



# The positive effects of a protean career attitude for self-initiated expatriates

## Cultural adjustment as a mediator

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The authors sought to explain why and how protean career attitude might influence self-initiated expatriates' (SIEs) experiences positively. A mediation model of cultural adjustment was proposed and empirically evaluated.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data from 132 SIEs in Germany containing measures of protean career attitude, cultural adjustment, career satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay in the host country were analysed using path analysis with a bootstrap method.

**Findings** – Empirical results provide support for the authors' proposed model: the positive relations between protean career attitude and the three expatriation outcomes (career satisfaction, life satisfaction and intention to stay in the host country) were mediated by positive cross-cultural adjustment of SIEs.

**Research limitations/implications** – All data were cross-sectional from a single source. The sample size was small and included a large portion of Chinese participants. The study should be replicated with samples in other destination countries, and longitudinal research is suggested.

**Practical implications** – By fostering both a protean career attitude in skilled SIE employees and their cultural adjustment, corporations and receiving countries could be able to retain this international workforce better in times of talent shortage.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the scarce research on the conceptual relatedness of protean career attitude and SIEs, as well as to acknowledging the cultural diversity of the SIE population.

**Keywords** Self-initiated expatriation, Protean career, Cultural adjustment, Career satisfaction, Intention to stay, International mobility, Cultural distance, Expatriates

**Paper type** Research paper



### Introduction

In times of unstable global economies and demographic changes, increasing numbers of skilled individuals go abroad and seek international career opportunities (Carr *et al.*, 2005; OECD, 2008). Self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are defined as individuals who have

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chosen to work and live abroad on their own initiative, in contrast to company-assigned expatriates (AEs), who are sent abroad by an organization (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). SIEs are one population who actively pursue and realize their personal goals in the host country (Crowley-Henry, 2007). For this reason, the SIE concept has been theoretically related to a protean career attitude (Doherty *et al.*, 2011), suggesting career management that is self-directed and driven by personal values rather than organizations (Hall, 1996). A protean career attitude was found to predict subjective and objective career success and career self-management (De Vos and Soens, 2008). However, the previous literature linking a protean career attitude and SIE has been largely conceptual (Doherty *et al.*, 2011). The few empirical studies have provided partially contradictory results regarding the understanding about the conceptual relatedness between SIE and a protean career attitude. For example, Andresen *et al.* (2012) examined whether a protean career attitude was stronger among SIEs than AEs but this research did not find significant differences. There is still no consensus on whether and how a protean career attitude is related to the career experiences of SIEs. To address this research gap, we integrated the literature in the fields of expatriation and career studies to propose and empirically evaluate a theoretical framework that examines the potential positive effects of a protean career attitude on SIE outcomes (i.e. career satisfaction, cross-cultural adjustment, life satisfaction, and intention to stay in host countries) and how those positive effects might be explained.

### What are SIEs?

According to Inkson *et al.* (1997), most self-initiated expatriation could be understood as a proactive decision to relocate internationally in order to maximize individual or family net advantages or fulfillment. Country of origin has been shown to be an important consideration in SIE research because previous studies on global mobility indicate that the motivations for moving abroad and returning to the home country might vary depending on individuals' specific home countries (e.g. developing vs developed countries; Harvey, 2009, 2011). However, the vast majority of the samples in previous SIE studies were from Western (as opposed to Eastern) countries (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). Therefore, to address the paucity of cultural diversity in SIE research and the dominance of a western-centric view, our framework examines SIEs from both developed and developing economies, to move towards a more comprehensive understanding of SIEs.

In order to provide a clear understanding of the SIE sample in our study, it is necessary to distinguish the SIE concept from other types of mobility such as migration. According to Al Ariss (2010), both geographical origin and destination have been used as key criteria to distinguish between migrants and SIEs. Conversely, in the present study, we do not take country of origin or destination but freedom of choice as the defining criterion for SIE, following the lead of Inkson *et al.* (1997). According to our definition, SIEs essentially choose whether to expatriate, where they will go, and the length of their expatriation. In sum, we argue that the most relevant characteristics defining SIE are that SIEs:

- Have freedom of choice (whether to expatriate, destination choice, length of stay outside their home country, whether and, depending on the immigration regulations, when to return).

- Are not sent abroad by their employer.
- Are currently working in or have had significant work experiences in the host country.

However, it must be acknowledged that there is no clear dividing line between internally and externally influenced decisions to move abroad. It has been argued that responses to the same macro contextual situation could be interpreted as free or forced choices, depending on personal circumstances (Cao *et al.*, 2012). Both external macro contextual factors such as political and socioeconomic situations and internal personal agency play crucial roles in individual decision making.

### **The importance of a protean career attitude for SIEs**

Hall (1996) introduced the concept of the “protean career” that is flexible, driven by individuals rather than organizations, and involves a “whole-life” perspective. According to Briscoe *et al.* (2006), individuals with protean career attitudes are self-directed (taking an independent and proactive role in managing their own vocational development) and values-driven (following their own career values and targeting subjective career success). Since the SIE concept was first developed, researchers have accentuated the intrinsic motivations, personal agency and dynamic self-directed career paths leading to expatriation (Inkson *et al.*, 1997; Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Theoretically, a protean career attitude would reflect SIEs’ fundamental, career-related attitudes that drive their entire career development process and expatriation experiences in general (Cao *et al.*, 2012; Crowley-Henry, 2007).

