were sometimes considered to be a little bit “olé olé” (I1) as French employers had the impression that the expatriate had more focused on enjoying the sun and the swimming pool rather than working (I3), one respondent (I11) reported that expatriating into other French-speaking European countries was not valued either as it was considered not to be different enough to the host country. More appreciated seemed to be host countries such as the Germany, Great Britain or the US as reported by I13.

During job interviews some of the respondents had to justify their self-initiated expatriation (N=3) and their self-initiated repatriation (N=4). Whereas one respondent (I1) reported that his self-initiated expatriation was seen skeptically as French companies considered him as instable and quickly willing to leave the company again, another French engineer (I3) illustrated self-initiation to be more valued than an assignment because SIEs were supposed to have been more challenged. The majority (N=4) of the respondents reported their self-initiated repatriation did not have any negative effect on their re-entry. However, one French engineer (I13) also illustrated it meant he had to make his proofs again, whereas one French manager (I19) reported about his difficulties to find a new job due to his age.
While economic capital was not mentioned to play any role in the re-entry into the French labor market, social capital issues were pertinent and mentioned by the majority (N=7) of the respondents. While three French SIRs did not use social capital, the rest especially drew on their already existing network, e.g. family members, friends or former fellow students. One French engineer (I20) was hired by a former professional contact in France she had worked with during her time in Senegal, i.e. a contact she had built up abroad.

Interestingly, only about half of the respondents mentioned incorporated cultural capital as pertinent for getting or not getting a job upon return. Acquired personal skills, e.g. open-mindedness, language skills or job-related management skills, e.g. autonomy or professional skills were valued for the re-entry. Problematic was the fact of having acquired too general competences as reported by one French engineer (I13) or the fact that due to a change of industry, the acquired competences were not pertinent any more as mentioned by another engineer (I19). Four respondents reported that institutionalized cultural capital, e.g. in form of diplomas, played an important role for the re-entry into the French labor market. One French engineer reported that one needs to have a diploma from a prestigious ‘Grande Ecole’, otherwise the acquired competences and the international experience is not valued:

*I have all that (international experience), but I did not study at a Grande Ecole. (…) So to say, you have to study at (name of a prestigious French engineering school) or you have to study at the big Grandes Ecoles of engineering in France, elite schools. This is the silver bullet.* (I13, French)

This same person also complains that in France, competences are not valued as careers are elitist, which is also confirmed by the majority of the other French respondents (N=7) who consider the value of the diploma as a critical key success factor for careers in the French career
field. Furthermore, it was reported those company representatives having graduated from one specific Grande Ecole tend to hire primarily graduates from this same school.

(...) it is limited by the network. People are seeking that. It has nothing to do with the competences. The network of those having studied at (name of the Grande Ecole), as soon as there is a CEO who has studied at (name of the Grande Ecole), he will prefer that his VPs have also studied at (name of the Grande Ecole). (I22, French)

One engineer (I1) illustrated that during his expatriation career field characteristics in France, especially with regard to pertinent aspects for an application, had changed. Therefore, he had to adapt his career habitus, which apparently was no problem for him. Three other French respondents reported that they had no problems to readjust their general habitus to the home country. One engineer (I13) was looking forward to the French habitus back home. However, one French manager (I4) also stressed his re-entry shock when he moved back to Paris after eight years abroad.

**Discussion**

The study results demonstrate that expatriation affects the habitus and capital basis. As to the effect on economic capital, we found mixed results. Some earned a higher salary abroad and were able to save money, others reported the contrary. While Suutari and Brewster (2000) found that the average salary between AEs and SIEs does not differ significantly, in our study those reporting a positive effect on their economic capital, especially on their salary had in large parts been sent abroad by their employers whereas SIEs mainly reported a negative effect. This finding is likely to be explainable by the higher hierarchical level of AEs in our sample and the fact that many SIEs had worked in low salary countries on a local contract basis. Furthermore, in their paper of this book Andresen and Gustschin (2012) found out that the overall expectancy
value of monthly income of international volunteers is lower than the average salary in their respective home country. As we also had international volunteers in our sample of SIEs, this may represent a further explanatory factor vis-à-vis the differences in the development of economic capital between former AEs and SIEs.

