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**Heeding the call from the promised land:
Identity work of self-initiated expatriates before leaving home**

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), we know little about how SIEs develop the aspiration to leave both home employers and home countries behind. Based on rich empirical data from Western European SIEs, who migrated to North America, we explored key dynamics of identity work leading up to their decision to expatriate. We found that an SIE's self-concept as a talented professional is initially negatively impacted by interactions with their home employers. However, through elevating conversations with "trusted outsiders", SIEs engage in re-crafting a more positive sense of self. SIEs associate the trusted outsiders' foreign professional background with idealized future work environments, the "promised land", in which they see their elevated selves fulfilled. Our findings have important implications for research on drivers of self-initiated expatriation, voluntary turnover and talent management.

Keywords: Self-initiated expatriates, identity work, voluntary turnover, talent; self-concept; super-turnover

Introduction

In an increasingly global work environment, skilled professionals have become increasingly mobile (Collings, Scullion and Morley, 2007; Haslberger and Vaiman, 2013). Thus, we are seeing growing evidence of qualified migrant workers or so-called self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (Selmer and Luring, 2011). Unlike corporate expatriates (CEs), who are allocated to particular posts or tasks abroad based on specific organizational needs and matching skills (Inkson et al., 1997), SIEs move abroad in pursuit of work based on their own willingness and initiative (Suutari and Brewster 2000; Lee, 2005; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; McNulty and Brewster, 2016). We focus here on SIEs who are employed prior to moving and who make the decision to move and switch jobs in conjunction.¹

Even though SIEs are increasingly common (Andersen, 2019) and sought after by employers due to their skills, educational background, and international work experience (Andresen et al., 2012, 2013; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Hussain and Deery, 2018), they have been under-studied in the field of international human resource management (Andresen et al., 2012, 2015; McNulty and Hutchings, 2016). Notably, studies have begun to discuss SIEs' characteristics, motivations and experiences abroad (Dickmann et al., 2008; Doherty and Dickmann, 2009; Selmer and Luring, 2012, 2015; Andresen et al., 2013, 2020; Bonache et al., 2014; McNulty and Hutchings, 2016). Yet, relatively little is known about why and how SIEs develop the initial motivation to leave home employer and home country.

Notably, prior studies have looked into SIEs' growth aspirations and intention to break free from domestic career constraints (Selmer and Luring, 2011; Andresen et al., 2020), along with various factors influencing their future location choices, such as family-related concerns (Richardson and Mallon, 2005; Thorn, 2009; Cerdin and Le Pargneux, 2010; Luring and Selmer, 2015). It has also been

¹ The employment status of SIEs prior to moving abroad may vary. For example, they might be unemployed in the country of departure (Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Regarding the search for a job abroad, SIEs may have either already secured a position in the host country before relocating or they may start their job search when they land in the host country (Andresen Bergdolt and Margenfeld, 2012; Suutari, Brewster and Dickmann, 2018).

established that SIEs are rather self-determined and have an entrepreneurial and explorative orientation (Selmer and Luring, 2011; Shaffer et al., 2012; Andresen et al., 2020). However, much less is known about how SIEs develop the aspiration to leave both their home employers and home country behind. In this respect, voluntary turnover research is useful in suggesting that prior to making a voluntary turnover decision, employees often experience identity struggles that may drive their decision to leave (Rothausen et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2019). However, turnover research has not specifically addressed the decision to expatriate. More specifically, it is unclear how identity struggles may translate into aspirations to explore entirely new career contexts.

In our study, we use an identity work lens to address this important question. Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1348) define identity work as "the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of their self-concept". An identity work perspective has been utilized primarily in organization studies to investigate the interplay between identity (re)formation and perceived identity threats along with the continuous need of professionals to manage insecurities (Brown and Toyoki, 2013; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Brown and Coupland, 2015). Our question is: *How does identity work contribute to SIEs' aspiration to discontinue their job and career at home?*

Using an identity work lens, we analyze the case of how knowledge workers from France, Belgium and the Netherlands developed the aspiration to quit their jobs in their home countries before migrating to the US and Canada. We find that at the core of this process is the transformation of the informants' self-concept as talented professional. We observe three sequential dynamics. First, informants perceive a suppression of their self-concept as talented professional by their home employer. However, they mobilize conversations with what we call "trusted outsiders", who express appreciation of their work and skills, to elevate their self-concept. In this process, the particular role of trusted outsiders as what Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) would call *referent others* comes from their position outside the informant's inner social circle combined with two aspects of these trusted outsiders' professional background. The first element is that they have foreign work experience. The second aspect is that they have no association with the informant's workplace. Our interviewees further associate the trusted outsiders and their foreign professional background with what we call a "promised land" - an idealized future work environment in which our informants see their (idealized) potential fulfilled. As a result, our informants make an association between their elevated self-concept and the promised land which triggers their move abroad.

Our findings have important implications for future research. First, they contribute to our understanding of how SIEs develop the motivation to move abroad, especially the urge to break free from domestic career constraints (Selmer and Luring, 2011; Andresen et al., 2020). Second, our research creates an important link between recent studies on the importance of the "talent" label in identity work (see e.g. Kirk, 2000) and the context of self-initiated expatriation. Our study thus has important implications for future research on global talent management. Third, our findings can enhance our understanding of the link between voluntary turnover decisions and identity struggles (see e.g. Rothausen et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2019) by stressing the importance of deliberate identity work in elevating self-concepts leading to turnover decisions. Furthermore, our study helps create a link between turnover decisions and decisions to move abroad by stressing the importance of trusted outsiders in recontextualizing career prospects beyond (the constraints of) familiar work environments.

Leaving home behind: SIE turnover decisions, identity work and the role of others

Self-initiated expatriation often starts with the decision to leave employers at home in order to venture into a new professional environment abroad (Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Cerdin and Brewster, 2014; Suutari et al., 2018a; O'Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2019). Yet, to date, we know very little about how professionals on their way to becoming SIEs make the initial decision to discontinue their job and career at home. Independent of the specific case of SIEs, there is a long tradition of voluntary turnover research that may give some insight (March and Simon, 1958; Hirschman, 1970; Mueller and Price, 1990; Hom et al., 2017; Rothausen et al., 2017). Mueller and Price (1990) for example argue that turnover decisions are typically motivated by a combination of economic, psychological and sociological factors. More recently, there has been growing interest in the role of identity work in voluntary turnover decisions (Rothausen et al., 2017; Crawford et al., 2018). This perspective seems particularly applicable to the case of SIEs as their motivation to relocate is strongly rooted in their self-concept of an aspiring, entrepreneurial and growth-oriented professional (Selmer and Luring, 2011; Andresen et al., 2020). We seek to better understand how this self-concept is related to identity work leading to the initial decision of SIEs to leave their job at home behind.