In this paper, we address the research on protean career attitudes and attempt to explain why and how this attitude affects SIEs’ experiences. To explain why, we apply developmental-contextual career theory (Vondracek *et al.*, 1986) as a theoretical underpinning of our framework. This perspective emphasizes the complex interaction between individual and context. In particular, it focuses on individuals’ active roles in their own development: the context does not simply produce different alternatives, but is influenced and shaped by individual characteristics (e.g. cognitive ability, motivation and personality features). Those SIEs with stronger protean career attitudes are assumed to exhibit more self-directed and values-driven career management behaviors during their expatriation, which would change and configure their living, social, and organizational environments and in turn would shape their experience in the host country.

A protean attitude in career management accentuates the personal evaluation of career success and a whole-life perspective which includes both work- and non-work-related experiences (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). Hence, our framework embraces the use of subjective career success and subjective well-being as relevant outcomes for SIEs. Furthermore, one ultimate decision many SIEs face is whether to stay in the host country, when to return to their home country, or even move to a third country. Previous literature has provided contradictory results regarding the relationship between a protean career attitude and mobility preferences (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Baruch and Quick, 2007). Therefore, we included intention to stay in the host country (defined as future plans regarding whether to stay in the host country) as the third expatriation outcome. In sum, we propose that a protean career attitude exerts an indirect positive effect on SIEs’ career satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay in the host

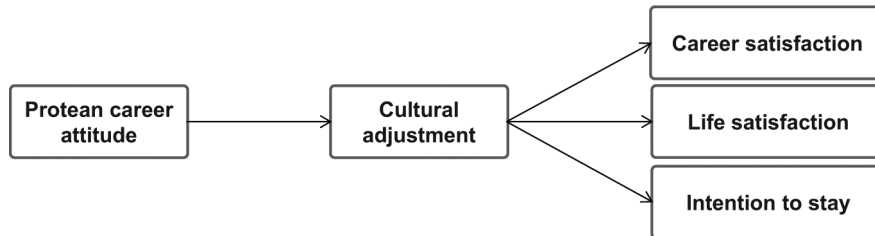
country, mediated by higher levels of cross-cultural adjustment. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework with the proposed paths. In the following section, we introduce the outcome variables and explain the importance of a protean career attitude with respect to each of these variables.

*A protean career attitude and subjective career success*

Subjective career success is defined as a person’s internal reflection on whether he or she has accomplished desirable work-related outcomes over time across any dimension that is important to that individual such as having a sense of personal fulfillment (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). In contrast, objective career success involves more external and tangible indicators of one’s career situation such as being promoted or having a pay rise (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). A protean career attitude can promote objective and subjective career success because it is positively related to a proactive disposition and intrinsic motivation for self-career management (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). Research suggests that proactivity is positively associated with both objective (i.e. salary and promotions) and subjective (i.e. career satisfaction) indicators of career success (Seibert *et al.*, 1999) and that the positive effects of a protean career attitude on career satisfaction are mediated by increased career self-management (i.e. employees’ efforts to define and realize their personal career objectives; De Vos and Soens, 2008). In the present framework, we use career satisfaction, the subjective evaluation of how satisfied people are with their professional development according to their own standards, as an indicator for subjective career success (Heslin, 2005). Professional development has been highlighted as a major motivation for many skilled professionals moving across countries (Harvey, 2011). To pursue their individual career goals and values in a self-directed way, SIEs with a protean career attitude may proactively manage their careers, seek a career environment that fits their career values, and adapt and alter their own work methods and procedures. As a consequence, they are more likely to follow and fulfill their personally relevant career values and goals and achieve a high level of subjective career success.

*A protean career attitude and life satisfaction*

In our framework, life satisfaction is used to indicate SIEs’ individual subjective well-being as an important outcome of their expatriate experience. It is defined as a cognitive judgment process and “a global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his/her chosen criteria” (Diener *et al.*, 1985, p. 71). We chose life satisfaction as an overall evaluation because it provides a general and culturally non-specific indication of SIEs’ individual well-being (Diener *et al.*, 1999). One characteristic of a protean career is the freedom to choose a career path based on one’s



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework and proposed mediation model to be tested explaining the positive effect of a protean career attitude on SIE experiences

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individually defined goals and values (Hall, 2004). According to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), the ability to pursue intrinsic goals could enable SIEs to find and fulfill their need for personal meaning in their lives and could therefore facilitate personal well-being.

*A protean career attitude and intention to stay in the host country*

In the current paper, intention to stay in the host country is defined as future plans regarding staying in the host country. According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), intentions of future actions guide behaviors today. Hence, intentions are considered valid predictors of SIEs' future behaviors (e.g. building human capital, networking, saving, and consuming). Therefore, in the current paper, we selected the intention to stay in the host country as the third expatriation outcome for SIEs. The nature of skilled individuals' movements abroad has changed from permanent to more frequent, shorter-term circular movements (OECD, 2008, Saxenian, 2005). Therefore, we focused on their intention to stay in the host country in the near future (i.e. in the next one to three years).

In research on careers, mobility preference (defined as inclination toward physically crossing organizational and/or geographical boundaries) is conceptually positively related to a protean career attitude (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). However, empirical studies have shown that a strong protean attitude in career self-management does not automatically imply a high degree of job mobility preference. This relationship varies according to context (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). Baruch *et al.* (2007) found a negative relationship between a protean career attitude and mobility preference among international graduate students. In sum, the present state of research provides contradictory information about whether a protean career attitude is related to greater or to less geographical and employment mobility.