Not surprisingly and confirming e.g. Fink et al.’s (2005) results, we found out that former expatriates had built up incorporated cultural capital. SIRs were especially endowed with additional personal skills, job-related management skills, and market-specific knowledge upon return. From a human capital point of view, this suggests that the SIRs’ value for potential employers is enhanced abroad. This would also confirm Begley et al.’s (2008) statement that SIRs are likely to represent a valuable human resource in filling key positions upon return. Our findings concerning the development of institutionalized cultural capital indicate that some received employers’ references documenting one’s tasks and experiences as is typical in Germany or letters of recommendation, whereas others did not build up any institutionalized cultural capital. It has already been argued that HR-practices vary in different countries (e.g. Larsen & Brewster, 2000), which is confirmed by the results of our study.

We found mixed results regarding the maintenance of social capital abroad, whereas almost all respondents reported to have built up new contacts, particularly outside the employing company. This is in line with already existing research results, e.g. by Antal (2000), Mäkelä (2007) or Jokinen et al. (2008) who found evidence that SIEs also build up social capital, but to a lesser extent than AEs. However, more studies are needed to explore in how far expatriation affects the already existing network, since, as our results show, SIRs especially draw on contacts they already had before expatriating when re-entering the native labor market.
Finally, our data indicate that the former expatriates’ global and career habitus has been modified abroad. This finding is interesting and adds to the discussion about habitus stability. Bourdieu (1992b) or Iellatchitch et al. (2003) suggest that the career habitus has a dynamic quality and can be modified when changing the career field. This viewpoint is also shared by Mayrhofer et al. (2004a) who further claim that the global, general habitus focuses more on stability as it is developed during life span. In our study, it came up that in some cases, the career habitus had changed abroad, especially with regard to work attitudes, which shows that expatriates apparently understand what is at stake abroad (illusio) and behave according to the rules of the respective career field. The fact that the modified career habitus was not reported to represent a problem for re-entering the native career field is a sign that at the same time SIRs do not unlearn the rules of the game of the native career field. Apparently, agents can adapt their career habitus abroad (modus operandi), but at the same time do not lose the ability to invest the right combination of career capital on the native career field and re-adapt easily upon return. In some cases, our results also show that the global habitus had been modified which would indicate that the global habitus is not as stable as assumed (Mayrhofer et al., 2004a). Further research is required to shed more light on this area and to differentiate existing viewpoints. One key aspect might be to investigate after how much time in a foreign field the global habitus starts to change. This would be of special interest for returnees suffering from a modified global habitus upon return as this could indicate a reasonable upper time limit for staying abroad.

Our results give reason to believe that SIRs to Denmark, France, and Germany face different re-entry conditions and that the SIRs’ modified habitus and capital portfolio is valued differently with respect to the country of re-entry. Hence, national borders seem to represent virtual boundaries where rules of career fields lose their impact. By showing that self-initiated
repatriation can be seen as a move between career fields, we contribute to the request that boundaries of career fields have to be investigated empirically. SIRs to Denmark faced important re-entry problems into their native career field. Especially the ‘Janteloven’, an implicit law rooted in the Danish global habitus, appears to be well-suited to explain SIRs’ difficulties to re-enter the Danish labor market. Quitting the country can somehow be interpreted as a treason, having worked abroad is apparently seen very negatively. Especially the fact of having expatriated on their own initiative rather than having been sent by a company apparently represents a knock-out criterion for re-entering the Danish career field, which might lead to brain-waste upon return. Acquired cultural or social capital seems not even to be considered any more as one’s own decision to expatriate represents an important criterion for exclusion within itself. It appears that the Danish flexicurity labor market which highlights the importance of external labor markets within the country is difficult to re-enter once a Dane has expatriated on his own behest. Boundaries of the Danish labor market may very well be open within national frontiers, but appear to be more closed from an external perspective, especially for potential re-entering former SIEs. A lateral (re-)entry into the Danish career field appears to be difficult for this group of internationally mobile workers.