Towards this objective, we build on the rich literature on identity work in organization studies and sociology. Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1348) define identity work as "the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of their self-concept" (p. 1348). Identity work thus involves shaping coherent and distinctive notions of one's self (see e.g. Watson, 2008). Importantly, identity work typically navigates between the need of individuals to develop a self-concept that reflects their embeddedness in real-life interactions and relationships, the "empirical self" (Cooley, 1962), and the need to craft and modify desired, idealized versions of their selves (Higgins, 1987; Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Identity work is thereby deeply connected with individuals' needs to manage insecurities, self-doubt and uncertainty (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Interestingly, sustaining one's identities and self-concepts requires from the individual the ability to remain consistent with how they perceive themselves (Rudd, 2007). This consistency might be challenged since identities and self-concepts are rarely stable, but typically perceived to be "under threat" and in need of constant validation (Swann et al., 2014; Brown and Coupland, 2015). This also points to the potential of individuals to re-assess their self-concepts and reshape them in accordance with personal values and aspirations (Heelas and Morris, 1992).

The importance of identity work has already been recognized in SIE research. For example, the study by Kohonen (2004) suggests that identity work and refinement is a central element in creating meaning and purpose in expatriate journeys (see also Daskalaki, 2012; Scurry et al., 2013). We know that SIEs often position their identity vis-à-vis established master narratives of career-making (LaPointe, 2010), while at the same time engaging in their very own identity project (Kohonen, 2004). We note, however, that most studies focus on identity dynamics professionals engage in abroad as they take on new assignments.

Surprisingly little is known about identity work leading up to SIEs' decision to expatriate. Prior studies often take for granted that SIEs possess a strong orientation towards growth and personal fulfillment (Selmer and Luring, 2011) along with confidence in their talent and professional skills (O'Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2019) all of which guide their decision to relocate (Shaffer et al., 2012; Andresen et al., 2020). From an identity perspective, however, it is conceivable that growth orientation and professional aspirations are not given but are part of a more complex identity-building process. In other words, one

could expect identity work to influence SIEs initial decisions to quit their jobs at home and relocate to a new country after that. This is the focus of our study.

To examine this, we consider identity work to be embedded in interactions and relationships with multiple stakeholders and reference actors. For instance, prior studies show how identity work is performed through conversations (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Josselson, 2004). Conversations and interactions are thereby interrelated with intra-personal identity dynamics (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Thus, the way individuals perceive themselves both affects and is affected by the way they are perceived by others (Jenkins, 2000; Alvesson et al., 2008). Cooley's (1902) concept of the *looking glass self* is a powerful way to conceive of this continuous reflection. Interestingly, an individual does not simply accept the image held by others; instead, they try to make the image fit with how they want others to perceive them. Identity work is thus not only about how individuals align their self-concept with how others see them (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Jenkins, 2014), but it is about producing desirable images of themselves that are accepted by others and validated in how others communicate about it (Stryker, 1968).

Yet, the effect of interactions with others on one's identity are highly contextual, which includes the position of others in one's identity discourse (see also Steedman, 2000). More specifically, as individuals perform identity work in conversation with others, they often seek validation from *particular* others whose viewpoint is considered important and legitimate (Markus, 1977; Bourdieu, 1985; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kreiner et al., 2009). By legitimate we mean positions that are seen by focal actors as acceptable and desirable (Suchman, 1995), coming from others who enjoy some form of moral or institutional authority (Giddens, 1984). Accordingly, individuals are more willing to internalize viewpoints of others with authority, and potentially make them their own (Derrida, 1981; Butler, 1993; du Gay et al., 2000). As a result, views coming from others lacking such authority, especially if they conflict with one's self-concept, will be perceived as less relevant (Markus, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984).

In professional settings such identity work dynamics often center around positions of status, belonging and self-worth (Taylor, 1995; Rose, 1996; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020; 2021). One example is the association of self-concepts with talent labels, whose importance is increasingly recognized (Björkman et al., 2013; Gelens et al., 2014). By "talent label" we refer to the identification, recognition, and naming of workers performing at an above-average standard (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018; Collings et al., 2019; Kirk, 2020). Talent labels often embody an emotional appeal (Huang and Tansley, 2012) which potentially strengthens the commitment of individuals to organizational goals (Tansley and Tietze, 2013). Thereby, talent labels, like any labels, are affiliated with systems of belief that professionals often internalize (Rudd, 2007). Tansley and Tietze (2013) demonstrate how such internalization unfolds. Building on Turner's (1977) ritual of passage theory, the authors argue that individuals first engage in *separation* that involves detachment from former selves; followed by *liminal condition*, where individuals seek to mobilize recognition; and, finally, *incorporation* where individuals fully embody the notion of organizational talent in their self-concept. The flip side of such internalization processes is that a perceived rejection of talent labels by employers can lead to resistance and identity struggles (Kirk, 2020).

It is in this very tension between the need for a sense of self-worth, and latent insecurities and identity threats where the importance of identity work lies (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Brown and Coupland, 2015). These insecurities are strongly related to values people adopt (Taylor, 1985), which, in turn, are linked to societal norms and expectations (Sennett, 2006). This is why individuals see the need to mobilize external views to seek verification to protect and restore their sense of identity and self-worth

in coherent ways (Bourdieu, 1984; Swann et al., 1994; Burke and Stets, 2009). However, verifications are rarely stable, and identity threats re-occur, which is why individuals engage in continuous identity work – not just to inform initial identity-*building* but recurrent identity *reformation* (Winkler, 2013) to manage insecurities and regain a sense of self-worth (Leary and Tangney, 2003; see also Goffman, 1956).

This raises important questions for the case of SIEs. If indeed identity reformation and external validation, including the association with labels such as "talent", are important in professionals' careers, how do they specifically play out when professionals are in the process of deciding to discontinue their jobs and careers at home to pursue a career abroad? Also, what role do particular *others* play as professionals engage in identity work leading to the decision to leave? Next, we seek to analyze these processes in greater detail based on the empirical case of SIEs from France, Belgium and the Netherlands who decided to leave their home countries behind to pursue a professional career in North America.