From the perspective of developmental contextualism (Vondracek *et al.*, 1986), the process of expatriation involves active and intentional interaction with different aspects of SIEs' micro- (e.g. family), meso- (e.g. organization) and macro (e.g. culture) environments. SIEs with a strong protean career attitude proactively select and shape their environments based on their personal values and goals. They are curious about host country cultures, willing to interact with the new environment, and show a high degree of personal agency in their expatriation (Cerdin and Le Pargneux, 2010; Inkson *et al.*, 1997). If these efforts and engagements turn out to be positive and satisfying to them, these factors may embed SIEs into the host country and increase their intention to stay in the host country (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010).

### **Cross-cultural adjustment as mediator**

In the previous sections, we suggested arguments as to why a protean career attitude could have positive effects on three identified outcomes. In the following section, we aim to explain how they could be related to each other by introducing cross-cultural adjustment as a mediator in our framework. Cross-cultural adjustment is one of the most prominent and well-established concepts in expatriation literature (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005). In our framework, we adopted the tri-dimensional cross-cultural adjustment construct with general, interaction, and work adjustment (Black and Gregersen, 1991) from expatriation studies on AEs. Adjustment is defined as a low level of stress and a low level of negative attitudes associated with living in the

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host culture (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005). We postulate that a protean career attitude is one predictor for cross-cultural adjustment. More specifically, a strong protean career attitude is postulated to lead to more self-directed and proactive activities in the host country: while interacting with the new cultural environment, SIEs with a protean career attitude proactively update their social behavior (e.g. networking behavior with host country nationals) and thinking patterns (e.g. language usage) to incorporate the new norms and standards of the host country. As a consequence, we hypothesize that they are more likely to be adjusted to the host country's culture.

In expatriation literature on AEs, numerous studies have shown that cross-cultural adjustment is a major predictor of job performance and satisfaction with the destination country (Shaffer and Harrison, 1998; Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005). Hechanova *et al.* (2003) demonstrated a two-step model of expatriation adjustment in which cross-cultural adjustment is the primary expatriation outcome and influences distal outcomes, such as satisfaction with the expatriation experience and job performance. We extended this process perspective to the context of SIE. For SIEs, cross-cultural adjustment serves as the primary outcome of a protean career attitude and is expected to mediate the positive effect of a protean career attitude on the long-term expatriation outcomes. If SIEs are generally well adjusted to the host country's culture, they are likely to have more resources (e.g. emotional, cognitive, or interpersonal) available to apply to other personal goals, such as career advancement or general well-being. This would in turn increase their satisfaction with the host country. In contrast, poor adjustment in the destination country may influence their intention to stay, to repatriate or to move elsewhere. Hence, we postulate that cross-cultural adjustment mediates the positive relationship between a protean career attitude and the three identified SIE outcomes in our framework.

- H1. A protean career attitude has an indirect positive effect on career satisfaction mediated through higher cross-cultural adjustment.
- H2. A protean career attitude has an indirect positive effect on life satisfaction mediated through higher cross-cultural adjustment.
- H3. A protean career attitude has an indirect positive effect on intention to stay in the host country mediated through higher cross-cultural adjustment.

## Method

### *Procedure and participants*

For this study, we targeted SIEs who were currently working in Germany and who would meet the criteria described above. Convenience sampling through multiple platforms was chosen as the most effective way to access a large number of potential SIEs, who, unlike AEs, have expatriated independently and are usually not officially organized within company structures (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010). For these reasons, we identified and applied four approaches because they provided access to a wide range of professionals who came from abroad and were working and living in Germany at the time of data collection.

Respondents were recruited via:

- An invitation on InterNations, a global online community for people working and living abroad which the first author joined. The search function for specifying

members coming from abroad and living in Germany was used to target individuals to receive an invitation to participate in the study.

- Inviting people by sending internal messages on Xing, a major online professional platform based in Germany.
- A message posted in discussion forums in “Toytown Germany”, a German-based online English-language community.
- An invitation to personal contacts by e-mail through the snowball principle (Welch and Piekkari, 2006).

The platform “Xing” did not provide the option of specifying individuals who came from abroad and were therefore potential SIEs. Hence, we chose an alternative strategy and targeted only potential SIE Xing members from China by searching for typical Chinese family names. We applied this strategy in Xing because Chinese were one major ethnic group in Germany who could be easily distinguished from the German population with their names (ranking second among non-European foreign populations in Germany after American). They were most likely to have initiated their expatriation abroad by themselves (in contrast to Turks or Vietnamese, who mostly targeted permanent migration with the family or as forced migrants; The Federal Statistical Office, 2011). We targeted Chinese to help counter the dominance of Westerners in other studies.

We told participants in the recruitment messages that our intention was to understand the career development of foreign-born people who work in Germany. A link to our online survey was provided in the message. The data used in the current study were collected online as part of a larger empirical study on SIE. In total, 92 questions were asked. The questionnaires were filled out at one sitting. Responses to 73 questions were used in the analysis for the present study (including 29 demographic questions). International surveys normally have a relatively low response rate (Harzing, 1997). For the internet social network InterNations, we were able to determine the response rate. We sent 128 messages to InterNations members and had a return rate of 14 percent. In total, cross-sectional data were obtained from 199 individuals. Due to the recruiting strategy of targeting Chinese SIEs in Xing and the use of the personal networks of the first author (who is Chinese), there was a majority of Chinese participants in the final sample (58 percent).

