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Unpacking differences in psychological contracts of organisational expatriates and self-initiated expatriates: a mixed method study

Introduction

Global staffing has remained a main focus within the field of International Human Resource Management (IHRM) since the 1970s (Collings, Scullion and Morley, 2007). With the changing patterns of global staffing in multinational enterprises, the latest trend has seen a decline in traditional international posts, and a rise in the number of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), with Asian countries being the emerging popular migration destinations (Collings et al., 2007; OECD, 2012).

In recent years, scholars have presented the importance of treating organisational expatriates (OEs) and SIEs as heterogeneous groups (Altman and Baruch, 2012; Guzzo, Noonon, & Elron, 1994). OEs are defined as expatriates whom are sent to international assignments by their home employers, whereas SIEs are those who make their own decisions to work and live in a foreign country (Doherty et al., 2013). SIEs have become a larger segment relative to OEs in global labour market (Myers and Pringle, 2005). Indeed, multi-National Corporations (MNCs) have indicated an intention to replace OE managers with local-hired SIEs (Collings et al., 2007).

With the increased reliance on SIEs relative to OEs in organisations, it is important to acknowledge that the drivers and motivations of SIEs might differ, as well as their perceptions towards the Psychological Contract (PC). In the present study, we adopt the definition by Rousseau (1989, p.123) whereby the PC refers to the employee's beliefs "regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party". Given the protean career attitudes of SIEs, which are described as a self-driven and value-oriented towards career advancement (Bricoe et al., 2006), it might result in substantial differences for SIEs in their expectation of their employer and understanding of the perceived promises relative to OEs. Moreover, previous studies have indicated various (perceived) differences of the two groups, e.g. motives, interaction with locals, work adjustment and career advancement opportunities, international mobility patterns (Alshahrani and Morley, 2015; Altman and Baruch, 2012; Guzzo, Noonon, & Elron, 1994). These factors may also have a significant impact on the differences in how SIEs experience the lack of fulfilment of the employer's obligations, and their emotional reactions to perceived failed promises made by the employer.

Although PC has been proved to be a useful tool to explain employer-employee relationships across cultures (Guzzo et al., 1994; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Thomas et al., 2010), research that investigated differences in the PC for OEs and SIEs is extremely limited. The current article uses PC breach and violation as two constructs to explore the PC for the two groups. Specifically, PC breach arises when an employee perceives that his/her employer has failed to adequately fulfill the promised obligations, while PC violation is the subsequent negative emotional outcomes of PC breach, e.g. anger and betrayal (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). PC breach only leads to PC violation when severe emotional reaction takes place (Conway, Guest, and Trenberth, 2011; Morrison and Robinson, 1997).

As PCs are usually subjected to individual differences in perceptions, different types of employees might develop different beliefs towards the exchanged agreement (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2014). The present study, using a mixed-method study, was conducted in a Chinese context. 171 expatriates from 35 countries/regions working in China participated in our survey. Four follow-up focus group interviews were conducted to triangulate the findings of the survey. Economic prosperity and cultural context have been regarded as important factors to select overseas work destinations, specifically for SIEs (Doherty, 2013). As one of the fastest growing economies and relationship-oriented societies, exploring the PC for OEs and SIEs in the Chinese context may provide important theoretical and practical insights. The contribution the current article makes is two-fold. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is a first attempt to investigate the differences in the PC for OEs and SIEs. The findings of this study may make a considerable contribution to the scholarship of the PC, self-initiated expatriation. Second, as human resource practices do not always apply to all types of employees in the same way (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010), differentiating the PC for OEs and SIEs may shed light on practical IHRM strategies.

Organisational and self-initiated expatriates

Although SIEs and OEs have notable differences, expatriates were typically treated as a homogeneous group in previous research. Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry (1997) presented the first article stating the necessity to distinguish SIEs from OEs. The term "self-initiated expatriates" was then further developed by Jokinen, Brewster and Suutari (2008), indicating expatriates who independently select a foreign location to work and live in. Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry (2013) summarized the profiles of SIEs in the management literature, showing that SIEs are portrayed as expatriates who are mostly from western countries, have a good educational background, mainly work for MNCs or medium size companies, and stay in the host countries from a few months to several years and permanent.

Prior studies have addressed the differences between OEs and SIEs in various dimensions (e.g. Altman and Baruch, 2012; Guzzo, Noonon, & Elron, 1994; Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Firstly, the demographic profiles of these groups appear to vary considerably. According to Suutari and Brewster (2000), SIEs were slightly younger, more likely to be single and female, and/or have a spouse working in the host country. The study conducted by Inkson and Myers (2003) confirmed a higher degree of gender equality among SIEs, while male expatriates usually dominated the OE population. Lauring and Selmer (2014) surveyed 640 SIE academics in Greater China, whereby the results showed that successful SIEs were more likely to be female, married and to occupy senior positions.