Data collection and analysis

Following an interpretivist paradigm (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burrell and Morgan, 1979), we adopt a qualitative and inductive approach to examine how self-initiated expatriates' identity work contributes to developing the aspiration to discontinue their job and career at home. Qualitative methods can be used to explore phenomena about which a novel understanding is needed (Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Yin, 2003). Using a qualitative approach to tackle our research question we follow the call by Suutari et al. (2018) for a deeper investigation into SIEs' perspectives of their motivations to expatriate. Since we were interested mainly in SIEs' narratives around their decision to leave home employer and home countries, and how their stories unfolded in a self-reflexive effort, we used semi-structured interviews as our main source of data (Thomas, 2004).

We thereby focus on the case of knowledge workers from Western Europe who made the decision to leave their home employers to migrate into North America. Case selection is key to contextualize findings for future research (Yin, 2003; Siggelkow, 2007). We further focused on Western Europeans from France, Belgium and the Netherlands in particular because of the growing mobility flow from those countries (AIC, 2017). Also, this empirical focus helped us reduce extraneous variation to better interpret findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). The interviewees' common decision to move to North America reflects typical patterns of work migration among scientists and engineers. Furthermore, we focused on SIEs that were employed in their home countries when they decided to expatriate. Some of them had already secured a job abroad, while others started their job search once they relocated. In their job search, several SIEs made use of their already established professional networks.

Importantly, with our inductive study, we do not aim for generalization in a statistical sense, but for what Yin (2013) calls "analytical generalization", by crafting generalizable analytical categories and relationships to inform future research (Tsang, 2014). To arrive at findings and inductive categories that are sufficiently robust, we collected data from 20 SIEs within our case population. Table 1 gives an overview of all informants.

Insert table 1 about here.

From our informant pool, 15 individuals were selected through expatriate social media platforms where they connect with their peers all over the world. Three individuals were identified via business contacts. We also used snowball sampling (Bryman and Bell, 2011) to recruit two participants. These two persons were part of the expatriate virtual network of one of the expatriates we interviewed. They did not know each other personally, except from limited virtual interactions on social network platforms.

It is important to note that while we focus on the role of identity work in SIEs' decision to relocate, especially the timing of their relocation decision is also related to situations in their private lives. Several SIEs we interviewed were in a relationship at the time they decided to expatriate. In those cases, the timing of relocation was influenced by the partner's employment status and the openness of the partner to expatriation. In some cases, the expatriation led to the separation of the couple.

Our interviews, with an average duration of 71 minutes, were composed of open-ended questions. Key themes included: the work history preceding the turnover and expatriation decision, including experiences with previous employing organizations; the actual reasons for the turnover and expatriation decision; actors involved in the decision; important interactions leading up to the decision; information about how they felt making the decision; their aspirations associated with expatriation; and reasons for the selected destination.

The interviews were conducted in 2018. At the time of the interviews, our interviewees had been expatriated for a period of two to four years. Our interviews are thus based on retrospection, whereby the time gap between the decision to move and the time the interview was conducted was small enough to mobilize vivid memories of relocation process, while also being significant enough to build on some degree of reflection.

Some interviews took place face-to-face in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. This was made possible when the informants visited Europe (e.g., to visit relatives and friends). For those who did not visit Europe during the interview period, interviews were conducted on Skype. As suggested by Seitz (2015), we made sure that the interviewees had access to a reliable internet connection to prevent interruptions.

Skype interviews are considered richer than telephone interviews thanks to visual synchronicity (Seitz, 2015), allowing for the capture of non-verbal cues (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Bargh et al. (2002) further suggests that conducting interviews via skype – rather than telephone – allows for the sharing of authentic views and expressions. At the same time, we were mindful to let interviewees decide how much they felt comfortable sharing, since communicating feelings and sensitive information can be challenging (Orchard and Fullwood, 2010).

The interviewer, who is multilingual and the first author of this study, conducted interviews in French when the informant was a French-speaker, and in English in case the interviewee was Dutch. She coded the material in English. This helped the theorizing process and facilitated the sharing of codes and interpretations with the other authors, who are fluent in English. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We applied common ethical guidelines regarding the respect of confidentiality, anonymity and consent (Creswell, 2013).

The coding and interpretation of interview data was done in three phases, which we detail next. We combined inductive coding and theorizing with the application of established concepts and categories, especially from identity work. More specifically, we used various concepts as sensitizing devices, such as "self-concept" and "identity threats", to guide our data analysis process

(Blumer, 1954). Yet, sensitizing devices only suggested "directions along which to look" (Blumer, 1954: 7).

In the first phase, the first author followed the advice by Miles and Huberman (1994) and immersed herself in the raw data by means of "free-floating listenings" to familiarize with the interviewees' narratives and tones (Boyatzis, 1998). In this phase, open labelling was used to code the transcript in a spontaneous way (Saldana, 2009). During this phase, the first author also paid attention to the feelings and perceptions that the informants associated with their experiences when recounting them. Expressions of feelings, such as anger or disappointment, were integrated into codes to support inductive interpretations (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This also assisted the capture of identity-processes in the interviewees' narratives as emotions inform about how individuals perceive themselves (Fineman, 2003) and how they engage in identity work (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010; Islam, 2014; Brown, 2015).

In the second phase, the initial codes and connections between them were discussed with the other authors to agree on a selection of codes and allow a higher-level thematic coding aiming at capturing how SIEs developed the aspiration to discontinue their home career. In this phase, special attention was paid to two overarching inductive themes, which are at the core of our theorizing, "trusted outsider" and "promised land". We use the label "trusted outsider" to capture those individuals our informants had decisive conversations with prior to making the decision to leave their home employers. The label of "promised land" captures our informants' projection of their idealized future work environment abroad.

In the third phase, we combined and integrated our new inductive themes with established categories, such as "self-concept", to label key processes of identity reformation leading up to SIEs' decision to leave home employer and home country. These processes are: (1) Suppression of self-concept through interactions with home employer; (2) Elevation of self-concept through interaction with trusted outsider; (3) Association of elevated self-concept with promised land. We elaborate on these processes in detail both in the empirical section and, in a more condensed form, in the discussion section that follows.