For SIRs returning to Germany, international experience seems to be valued positively. In their “Germanic Model” Evans et al. (2002) suggested that recruitment was not elitist and functional expertise was highly valued. Our results confirm the quintessence of this model and provide potential for enlargement. We found no evidence for an elitist recruitment of SIRs. The fact that the German initiative of excellence (2004) might lead to a more elitist recruitment in the future (Hartmann, 2007) seems not (yet) to be to the point. Incorporated cultural capital appeared to be highly important for the re-entry into the German career field. Not only job-related
management skills, e.g. functional competences as suggested by Evans et al. (2002), were highly valued, but also personal skills and market-specific knowledge, e.g. language skills, played an important role for a successful re-entry. Moreover, institutionalized cultural capital, especially in the form of employers’ references, were crucial in order to underline the international activity. Social capital issues, particularly existing contacts before expatriation, were also pertinent, whereas habitus was not found to affect the re-entry. At least no habitus-related problems could be identified. It rather represented a pull-factor to return home as respondents somehow missed the German global habitus. Having been out of the German career system, a lateral (re-)entry seems possible and its success dependents on the right capital fractions in one’s capital portfolio. Especially incorporated and institutionalized cultural capital and, also to a lesser extent, social capital issues were found to play an important role and have to be strongly represented, whereas we found no evidence for economic capital issues being of pertinence. Interestingly, one former German AE reported that economic capital issues negatively influenced his re-entry into the German career field as home country companies felt under pressure to keep up with his high salary abroad. This might point to the fact that rules of the game when moving between career fields have not fully been understood as this respondent would have suffered a lower salary than abroad anyway, even if he had been repatriated into his sending institution as “extras”, e.g. overseas allowances, would not have been paid by the employer anymore (e.g. Harvey, 1989).

Institutionalized capital issues seem to be of special importance for SIRs re-entering the French career field. Our study confirms that recruitment in France is highly elitist (e.g. Hartmann, 1997). It was found to be important at which Grande Ecole one had studied. If the diploma was not prestigious enough, re-entry appeared to be difficult. Only with a sufficiently valued diploma, incorporated cultural capital was taken into consideration at all and represented
a pertinent evaluation criterion. The academic literature has already shown the importance of the diploma for careers within the French career field (e.g. Alexandre-Bailly et al., 2007). In our study, we were able to demonstrate that institutionalized cultural capital is also of high importance for successfully re-entering the French career field. Hence, the value of the diploma does not lose its pertinence and institutionalized cultural capital represents a necessary condition for the re-entry into the French career field. Social capital in the form of external strong ties (Mäkelä & Suutari, 2009), especially former fellow students (Burt et al., 2000), were also found to strongly affect the re-entry. There appears to be a link between institutionalized cultural capital and social capital on the French career field. This leads to a social reproduction effect (Hartmann, 1997) and shows the dependence of the value of one’s network from the educational institution where one has studied. Contrary to Evans et al.’s (2002) assumption that recruitment in the Latin career model only takes place at entry, in our study, SIRs were also found able to return back into the French career field. Hence, a lateral (re-)entry into the French career system seems possible. This would indicate that boundaries in French careers are not as closed (any more) as indicated in the academic literature (e.g. Dany, 2003; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004), which would be in line with assumptions made by the new career literature (e.g. Sullivan, 1999; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Interestingly, the sector of activity abroad was also found to be pertinent for the value of the international experience. While having worked for big prestigious companies abroad was valued positively, having worked as an international volunteer was seen rather negatively and penalized. Scholars report that international volunteers acquire important professionally relevant skills and feel personally enriched upon return (Hudson, 2004; Fee & Gary, 2011), which is confirmed by the results of our study. However, our results also show that their acquired incorporated cultural capital was not valued upon return. One reason may be that
there is a lack of understanding vis-à-vis the activity of international volunteers abroad leading to a devaluation of returning international volunteers. In summary, French returnees apparently have to be especially endowed with institutionalized cultural capital and social capital, whereas incorporated cultural capital and economic capital only played a minor or no role for SIRs re-entry.