To ensure that potential participants were indeed SIEs, we selected participants according to several criteria: We asked participants their reason for coming to Germany and excluded those who (1) reported forced migration (e.g. refugees), (2) were sent abroad by their employer, and (3) moved with their parents (not self-initiated). Furthermore, we selected only those participants who were (4) foreign-born, (5) currently not repatriated, and (6) 18 years or older at the time of expatriation. Further, we included participants who (7) were working at the time of the study. These criteria were selected based on the definition of SIE discussed earlier in this paper. Criteria (1)-(6) refer to the first two features, “freedom of choice” and “not sent abroad by the employer”, and criterion (7) refers to “currently working in or having had significant working experiences in the host country”. In addition, we focused on the skilled SIEs with tertiary or higher education because the reasons for working abroad and general experiences in the host country might be very different for unskilled

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individuals (Selmer, 2012). Of the 199 respondents, 132 participants fulfilled the criteria set out above and were included in the data analysis.

Our final sample reflects a diverse range of demographic and professional dimensions (for a detailed demographic profile see Table I). Approximately two-thirds of the individuals in our sample were 22 to 35 years old ( $M = 32.1$ ,  $SD = 6.8$ ). Gender was equally distributed (49 percent were female; 3 percent did not indicate their gender), and approximately 42 percent of the participants were married. A total of 37 percent of our sample had lived in Germany for less than five years, while 31 percent had been in Germany for more than ten years ( $M = 7.7$ ,  $SD = 5.8$ ). In addition, 70 percent had gone to college in Germany prior to their working experiences. The rather long stay in Germany of our SIE sample corresponds to the characteristic SIE features outlined in previous literature. SIEs are more likely to accept future employment abroad than AEs (Suutari and Brewster, 2000). The Finnish SIEs from various professions in Jokinen *et al.* (2008) had 4.3 years of foreign working experiences on average whereas the AEs only 2.6 years. In Selmer and Luring's (2011) study, the academic SIE sample had worked abroad for approximately ten years. Regarding education, 67 percent of our sample had a master's degree, and 17 percent had a doctoral degree. Approximately 83 percent were employed in organizations, and the others were self-employed or entrepreneurs; 68 percent had no supervisory responsibilities, while 13 percent were managers or executives. The participants worked in diverse industries, including telecommunications, finance, the automotive industry, and the public sector. The SIEs came from China (58 percent), Western European countries (24 percent), North America (14 percent), and other countries (4 percent).

### *Measures*

Means, standard deviations, bivariate correlations and Cronbach's alpha for all measures are reported in Table II. With the exception of the intention to stay scale, the measurement scales displayed robust internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas between 0.81 and 0.90).

*Protean career attitude.* We used the scale developed by Briscoe *et al.* (2006) to assess protean career attitude. It consists of two subscales: self-directed career management attitude (eight items; e.g. "Ultimately, I depend on myself to move my career forward") and values-driven attitude (six items: e.g. "I navigate my own career based on my personal priorities, as opposed to my employer's priorities"). A five-point Likert scale with rankings from "totally disagree" (1) to "totally agree" (5) was used. We calculated an overall protean career attitude score by calculating the mean of the two sub dimensions. All items within the scales were randomly ordered in the survey.

*Cross-cultural adjustment.* The degree of general, interaction, and work adjustment was measured using Black and Stephens's (1989) scale. The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they were adjusted to work-related aspects (three items: e.g. "specific job responsibilities"), interaction (four items: e.g. "socializing with host nationals"), and general life conditions (eight items: e.g. "food," "housing," and "health care facilities") in the host country. A five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "not adjusted at all" to (5) "extraordinarily well adjusted" was used. An overall scale for cross-cultural adjustment was assessed using the means of the three sub dimensions.



CDI  
18,1

64

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Age</i>		
20-30	69	52.3
31-40	45	34.1
41-50	14	10.6
> 50	1	0.8
Unknown	3	2.3
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	64	48.5
Female	64	48.5
Missing	4	3.0
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	39	29.5
In relationship	29	22.0
Married	56	42.4
Divorced	5	3.8
Unknown	3	2.3
<i>Residence permission</i>		
Limited	60	45.5
Permanent	47	35.6
EU citizenship	13	9.8
German citizenship	12	9.1
<i>Education</i>		
Bachelor degree	17	12.9
Master's/Diploma	88	66.7
Post-Master's	24	18.2
Unknown	3	2.3
<i>Occupational status</i>		
Entrepreneur	3	2.3
Employee	110	83.3
Self-employed	6	4.5
Researcher	7	5.3
Unknown	6	4.5
<i>Income (annual gross, in EUR)</i>		
< 40,000	52	39.4
40,001-50,000	28	21.2
50,001-55,000	14	10.6
55,001-60,000	7	5.3
60,001-65,000	7	5.3
> 65,000	24	18.2
<i>Size of organization (in number of employees)</i>		
1-50	31	23.5
51-250	12	9.1
251-500	6	4.5
501-1,000	9	6.8
1,001-5,000	10	7.6
> 5,000	54	40.9
Unknown	10	7.6

**Table I.**  
Demographic profile of  
participants

(continued)

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Country of origin</i>		
China	77	58.3
The USA	17	12.9
France	10	7.6
UK	6	4.5
Spain	4	3.0
Ireland	4	3.0
Italy	4	3.0
Sweden	2	1.5
Canada	2	1.5
Austria	2	1.5
South Africa	2	1.5
The Netherlands	1	0.8
New Zealand	1	0.8
<i>Length of stay in Germany</i>		
< 5 years	49	37.1
5-10 years	42	31.8
> 10 years	41	31.1
<i>Total work length</i>		
< 1 year	17	12.9
1-3 years	39	29.5
3-10 years	47	35.6
> 10 years	29	22.0

Table I.