Findings

Our findings show the role played by what we call "trusted outsiders" in SIEs' identity work leading up to the decision to expatriate. We examine how SIEs' self-conception as highly talented professionals is initially suppressed by what their home employers think of them, and how their self-concept is later revitalized through conversations with trusted outsiders. This dynamics coincides with what we call a projection of a promised land where SIEs see their talent valued more fully in the future.

Feeling undervalued by home employers

One important initial driver for our informants to engage in identity work was the initially latent and increasingly manifest feeling of being undervalued as a professional by their employer. More specifically, our informants expressed a substantial misalignment between their self-concept as a valuable and talented professional and how they felt their home employer sees them. This misalignment generated intrapersonal tensions for the informants because they could not make sense of themselves as talented professionals in the absence of external validation by their employer. Françoise, a 36-year-old engineer who left France for the USA, shares her experience in the following way:

I had dreams, a lot of potential, and everything was trying to break free, but it was coming up against a way of thinking, basically that people only have to do as we expect that they do, and if they do not do that, then it's no use; they're sidelined. (Françoise)

Related to this, the informants expressed feelings of having been insidiously and gradually made less confident about their potential. It was clear from the interviews that their wish of greater recognition by their home employer was of primary importance to sustain their self-esteem. This quote from Nadia, who worked in a company in the Netherlands before moving to Canada, reveals this:

I wasn't valued at all. They made me feel like a nobody. I mean they didn't do anything to make me feel that my work was appreciated. It is frustrating when you know that you're doing such a good job (...) They clearly ignored my strengths. They preferred to focus on my weaknesses. (Nadia)

Initially, the tension between their self-concept and their perception of how their home employer sees them would lead our informants into a *resignation state*, in which they would adopt the company's view of their professional identity. In fact, this would often result in serious self-doubt about their self-perception as demonstrates this quote from Jules, a 42 year-old French engineer who moved to the US.

Not to say I was crazy, but I really spent more than a few hours wondering if I was not overvaluing my competencies. I think I asked myself sometimes if I was not just misconceiving all of them. (Jules)

At the same time, their partial resignation would make the tension "workable" in the sense that their need for greater recognition by their employer would be reduced. This is also why for a long time, our informants would "live with the tension" without taking further action.

The following quote of Samuel, a Frenchman who works in the field of multimedia technologies and who decided to move to Canada, illustrates quite drastically how a latent tension would impact their social life. In the second part of this quote, he evoked how he felt when his partner introduced him to some friends:

I couldn't think anymore of myself as a successful man. I felt I was acting, at home showing my family I was a superstar while it was not the case. When she introduced me to her friends, speaking for twenty minutes about how great I was in everyone's eyes, I couldn't bear it. (Samuel)

Arguably, the SIEs' self-doubt regarding their ability to succeed resulted in frustration and feelings of uncertainty. On the one hand, our informants would accept how they were seen by their home employer, not least because they would regard them as important judges of their professional abilities. On the other hand, their latent feeling of deserving better would lead them to pretend fulfillment to the outside while suppressing mounting frustration about their professional situation. Notably, for some respondents, this feeling was more pronounced than for others, yet, no matter the degree, all our respondents shared the initial feeling of not being valued by their home employer.

How an outsider helps SIEs revitalize their self-concept

Our interviews indicated that there was undeniably a long-standing latent idea in the informant belief system that staying in the same work environment would be a source of identity conflict. However, this

latent tension became a more salient one only after certain events occurred which triggered important realizations and a growing urge to act.

Specifically, we find that our informants had specific conversations with individuals outside of their organizations which became a key factor in triggering not just the decision to leave the employer but to leave the country as well. We call these important individuals "trusted outsiders". They are *outsiders* because they were neither affiliated with their employers nor part of the informants' social circle. Encounters with these individuals happened either randomly, for example at a train station, or in the context of an external project. They were *trusted* because they were members of the same professional field as the informant (see also below).

The places and circumstances in which these important conversations occurred varied from one informant to another. However, all conversations had in common that the individuals we call "trusted outsiders" expressed that they see in the informant a great potential or substantial talent as a professional. For some informants, these conversations were relatively long, while for others they took only a few minutes—yet, nevertheless, they turned out significant to them due to the importance of the subject matter.

Indeed, informants insisted on the deep impact these conversations had on the way they felt about themselves and their professional capabilities. Jimmy, a French engineer who was inspired by an American outsider and who consequently moved to the US, says:

When he told me I was really good, I really started to realize that I was not completely wrong about my own self-opinion. I showed him a bit of the program I had developed a few years ago, and he was amazed. I really felt good at that moment. You know, the most surprising fact is that I didn't do anything special in the eyes of the company. But that guy working in Silicon Valley and running a fruitful business told me that in everybody's eyes, I should be seen as more than an expert. (Jimmy)

These conversations helped renew the informants' confidence in themselves. We further find that one major reason for why these conversations became so significant was their informal, unplanned and unpredictable nature. They happened spontaneously at moments that were not designed for interactions of this kind. Accordingly, some informants saw them as accidental, while others would interpret them as an articulation of "fate".

Also, according to our informants, the individuals they talked to had no stakes in the conversation or any interest in sharing that they were impressed with their professional abilities. The unexpected and unforced nature of these conversations, combined with the perception that these individuals were knowledgeable, led our informants to believe that what they said really meant something. The words by Line, a computer engineer who made the decision to leave the Netherlands and pursue her career abroad in the US, are particularly evocative:

I never would have imagined I would meet this guy at the station. I mean, I usually do not like when people are reading my stuff. Nobody likes that. You know that awkward moment when you are working and people start questioning you about what this or that relates to? This is something really intrusive. But with that man it was different. He knew what my stuff was about and he was really bright. We spoke for more than an hour about my algorithm, and he was fascinated. The most surprising thing was that he was bright, really, a sort of god of

mathematics, and he was seated just here beside me, discussing with me about how he found my stuff great, in a station where I would never have expected to meet such a person. (Line)

From an identity work perspective, our informants mobilized these conversations to revitalize their self-conception of a talented professional while recontextualizing their perception of being undervalued by their employers as a more limited "local" view. Importantly, the fact that these conversations did not have a history and were not embedded in a longer-term relationship with the respective conversation partners is not central to their significance to the informant's identity reformation process. In fact, these conversations only *became* important because our informants, more or less intentionally, contextualized and used them as identity-building devices in the ongoing effort to resolve the tensions they were facing in their workplace.