**Implications for Theory and Practice**

From a theoretical perspective we hopefully contributed to IHRM-literature in a way that we enlarged our understanding about the heretofore neglected topic of self-initiated repatriation. We provide insights about career fields in Europe and showed that to a large extent, the rules of the game in France, Germany, and Denmark differ. Therefore, national frontiers are likely to represent boundaries where rules of the game of career fields lose their impact. Our results confirm in large parts Evans et al.’s (1989) international career model, but challenge the fact that a lateral re-entry into the French career system is not possible.

From an organizational point of view, we provide information for potential employing companies about the career capital of SIRs. Companies should consider highly-skilled SIRs’ as a valuable human resource which, due to the acquired cultural capital, has the potential to contribute to the company success. From an individual perspective, SIRs have to be aware of the rules on their respective native career fields. Although expatriates may a priori not be sure about their return, they are well-advised to watch that the modification of their capital portfolio abroad has no detrimental effect upon return and still fits to the rules of the native career field. For French returnees, particularly for those who expatriate on their own initiative, it is crucial to choose the host country and sector of activity with caution as it seems to affect the value of the international experience upon return. Furthermore, potential French expatriates have to be aware
of the fact that expatriation may be a risky undertaking if one does not possess sufficiently valued institutionalized cultural capital. Acquired skills and competences may not be valued upon return if one does not possess the right diploma. Last, French expatriates should stay in contact with former fellow students during their time abroad as they were found to represent valuable social capital for a return into the French career field. German expatriates should especially try to improve their incorporated cultural capital basis. They should also mind to ask for an employers’ reference in order to be able to testify their activities abroad as a lack of institutionalized cultural capital can cause problems, also certainly to a lesser extent than for French SIRs. Danes certainly face the most difficult re-entry conditions. Since their international experience, especially self-initiated expatriation is seen very negatively per se, they should particularly highlight the fact of having repatriated on their own behest as this is valued very positively and shows the SIRs’ commitment to Denmark.

**Limitations and further research**

We see the limitations of our study. First, we investigated self-initiated repatriation collecting information exclusively from SIRs. In further research, HR-experts’ appraisal about the value of the modified set of career capital should be gathered as they represent the decision-makers vis-à-vis the re-entry into the native labor market. Further, the amount of our respondents is limited. Therefore, generalization appears to be difficult. Having only a very few Danes in our sample, especially the results about repatriation to Denmark need to be interpreted with the appropriate caution. A further confirmative quantitative study is of interest in order to achieve a statistical generalization of our results. Finally, it would also be valuable to include non-European countries in our cross-country comparative study and to investigate self-initiated
Conclusions

Our study was exploratory in nature and aimed at investigating self-initiated repatriation to Denmark, France, and Germany. Applying Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice (1972), we took a multi-level perspective and analyzed self-initiated repatriation at the interplay between field, capital, and habitus. We found that expatriates’ habitus and career capital had been modified abroad. In line with our expectations, SIRs were found to face differing re-entry conditions depending on the country of return, which shows that national boundaries represent virtual borders of career fields. Economic capital and habitus issues did not play a major role for the re-entry into the native career field. Agents were found able to adapt their career habitus abroad and at the same time not to lose the ability to invest the right combination of career capital on the native career field. For returnees to the Danish career field, having self-initiated expatriated represented negative symbolic capital within itself as it was interpreted as treason to the home country. Especially the modified set of cultural and social capital was pertinent for re-entering the French and German career field. While in France, having a prestigious diploma, which generally goes hand in hand with a valuable network, was found to be a necessary criterion for successfully re-entering the French career field, German SIRs especially drew on incorporated cultural capital in the form of professional skills and competences. This clearly shows differing rules of the game between national career fields and resulting differences in the composition of symbolic career capital fractions.
References


Figure 1. Applying Bourdieus Theory of Practice on self-initiated repatriation