*Career satisfaction.* This construct was assessed with the five-item scale employed by Greenhaus *et al.* (1990). An example from the scale is “I am satisfied with the progress I have made towards meeting my goals for advancement”. This construct used the same Likert scale that was used to assess protean career attitude.

*Life satisfaction.* We assessed this variable using the scale described by Diener *et al.* (1985). It contains five items that are scored with the same Likert scale that was used to examine protean career attitude. A sample item is “I am satisfied with my life.”

*Intention to stay in the host country.* Two items were developed to test the SIEs’ intention to stay in the near future with a five-point Likert scale ranking from “totally disagree” (1) to “totally agree” (5): “In the near future, I will continue to live and work in this country,” and “Recently, I have been seriously considering the option of returning to my home country.” Tharenou and Caulfield (2010) published a repatriation intention scale when our data collection was already in progress. We included their scale in our questionnaire after it became available in order to test the validity of our scale. Our measure was highly correlated with Tharenou and Caulfield’ (2010) measure ( $r = -0.70, p < 0.01, N = 46$ ), providing evidence of convergent validity.

*Control variables.* Controlling for factors that might affect the variables of interest in our model allows a more valid estimation of the true relationship between them that is independent from third-variable effects. Hence, we controlled for four possibly confounding factors and tested the effects of the control variables on each variable of interest in the model: First, we controlled for the length of total work experience (“Your total work experiences” in years and months) because the independent variable

**Table II.**  
Descriptive statistics,  
correlations, and  
reliabilities for all  
variables in the  
framework

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Work length <sup>a</sup>	6.24	6.24	—									
2 Cultural distance	3.29	1.82	-0.27**	—								
3 Residence permission	—	—	0.41**	-0.48**	—							
4 Length of stay in Germany <sup>a</sup>	7.73	5.76	0.40**	0.17	0.33**	—						
5 Age	32.14	6.78	0.73**	-0.20	0.32**	0.52**	—					
6 Protean career attitude	3.57	0.53	0.36**	-0.23	0.23**	0.14	0.24**	—				
7 Cross-cultural adjustment	3.69	0.74	0.37**	-0.38**	0.38**	0.301**	0.18*	0.39**	(0.90)			
8 Career satisfaction	3.19	0.86	-0.05	-0.08	0.167	-0.01	-0.23**	0.21*	0.25**	(0.87)		
9 Life satisfaction	3.28	0.76	0.09	-0.25**	0.32**	0.12	-0.03	0.14	0.42**	0.48**	(0.83)	
10 Intention to stay	3.48	0.96	0.12	0.212*	0.25**	0.10	0.04	0.27**	0.45**	0.14	0.29**	(0.57) <sup>b</sup>

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> Descriptive statistics in years. Correlation is based on log-transformed values; <sup>b</sup> Correlation coefficient due to two-item-scale; Cronbach's alpha values are reported in parentheses; \*  $p > 0.05$ , \*\*  $p > 0.01$ ;  $N = 132$

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“protean career attitude” could be developed and intensified with increasing work experiences (Segers *et al.*, 2008). This variable may also influence cross-cultural adjustment and career satisfaction. We did not control for age because age is strongly related to the length of work experience ( $r = 0.73$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The second variable we controlled for was length of stay in Germany, because it might influence cross-cultural adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005) and intention to stay (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010) positively. Third, we controlled for residence permission (i.e. official visa or residency status of foreign people who stay in Germany) because it may influence the participants’ cross-cultural adjustment and intention to stay in the host country. This variable was coded as 0 (limited) and 1 (permanent, including permanent residency, European Union (EU) citizenship, and German citizenship). SIEs who have permanent residency have the option to stay in the host country on a permanent basis. However, this does not necessarily indicate that they will stay indefinitely. Therefore, participants with permanent residency still meet our definition and selection criteria for SIE.

Fourth, we controlled for cultural distance because expatriation between culturally distant countries might lead to more adjustment difficulties (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, SIEs moving between culturally distant countries might be more likely to repatriate than those moving between culturally similar countries (OECD, 2008). We adopted one standard method used in the international management literature (Shenkar, 2001) to operationalize country-level cultural distance. The participants were asked to indicate their nationality at birth and their mother tongue as indicators of their home countries. Based on GLOBE culture clustering (House *et al.*, 2004), cultural distance was measured using the average difference between the home and host country in the cultural values taken from the GLOBE project, following procedures developed by Kogut and Singh (1988). Using this procedure, we obtained a summary score of the differences between a participant’s country of origin and Germany on a set of nine core cultural values (e.g. performance orientation, power distance; House *et al.*, 2004). With this interval scale of country-level cultural distance to Germany, we were able to control for the potential impact of mixed cultural backgrounds and the large percentage of Chinese participants in our sample. However, the potential impact of one large cultural group cannot be totally excluded from our study.