How an outsider becomes a trusted messenger

In our interviews we further examined what made our informants trust the views of these outsiders. In other words, what qualifies these individuals to have such a significant impact on the informants' identity work and decision-making process?

We find that one core dynamic in this context is the association of the views expressed by these individuals with the credibility they enjoyed in the eyes of the informants. Across all cases we identified in particular three characteristics that were perceived by our informants as important trust-building features: the outsider's professional background; the fact that they had foreign work experience and no association with the informant's workplace; and the fact that they were not part of the informant's family or inner social circle.

First, the individuals we label "trusted outsiders" have in common that they were working in the same profession as the informant. They were thus perceived by the informant as being able to understand the subtleties of the informants' work. That is why their appreciation of the informant's abilities was interpreted by the latter as a strong confirmation of their own self-concept. By contrast, the interviews made clear that receiving flattering comments from random people would not be sufficient for our informants to revitalize their self-conception as a talented professional. Some of our informants argued, in fact, that they would interpret compliments received from a non-expert as an indication of the person's fascination with their work without seeing a particular value in this form of recognition.

The second important feature characterizing the trusted outsider was that they were not directly involved in the same work environment as the informants. Even in cases where they had been involved in some temporary collaboration with the informant's organisation, they were not directly employed by them. In other words, our informants would perceive these individuals as external and unbiased experts. Consequently, being recognized by someone knowledgeable from outside the organization suggested to them that their professional abilities and credibility are significant enough to be of value in the larger professional community and that other employers would indeed take an interest in their talent.

What is more, these individual experts not only worked outside the informant's organization but they had work experience abroad; typically, in a country known for its expertise in the professional field of the informant, like the U.S. in our case. In the eyes of our informants this feature added credibility to the view expressed by these individuals. In addition, this feature would become a very important trigger for our informants' later decision to move abroad. In fact, our interviews indicate that the decision of

our informants to move to North America was very much supported by their encounters with professionals from that region. For example, Koen, who decided to move from Belgium to North America, remembers the importance of the fact that the trusted outsider he conversed with came from the U.S.

I mean, I am not talking about a guy located here in Belgium or in the UK. This man was from the US, and he told me that I was doing something great. Can you imagine that? While people next to you cannot see that, and when this man saw it after just a few minutes. (Koen)

Third, and related to the previous criterion, the trusted outsiders were not involved in any way in the private life of the workers interviewed. In fact, we find that informants understood any valuation expressed by people involved in their personal life as a form of complaisance and, consequently, did not consider it as objective or meaningful. Thus, such compliments were perceived more as an expression of sympathy than as a valid recognition of their talent. Séverine, a French engineer who now lives in the US, shared this contrasting perspective on how she felt when her partner used to value her:

Louis told me I was a great engineer. In his eyes, I was the best and the most intelligent, and, yes, also the most beautiful. I mean, when people love you or care for you they spend a lot of time throwing away compliments that make you smile but that you never really take seriously. It's just that this is the proof you are appreciated. But when performing like I do, you do not expect to be appreciated; you need to be recognized for what you're really worth intellectually. (Séverine)

In sum, a combination of characteristics turned outsiders into trusted voices and messengers from a world outside the informants' home organization. Thanks to the validation received by these individuals our informants would develop a more confident position towards their home employers and get ready for change in their professional lives.

Home employers become an irrelevant audience

Following their encounters with the trusted outsiders, our informants would not only revise their self-concept but also develop a more distant relationship with their home employers. Unlike in the past when their employers, despite perceived tensions, were regarded as the primary authority in determining their professional identity, they were now increasingly seen as irrelevant to their self-concept of a highly talented professional.

More specifically, our informants would change the way they process the conflict between their self-concept and the way they felt their home employers view them. While self-doubt was previously seen by our informants as a source of reflection in response to this tension, it increasingly became a barrier for change. Related to this, informants would increasingly view their home employers as a roadblock in their journey of professional growth. As a result, informants began to see their home employer's conception of them as irrelevant.

This had important consequences for how the informants envisioned their future in their home organisation and beyond. It appeared to them that continuing to evolve in this environment posed an obstacle to their need to thrive as a professional in line with their revitalized self-concept, making exit a more viable and meaningful option than before. Tina, who decided to leave the Netherlands to start a new journey in Canada, shares these words:

It was not only a good conversation; [...] it was a relief. Maybe because I am sensitive to what people tell me, I don't know. But yes, for me it had a huge impact. It is like it was the proof I needed to say, "OK guys, goodbye." (Tina)

Lucas, who left Belgium for the US, reflects for his part on how this revitalization occurred in a context of struggle.

It is like there was me and my idea about who I am and then what people in the company thought about me. And, believe me or not, these ideas were completely different. OK, there might be some little differences when you think something and it is not exactly how people see you. But in this way, no. It was like when you have short hair but are convinced your hair is pretty long. I was struggling to show people they were wrong, but at a certain point, I also questioned myself about that. I couldn't believe anymore that I was right about what I thought I was if people refused to see it. When I remember that time, it was really hard to live with. Really, I needed to get far away from that. (Lucas)

Importantly, the expression "I needed to get far away from that" points to the fact that our informants saw tensions within their home organization as part of a larger problem that is anchored in the cultural and institutional environment this organization is in. Eventually, "getting far way" meant leaving the entire country rather than just the organization. As we detail next, an important aspect of the revitalization of our informants' self-concept and the related determination to leave their home employer was what we can conceive of as the projection of an image of a foreign place where their aspirations can be fulfilled.

Moving to the promised land

Above we already discussed that receiving validation from a professional expert of a foreign country was an important trigger for our informants to not only consider leaving their employers but leaving their country as well. In doing so, our informants would associate many of the tensions and difficulties they experienced in their home organization with the culture of their home country, and in some cases the entire region. The following quote of Séverine, who moved to North America, illustrates this nicely:

I worked in Germany, Spain, and France, and it was always the same experience: the same situation, same culture, and same ways to assess my capabilities. In all these countries, people were unable to recognise how talented I was. So . . . well, for me, everything was so obvious. Europe was definitely not the place to be valued as I really deserved to be. (Séverine)

It is important to note that the entire process of leaving employer and country was not merely motivated by dissatisfaction or the availability of new opportunities, but very much by the strong need to cultivate and protect the self-concept of a talented professional. This is also why applying for a foreign assignment at their home employer was not seen by them as an option. Instead, distancing themselves from their employer was seen by our informants as the only viable way to protect their (idealized) self-concept.