#### *Data analysis*

Our framework proposes a mediation model that includes three mediation relationships. A protean career attitude is expected to positively influence three expatriation outcomes (i.e. career satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay in the host country) mediated by cross-cultural adjustment (Figure 1). To account for the possible relationships among the three outcome variables, we followed recommendations to test our model (as proposed in Figure 1) in path analysis (Weston and Gore, 2006) using a bootstrap method (2,000 bootstrapping samples; Shrout and Bolger, 2002) with the structural equation modeling (SEM) software AMOS 19.0. A mediating path can be revealed if the indirect effect between two variables is significant, meaning that a mediator variable significantly carries the causal relationship between two variables. However, all direct paths (i.e. paths from a protean career attitude to the three outcome variables) were also included to test the robustness

of the mediation. For these reasons, we conducted a sequence of model tests. The following indices were used to evaluate the fit of the tested models:

- chi-squared goodness-of-fit to the degrees of freedom ratio;
- Tucker-Lewis index (TLI);
- the comparative fit index (CFI);
- root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA); and
- standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR).

Previous studies suggest a satisfactory model fit with the TLI and CFI values of 0.90 or higher, RMSEA values no higher than 0.08, SRMR values no higher than 0.10 and a chi-squared goodness-of-fit to a degrees of freedom ratio less than or equal to 2 (Weston and Gore, 2006, Browne and Cudeck, 1993).

**Results**

*Descriptives and correlations*

As Table II shows, cross-cultural adjustment exhibited significant correlations with all variables in the framework. A protean career attitude correlated significantly with two of the three outcome variables, namely career satisfaction and intention to stay.

*Test of the indirect effects*

We first tested the partially mediated model with all direct effects of a protean career attitude on the three outcome measures in the model. The four control variables (amount of work experience, length of stay in Germany, residence permission, and cultural distance) and their proposed paths were also included in the SEM analysis. The results showed that the direct path from a protean career attitude to career satisfaction was significant, while the paths to the other two expatriation outcomes were not significant. All proposed indirect effects were significant. The control variable residence permission did not have any significant paths to other variables in our model. The model fit statistics are shown in Table III. To arrive at a more parsimonious model that better fitted our data, we deleted all non-significant paths in a second step. The results showed that this modified model fit well to the data ( $\chi^2 = 11.19$ ,  $df = 13$ ; TLI = 1.02; CFI = 1.00; SRMR = 0.041, RMSEA = 0.00). Figure 2 shows the modified model with its standardized path coefficients (including the significant paths of control variables). All proposed paths in Figure 1 and all indirect paths were significant. The standardized indirect path coefficients were

	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	BIC
Partially mediated model	22.15	13	1.70	–	0.90	0.96	0.07	0.05	178.40
Modified (final) mediation model	11.19	13	0.86	10.97	1.02	1.00	0.00	0.04	123.49
Alternative model	44.73 *	13	3.44	–	0.66	0.84	0.14	0.10	157.04

**Table III.**  
Fit statistics of tested structural models

**Notes:** \*  $p > 0.001$ ;  $N = 132$ ; TLI, Tucker-Lewis index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root-mean-square residual.  $\Delta\chi^2$  denotes the differences to the partially mediated model. Dashes represent data that were not applicable

from a protean career attitude to career satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.06, p < 0.01$ ), to life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.11, p < 0.01$ ), and to intention to stay ( $\beta = 0.16, p < 0.01$ ). These significant positive indirect path coefficients supported *H1* through *H3*: The positive relationships between a protean career attitude and the three expatriation outcomes were mediated by SIEs' positive cross-cultural adjustment.

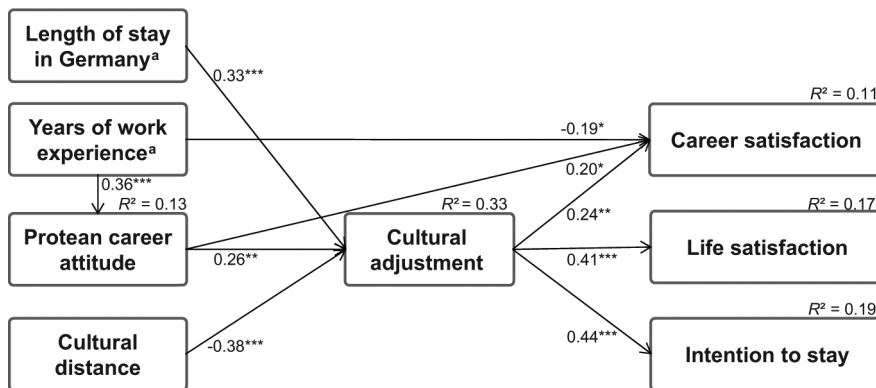
In addition, cultural distance showed significant indirect negative effects on the three outcome variables, mediated by lower cross-cultural adjustment among SIEs. The indirect path coefficients were to career satisfaction ( $\beta = -.09, p < 0.01$ ), to life satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.16, p < 0.01$ ), and to intention to stay ( $\beta = -0.17, p < 0.01$ ).