Furthermore, the categorization of home country and home region as problematic coincided with an idealization of distant geographies as more promising and suitable. In many cases, our informants had no prior experience of working in the countries they eventually moved to. Instead, they considered the reputation of the country in their professional world as an important criterion for its fit as a future work environment. Receiving validation from the promised land through a professional expert further

reinforced the idea that this might be the right move at the right time. In this respect, the trusted outsiders not only served as messengers but as a bridge to the new environment. In most cases, this new environment would be North America.

Once our informants moved abroad, at least their initial experience abroad often confirmed their idealized comparison with their home countries. For example, this informant decided to move to Montreal. It is interesting that from the beginning the informant would compare the new with the old employer as representations of a professional culture and environment rather than just as organizations. Samuel formulates it this way:

Well, Montreal is a great city, professionally speaking. I really enjoy opportunities I can grasp here as an employee in such a big company, but I also have the feeling that it is not just about the company—I am not sure that France may offer these kinds of opportunities. And, I mean, above all, there is still something hidden that I cannot name at this moment—but this is like a mindset you can feel at the right place as a worker or as a person with all the capabilities (...) when I remember how I felt in France and how I escaped that brainwashing, I can only tell you that company was the place where I performed a job that was not appreciated as it should be. (Samuel)

Our interviews suggest that the choice of North America as their destination was not merely the result of some individual assessment of career advancement opportunities, but very much the result of an idealization of a promising future work environment. This idealization was partly grounded in North America's image as a dream destination for STEM careers, and partly in the transformative encounters with professionals from that region.

We further observed that this idealization was linked to our informants urge to escape their home country in favor of a place matching their aspired self-concept. Over time, our informants would replace their initially idealized image of the host country with a more nuanced account of both opportunities and challenges in the host environment. However, these changes do not make the initial idealization less important. This is because only by narrating a stark (and exaggerated) contrast between perceived constraints and related threats to their self-concept at home and the promise of betterment and fulfillment abroad, our informants were able to justify to themselves such a drastic career move. Identity work, specifically the reformation of idealized self-concepts through encounters with trusted outsiders from the promised land, is thus a central lever in developing the motivation and courage to move abroad.

Discussion

In this section we aim to develop, based on our empirical findings, a more generic process model of identity work leading up to SIEs' initial decision to leave their home employer and home country to inform future research. Figure 1 summarizes the main elements of the model. We distinguish three dynamics: (1) suppression of self-concept through interactions with home employer; (2) elevation of self-concept through interactions with trusted outsider; and (3) association of elevated self-concept with promised land.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

The *first dynamic*, suppression of self-concept through interactions with home employer (see Figure 1), resembles findings from previous studies on identity work leading up to voluntary turnover decisions (Rothausen et al., 2017) as well as research on how workers respond to identity threats facing them in various contexts (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Brown and Coupland, 2015). Previous studies have shown how even highly qualified knowledge workers often struggle with deep insecurities about their abilities in relation to organizational and professional expectations. Like in our case, professionals would often enter prolonged periods of self-doubt (Knights and Clarke, 2014), leading to internal resignation.

We find that in the context of the self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) we studied, these identity struggles focus in particular on the notion of talent. The perception of talent is contextually embedded and may vary in the eyes of different stakeholders, which makes it subject to competing interpretations (Wiblen and McDonnell, 2019). The association with talent labels is a highly contested terrain in many organizations (Kirk, 2020). Importantly, even though such labels do not directly reflect a person's identity (Hough, 2016), they can be at the center of deep identity work in professional contexts (Kirk, 2020).

The importance of talent as a property of SIE identities foreshadows a key feature of SIEs: their strong orientation towards growth, fulfilling their potential and expanding their comfort zone (Andresen et al., 2020). Thus, our findings indicate similar to prior research that a perceived conflict between how SIEs perceive their own potential and how their employers perceive it can be a key driver of decision-making (see Donnell, 2011; Sonnenberg, Zijderfeld and Brinks, 2014; Daubner-Siva et al., 2018; Kirk, 2020). Yet, at the same time, our findings suggest that future SIEs may initially also lack the drive to leave their home employer despite these perceived conflicts. This is because, initially, SIEs would put a lot of weight on how their professional potential is judged by their home employers. This observation matches the literature on talent management as it confirms the crucial role of organizations in defining who is talented and who is less so, including SIEs (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Thunnissen et al., 2013; Festing and Schäfer, 2014). As a result, our future SIEs initially suppress their own self-concept in response to how they perceive their employer's judgment.

There is, however, another important dimension to this dynamic. Rather than seeing their employer as a distinct organization, we find that SIEs associate them with a larger cultural and institutional environment that suppresses their potential. For example, one informant expresses that the lack of recognition of their capabilities by their home organization is related to a certain mindset cultivated by European people. With this contextualization, the SIEs we studied would sometimes perceive a pattern of failed recognition across multiple organizations in European countries, which, eventually leads them to leave Europe behind.

The *second dynamic* is what we call "elevation of self-concept through interactions with trusted outsiders" (see Figure 1). This observation is at the core of our study and makes it specifically relevant for our understanding of voluntary turnover decisions in the context of self-initiated expatriation. Recent studies indicate that the actual decision-making process leading up to self-initiated expatriation is still under-researched (Hussain and Deery, 2018; Kim et al., 2018). We find that in the case of initial turnover decisions of SIEs, important changes in identity work, specifically what we call the "elevation" of SIEs' self-concept, contribute to SIEs' decision to leave their home organization and home country.

We find that this important dynamic is triggered to a large extent by conversations SIEs have about their professional career and potential with what we call "trusted outsiders". This finding reiterates the

important role of referent others (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010) in shedding light on provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999) in the course of discursive exchanges. The conversations, in which these dynamics take place, become further articulated in stories that support an individual's identity work (Alvesson, 1990). Discursive construction is indeed used as an activator of identity reformation (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Josselson, 2004). More specifically our findings point to the role of conversations with trusted outsiders who we define as individuals who work in the same professional field as SIEs but outside the SIEs' employing organization, outside their social circle, and typically also outside their home country. They are trusted by SIEs in the sense that SIEs see the outsiders' view as legitimate based on their shared professional affiliation and the credentials SIEs associate them with. At the same time, SIEs perceived them as unbiased since they have no stakes in the conversation. There is also a dynamic component of trust coming from the experience of these conversations as spontaneous and unforced.