Finally, following recommendations for using SEM, we specified an alternative model to test whether another possible configuration of variables fits the data as well as our proposed model. Specifically, we exchanged the positions of a protean career attitude and cross-cultural adjustment in the modified model to test whether cross-cultural adjustment acts as the predictor and a protean career attitude as the mediator in the framework. If this alternative model fits the data as well as, or even better than, our proposed model, the mediating paths would be called into question. According to the model fit indicators shown in Table III, the proposed model (Figure 2; Bayesian information criterion [BIC] = 123.49) fitted the data better than the alternative model (BIC = 157.04). In sum, the three steps of path analysis provided support for our hypotheses. The positive relationships between a protean career attitude and life satisfaction and intention to stay were fully mediated, while the path to career satisfaction was partially mediated by higher cross-cultural adjustment. The modified mediation model in Figure 2 was hence retained as the final model.

### Discussion

In this paper, we sought to advance the understanding of the influence of a protean career attitude on SIEs' expatriation experiences. In this respect, our results make four theoretical contributions.

The first general contribution is the development and empirical examination of a framework explaining why and how a protean career attitude positively influences



Notes: <sup>a</sup>Coefficients are based on log-transformed values.  
 \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Figure 2. Completely standardized path coefficients for the final model

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SIEs' experiences. Although a protean career attitude has been suggested to be conceptually connected to SIEs (Doherty *et al.*, 2011), empirical studies validating its predictive effect are scarce. Our study demonstrated that a protean career attitude is positively associated with both SIEs' career-related expatriation experiences and their general well-being. Our empirical results add to the validation of the positive effect of a protean career attitude that has been reported in general career studies.

Our paper's second contribution is to propose a two-step model to theorize the SIE process. Although the cross-sectional nature of our study does not permit us to make causal inferences, our results suggest that protean attitudes in career management could initially lead to better cross-cultural adjustment. Subsequently, a strong protean career attitude may lead indirectly to SIEs having a more positive view of their career and general well-being in the host country and may increase their intention to stay in the host country for the near future.

Third, the current paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between a protean career attitude and mobility preferences, a link that has produced contradictory statements in the literature (e.g. positive relationship in Briscoe *et al.*, 2006, and negative relationship in Baruch *et al.*, 2007). Our study showed a positive relationship between a protean career attitude and intention to stay in the host country that was mediated by greater cross-cultural adjustment. Furthermore, this finding enriches the current profile of SIEs: those with a protean career attitude are self-directed, active, and striving for achievement. Although SIEs are temporarily living and working in a destination country of their choice, they appear embedded in and committed to that location while staying there.

Fourth, the study enriches SIE research that has largely focused on SIEs moving between Western countries, which are culturally similar (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). By integrating the macro contextual level into the framework and controlling for the influence of country-level cultural distance, we add to understanding of SIE from culturally distant versus close countries (defined with cultural values in House *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, we tested the effects of country-level cultural distance on all variables in our model. Our study suggests that SIEs from culturally distant regions could have a lower level of cultural adjustment in the host country, which could further have indirect negative impacts on their career satisfaction, general well-being, and would intensify their intention to leave the host country.

However, it is important to recognize that 58 percent of our sample was Chinese participants, whose country of origin was culturally distant to the German culture, and the results might reflect specific features of Chinese participants. According to our *post hoc* tests comparing Chinese with the other participants, the group of Chinese participants was on average less adjusted to the German culture, showed lower levels of life satisfaction and had a lower intention to stay in Germany in the future than the other nationalities in our study.

Fifth, scholars have shown an increasing interest in SIE as an alternative to migration (OECD, 2008). For instance, Saxenian (2002) and Wadhwa *et al.* (2009) found that in the USA, increasing numbers of highly skilled individuals from China and India are returning to their home countries for better professional and entrepreneurship opportunities. Hence, the boundaries between SIE and migration are becoming more blurred: they both involve cross-border movements for a significant period of time, often seeking better professional opportunities (Carr *et al.*, 2005; Harvey, 2009). By

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examining a broader population of SIEs to include individuals from non-Western and developing countries, the current paper attempted to expand the evidence base.

*Why and how is a protean career attitude effective for SIEs?*

Our results suggest that a protean career attitude is positively related to SIEs' career satisfaction, life satisfaction, and intention to stay in the host country and it is mediated by cross-cultural adjustment. Accordingly, a protean career attitude would drive SIEs in their intercultural career management in the host country by translating this attitude into proactive and concrete actions. The extant literature indicates that because protean careers are guided by self-directedness and self-awareness, they are more effective in a dynamic and self-managed career environment and this leads to more career satisfaction than an organizationally managed career (Baruch and Quick, 2007; Hall, 1996). Given that SIEs have a less defined, more flexible approach to career management (Doherty *et al.*, 2011; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008), our study suggests that a protean career attitude provides an incentive for SIEs to proactively define and direct their own career paths, further contributing significantly to their career satisfaction and general well-being.

Our empirical results confirmed our hypotheses and showed that a protean career attitude was positively associated with cross-cultural adjustment, career and life satisfaction, and intention to stay in the host country, which were strong indications of satisfaction with and integration into the host country. Hence, the question of whether and to what extent SIEs who hold a strong protean career attitude intend to pursue a career path with high mobility preferences, as implied in the extant literature (Baruch and Quick, 2007; Inkson *et al.*, 1997), requires further empirical examination. Furthermore, given that over 80 percent of our sample was employed in an organization, a protean career attitude may have positive outcomes for organizations. For example, the global business environment has become more dynamic and unpredictable, which requires more flexibility and adaptability from both organizations and employees (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006; Deloitte, 2010). A protean career attitude may facilitate the adaptability, flexibility and adjustment needed at an individual level to meet these challenges. In relation to SIE concepts, further empirical validations are needed to clarify the role of a protean career attitude in organizations.