The elevating effect of these conversations comes from the way trusted outsiders validate the previously suppressed self-concept of SIEs as talented professionals. In other words, trusted outsiders assist processes of self-verification as they evoke feelings of being "known and understood" (Swann et al., 2004, p.10). This finding corresponds with prior research suggesting that legitimate views are more likely to be internalized (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006, 2009; see also: Higgins, 1987; Snow and Anderson, 1987).

Moreover, we find that the elevation of SIE's self-concepts is not an automatic outcome of SIE's conversations with trusted outsiders but that the SIEs we studied deliberately mobilize their interactions with trusted outsiders in their narratives to revitalize their self-concept as talented professional. In that sense, SIEs use conversations with trusted outsiders in their role as referent others (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010) to sustain what would otherwise remain "provisional selves" (Ibarra, 1999). This is where the importance of identity work lies as opposed to accidental or unconscious identity shifts (see also Burke, 1991; Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Maurer and London, 2018). Accordingly, while prior studies have emphasized that the internalization of external views is more likely when they are congruent with self-concepts (see e.g. Stryker, 1968; Burke, 1980; Burke and Stets, 2009; see also Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Jenkins, 2002; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004), our findings suggest that SIEs in their narratives make a deliberate effort to establish a new congruence between their self-concept as talented workers and external views by choosing trusted outsiders over their employers as reference points for their self-verification. This shows that establishing desirable congruence involves deep identity work in which identifying *what* would be internalized as relevant views is a necessary effort (Watson, 2009) to generating a purposeful identity reformation (Kirk, 2020).

Significantly, our informants thereby make an important transition from previously separating their self-concept from who they want to be, an identity position Knights and Clarke (2013) call "aspirants", to a self-concept that incorporates their idealized self as a projection of who they think they deserve to be and be seen as.

The *third dynamic* is what we call "association of elevated self-concept with the promised land" (see Figure 1). This dynamic links SIEs' elevated self-concept with the projection of a future in a foreign country that promises to recognize the SIE's potential more fully. Again, trusted outsiders become an important element in this process.

This dynamic is central to the SIEs' eventual decision to expatriate. While a combination of factors motivates relocation, we find that identity work leading to the elevation of self-concepts and their association with a promised land play a key part in this. Two interconnected dimensions of idealization

are important here: First, as noted above, based on the conversations with trusted outsiders SIEs begin to embrace an idealized self-concept which is incompatible with their work environment at home. Second, this idealized self-concept is associated with a different, idealized work environment where SIEs hope to see their potential more fully recognized. We find that both dimensions of idealization serve as a "tool" for SIEs to create sufficient distance between the perceived constraints in the work environment at home and the perceived opportunities of betterment abroad. Creating this distance in their narratives helped the SIEs develop the rationale and urge to make a rather radical and courageous career decision: to leave their job and career at home behind.

We further find that trusted outsiders serve as a bridge between SIEs' home environment and the promised land. At the most basic level, trusted outsiders, from the SIEs' perspective, provide a glimpse into how companies abroad may perceive and value the SIEs' professional talent. Trusted outsiders are perceived by SIEs to have this insight because of their work experience in particular foreign countries, such as the U.S. or Canada in our case, which carry "promise" of a better, more fulfilling work environment. Thereby, trusted outsiders take on a bridging role in the SIEs' narratives by obtaining a dual position as representatives (or messengers) of a world *outside* of the reality SIEs currently see themselves in while also being familiar with the professional field SIEs are part of. This is why conversations with trusted outsiders are not just important in the process of identity reformation (see also Leary and Tangney, 2003) and the internalization of talent labels (see also Kirk, 2020), but in developing the confidence needed to expatriate into entirely new work environments.

Implications for Future Research

Our findings have important implications for future research, in particular in three areas: (1) motivations of self-initiated expatriation, (2) talent labeling in the context of knowledge workers, and (3) voluntary turnover decisions in relation to self-initiated expatriation.

First, our findings have important implications for our understanding of where the motivation to expatriate comes from. Prior research has emphasized SIEs' explorative orientation (Selmer and Lauring, 2011) and growth aspirations leading up to decisions to expatriate (Suutari et al., 2018). However, it has been less clear how SIEs develop this aspiration and orientation in the first place. We found that SIEs' emerging growth aspiration is related to an idealization of self, which seems to be at the core of both prolonged periods of self-doubt and the eventual urge and capacity to act and move abroad. This has important implications for SIE research as it suggests to pay more attention to the potentially fragile nature of SIEs' aspiration to grow and potential linkages to feelings of insecurity, self-doubt and idealized self-concepts.

In addition, our findings have wider implications for the role of identity work and processes of self-verification in self-initiated expatriation, beyond the initial decision to move. Our study indicates the potentially important role of conversations with certain individuals in maintaining such identity positions and in thereby managing perceived tensions between home and host country environments (see also: Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Josselson, 2004). In addition, whereas most research on SIE interactions has focused on stakeholders and referent others within the organisation, we emphasize the role of externally positioned individuals in SIEs' identity work (see also Van Bakel, 2018). We show how these individuals at particular times can serve as catalysts of identity reformation.

Second, our findings contribute to the literature on talent management and talent labelling. We found that SIEs perceive talent labels as an important element of the recognition they think they deserve. Whereas most studies on global talent management and talent labels take an intra-organizational perspective on how talent labels are negotiated and allocated (see Björkman et al., 2013; Festing and Schäfer, 2014), we show how SIEs in their identity work make reference to "master narratives" of career-making (LaPointe, 2010) beyond firm and geographical boundaries. Our findings suggest that in the context of SIEs, a field perspective (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), which looks at communities of organizations and professionals within and across geographical boundaries, may be more appropriate to explain how SIEs respond to talent ascriptions. In our case, the perceived disconnect between intra-organizational and extra-organizational talent labelling turned into a driver of voluntary turnover.

In addition, our findings help expand our understanding of how talent labels get internalized by professionals through identity work, especially for the case of SIEs. Building on prior work by Tansley and Tietze (2013), who showed how talent labels get internalized through a multi-stage process: separation, liminal condition and incorporation; our findings point to two fundamental extensions. First, our findings indicate that in the context of SIEs both intra-organizational and extra-organizational identity work dynamics feed into both separation and incorporation processes. Second, we show how trusted outsiders are important catalysts for both the association and disassociation of self-concepts with talent labels.

Third, our findings can inform voluntary turnover research by specifying drivers of turnover for the population of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). Even though voluntary turnover has been researched intensively (Mueller and Price, 1990), including the importance of identity work in turnover decisions (Rothausen et al., 2017; Crawford et al., 2018), there is little research on identity work leading to departures from both firm and country. Our study indicates that in the case of SIEs, initial turnover decisions are driven by a combination of factors that is quite specific to the orientations and characteristics of these workers.

On the one hand, we find that SIEs' motivation to leave is very much anchored in their self-concept as talented professional which may be in conflict with how they feel treated by their employer (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Brown and Coupland, 2015). Also, the strong orientation of SIEs towards what they could *become* as a professional (Andresen et al., 2020), rather than what they *are* at any point in time should be treated as an important facet of their identity work and driver of decision-making. We thus recommend to more carefully study the construction and importance of idealized selves in voluntary turnover decisions. On the other hand, our findings suggest that SIEs not simply look at their home employers as distinct entities but as representations of a cultural and institutional work environment that reaches beyond any one organization. Decisions to leave an organization and leave the country need to be seen in conjunction, even if they would conventionally be treated as two separate decisions.

We therefore suggest to distinguish regular voluntary turnover decisions from what we would call "super-turnover" decisions that combine leaving an organization with leaving a larger context of work, e.g. a country or professional field. An identity work lens seems useful in understanding how such super-turnover decisions come about.

There are also some limitations of this study which need to be addressed in future research. First, our study focuses on the flow of SIEs from Europe to North America. Future studies need to carefully address to what extent the idealization of host countries as promised lands applies to particular destinations rather than others. Second, while we focused here on SIEs rather than corporate expatriates,

we encourage future studies to apply an identity work lens to different types of expatriates to further investigate either the persistence or the reformation of expatriates' self-concepts through different types of mobility.

Managerial implications

Our study has implications for decision-makers in organizations. First, to support organizations' retention strategy, we encourage organizations to promote an open and transparent communication approach where employees would have the opportunity to express their feelings about how their potential is valued and recognized in the organization. Organizations could set up dedicated face-to-face meetings on this issue to be integrated into the organization's feedback culture.

The purpose of this is twofold. On the one hand, such feedback processes help mitigate the frustration that might result from incongruence between a worker's self-concept and the one reflected on them by the organization. Related to this, they help identify identity tensions experienced by their workers before they become critical. On the other hand, such regular conversations can become key as part of retention management which should be integral to everyday management of SIEs (Ceric and Crawford, 2016). However, rather than narrowly aiming for retention in the conventional sense, career conversations with SIEs should include discussions about transfer to different locations, to business partners or clients, or to unrelated organizations if that is what SIEs aim for.

Second, any conversation about "talent labels" with SIEs, or knowledge workers who match the SIE profile, should follow the principle of shared valuation instead of being limited to what Kirk (2020) described as a top-down, organizational categorizing ascription. Following this principle could also add to synergies between talent management and expatriate management (see Jackson et al., 2011; Al Ariss et al., 2014; Cerdin and Brewster, 2014; Collings, 2014). In the same spirit, organizations looking to hire expatriate talents could proactively communicate to future hires the importance they attach to *open conversations* with potential employees about how the worker would expect their work to be valued. This practice would demonstrate the company's attention to providing the worker with an environment in which they can feel understood and valued.

Conclusion

This study has explored the importance of identity work leading up to the decision of SIEs to expatriate. We make four central observations: (1) Specific referent others i.e., "trusted outsiders" play a central role in elevating SIEs' sense of self-worth and in helping them distance themselves from home employers as primary references for self-verification; (2) SIEs associate trusted outsiders with preferred alternative and better fulfilling work environments, the promised land; (3) SIE's idealization of their own talent as well as their imagined future work environments enables them to leave home employers and home countries behind; (4) Our findings suggest that interactions with external referent others have a strong influence not only on knowledge workers' identity work in general, but on processes of talent labeling and what we call "super-turnover", i.e. decisions to move into entirely new career contexts.

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Table and Figures

Table 1: Informants

ID	Sex	Age	Occupation	Home country	Host country	Interview Duration (min)	Duration of the expatriation	Relationship at the time of the expatriation	Children at the time of the expatriation
Xavier	M	42	Pharmaceutical expert	Netherlands	USA	71	4	Partner	Yes
Sabine	F	38	Architect engineer	Belgium	CANADA	69	2	Single	No
Jules	M	42	Engineer	France	USA	72	4	Partner	No
Francis	M	38	Multimedia expert	Netherlands	USA	63	3	Single	No
Mathéo	M	37	Robotics engineer	Belgium	CANADA	70	2	Single	No
Paul	M	38	Finance expert	Belgium	USA	69	3.5	Single	No
Lucas	M	41	Finance engineer	Belgium	USA	70	2	Partner	No
Françoise	F	36	Computer science engineer	France	USA	70	2.5	Single	No
Séverine	F	39	Science engineer	France	USA	85	3	Partner	No
Jimmy	M	39	engineer	France	USA	72	3	Partner	No
Samuel	M	35	Multimedia tech engineer	France	CANADA	65	2.5	Partner	Yes
Marco	M	40	Science engineer	Belgium	CANADA	68	3	Partner	Yes
Nadia	F	36	Electronics engineer	Netherlands	CANADA	74	2.5	Single	No
Line	F	42	Computer science engineer	Netherlands	USA	60	3	Partner	No
Tina	F	36	Engineer	Netherlands	CANADA	74	3	Single	No
Hervé	M	39	Computer engineer	France	CANADA	80	2	Partner	Yes
Greta	F	40	Economics expert	Belgium	USA	68	4	Single	No
Koen	M	42	Computer science engineer	Belgium	CANADA	70	3	Partner	No
Micheline	F	43	Finance engineer	France	CANADA	85	3.5	Partner	Yes
Catherine	F	44	Computer science engineer	France	CANADA	73	3	Partner	Yes

Figure 1: Identity work dynamics contributing to the reformation of SIEs' self-concept prior to decision to move abroad