*Limitations and suggestions for future research*

Several limitations of our study need to be considered. First, all data were cross-sectional and came from a single source. This research design might generate shared method variance, which could affect the observed relationships among the variables. Moreover, the research design does not allow for causal inferences, even if they are theoretically implied in our model. Future studies should employ longitudinal research designs to examine the potential causal relationship between the variables in our study. For example, intention to stay in the host country might also influence levels of cultural adjustment. Second, our framework explained the influence of a protean career attitude from the individual perspective. Hence, socioeconomic and political contexts are not considered. Future studies should pay particular attention to the impact of the respective labor market within which SIEs are operating (Harvey, 2009, Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010).



Third, although our study design was to target a large sample of SIEs with a broad spectrum of cultural backgrounds, our sample size was relatively small and included a large portion of Chinese participants. In the current study, we introduced the country-level cultural distance scale to control for the impact of mixed cultural backgrounds of our sample. Specifically, we tested in our model the effects of a summary score of the differences between a participant's country of origin and Germany based on cultural clusters from the GLOBE project (House *et al.*, 2004). This procedure allows us to make clearer inferences about the "true" effects of our variables of interest – independent of country of origin of the participants. However, it does not permit us to draw conclusions about whether there are qualitative differences regarding cross-cultural adjustment or protean career attitudes between different countries. This could be especially important given the large percentage of Chinese nationals in our sample. Possibly, their country of origin had an effect above and beyond cultural distance. For example, they might be more inclined to use their social network "guanxi" (Xin and Pearce, 1996) in the home and host country to manage their SIE experience as compared to other study participants from countries with similar cultural distance. Moreover, several large German corporations informed us that they had no means of identifying SIEs without examining individual employee files, which is usually prohibited by the German work councils' data privacy regulations. Without the systematic approach of sending messages through organizational platforms (e.g. HR departments), we might have omitted a large number of SIEs professionals who were not registered in the online platforms we used. This impacted our sample size negatively. Therefore we encourage researchers to explore more suitable means in social media for recruiting large samples of SIEs. For example, Xing and LinkedIn provide professional membership options which charge service fees. These memberships offer more specific search options and allow direct messages to be sent to targeted groups.

Fourth, because Germany was the host country for all participants, the results may also contain host-country-specific features. For example, Germany has a relatively restrictive visa policy for skilled people from non-EU countries (e.g. a minimum income or the completion of tertiary education in Germany; German Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology, 2004). Moreover, a diploma in German universities usually requires a prescribed period of study of 4 to 5 years (Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst, 2012). Such restrictions might lead to selection biases in our sample. For example, it would be more likely that we recruited participants who had been in Germany for a relatively long period of time (31 percent of our sample had stayed in Germany for more than ten years) or high educational levels (85 percent of our sample had a master's or higher education degree), which could further influence the degree of cross-cultural adjustment or career satisfaction. Also, with respect to the potential impact of a large group of Chinese participants on the results, the study should be replicated with samples from a broad spectrum of host and home countries in order to increase the generalizability of the theoretical framework.

Furthermore, a protean career attitude might also have negative impacts on SIEs: Their independence, responsibility for their own career, and their high intrinsic motivation might make it difficult for them to commit to and identify with organizational goals and values. This possibility could be explored in future research. In addition, given the influential role of a protean career attitude on the entire SIE

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experience, further research could examine socio-structural, organizational, and individual factors that facilitate the development of SIEs' protean career attitudes.

### *Practical implications*

Because of talent shortages in many countries and the increasing demand for inter-culturally flexible employees with specialized skill sets (Deloitte, 2010), SIEs are strategically valuable human resources for many organizations (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010), and increasing numbers of SIEs in relation to domestic employees are employed in many organizations (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). Our paper provides several practical implications that address these key trends.

In some countries, such as Germany, the government is considering increasing targeted immigration of a qualified workforce in order to reduce workforce shortages (German Federal Employment Agency, 2011). Attracting and retaining international talent has been a key issue. Given the positive relationship between a protean career attitude and SIEs' intention to stay in the host country, corporations and receiving countries could try to foster this type of career attitude. For example, organizations could recognize and develop SIEs' intrinsic career values differentially and provide individualized career development information and other resources to help SIEs form, evaluate, and realize their career goals and values in a self-directed way. At both the HR and corporate culture levels, recognizing and integrating individuals' self-fulfillment into the corporation's value could be an effective employer-branding strategy to attract and retain these SIEs in the "war for talent." Furthermore, the study adds to the current discussion about diversity in German politics and corporations. It might be even more important to acknowledge, include, and foster their specific experiences, skills, and individual career values and goals. Moreover, corporations should be aware of the crucial intervening role that cross-cultural adjustment (at work, in general living, and in interaction with host country nationals) plays in SIEs' experiences and provide specific adjustment aids and resources to facilitate cross-cultural adjustment as the initial step toward further positive experiences. Last but not least, the results indicate that organizations should take into account the differences in the expatriation experiences of SIEs from culturally similar versus those from culturally distant countries. SIEs from culturally distant countries in particular should receive more support to help them ease their adjustment difficulties, thereby facilitating more positive expatriation experiences in the long term.

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