Secondly, the motivating factors for OEs and SIEs are significantly different. The main factors that motivate OEs are related to their career, such as job opportunities and career advancement (Dickmann et al., 2008; Doherty, Dickmann and Mills, 2011; Suutari and Taka 2004). While OEs tend to seek a relatively familiar culture and job security with a conservative attitude towards expatriation (Inkson and Myers 2003), adventure, host country location, escape from one's previous life, and travel

opportunities are main components that motivate SIEs to migrate (Doherty et al. 2011; Insksonet al., 1997; Selmer and Lauring, 2012). Moreover, SIEs may deliberately seek a host culture that is very different from their home culture (Richardson and McKenna, 2011). Carr, Inkson and Thorn (2005) argued that the five main reasons for people to migrate are economic factors, political factors, cultural factors, family factors, and career factors. OEs appear to focus more on career factors, while SIEs seem to place more emphasis on personal enrichment and cultural factors.

The barriers claimed by OEs from accepting an international post may not equally apply to SIEs. Family related issues are considered to be an important factor for OEs to decide whether or not to accept international assignments (Cole 2011). Conversely, SIEs may decide to work abroad to pursue a romantic relationship, or to follow a spouse who already works in the same host country (Doherty et al., 2011). Furthermore, Cao, Hirschi and Deller (2014) found that SIEs were more willing to stay in a host country when perceived organisational support levels were high.

Thirdly, as SIEs have less support with respect to pre-departure training, career progression, and repatriation plans, SIEs may have a lack of job autonomy, job suitability, and job variety (Lee, 2005). Indeed, OEs were reported to experience a higher level of job satisfaction (Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013). Studies also indicated that SIEs interacted better with locals compared to OEs, and relied less on their companies for providing service (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009; De Araujo Teixeira, da Cruz and Malini, 2013).

Expatriate psychological contract

The concept of PC was originally introduced by Argyris (1960), and then developed over time to describe the employer-employee relationship. Rousseau (1989) brought the concept to a new era, arguing that PCs indicate the perceptions regarding the mutual obligations between the employer and employee. There still exists controversy whether PCs should be conceptualized from an employee's perspective, an organisation's perspective, or both (Dabos and Rousseau, 2013). As indicated previously, we adopt the PC definition of Rousseau (1989). An organisation does not exclusively shape the PC, but merely creates a specific context within the PC operates. The perceived disruption of PCs might have negative effects on job-related outcomes, such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction, work engagement and intention to quit (Chen and Chiu, 2009; Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013; Morgan and King, 2012; Rayton and Yalabik, 2014).

The current article adopts an evaluation-oriented assessment (Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1998) to explore the nature of PC, where evaluations include assessments of PC breach and violation. In line with previous studies (Morgan and King, 2012; Robinson and Morrison, 2000), PC is commonly measured using PC breach and violation. A PC breach arises when the employee perceives that the organisation fails to meet promises implicitly or explicitly made (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). PC violation is the intense emotional reaction to psychological breach, such as anger or betrayal. PC breach is expected to be positively related to the PC violation (Robinson and Morrison, 2000), however, PC breach only leads to violation under certain

conditions when negative emotional outcomes take place (Conway, Guest, and Trenberth, 2011; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). Furthermore, as the PC evaluates perceived fulfillment of promises made by the employer, explicitly and implicitly, the constructs do not necessarily deal with the written contract.

Guzzo et al. (1994) published the first article that put the PC of expatriates on the research agenda, becoming a foundation the latter studies in expatriate PC to build on. 209 expatriates on international assignments were surveyed and the findings revealed that the relationship between organisational practices and retention-relevant outcomes was mediated by the PC (Guzzo et al., 1994). Yet, few studies have followed the work of Guzzo and his colleagues to explore further in this field (see, for example: Haslberger and Brewster, 2009; Lewis, 1997; Pate and Scullion, 2010). The expatriate PC is different from the traditional employer-employee PC, in that expatriates are exposed to more uncertainties, risks, and anxieties of the adaptation process than their domestic peers. As employment contracts cannot cover all uncertainties, the PC is essential in the sense that it has an impact on how expatriates may assess the potential benefits and costs of a job offer abroad (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009). The expatriate PC is usually broad and expansive because it may cover a wider range of work and non-work factors, indicating a violation is more likely to occur where employees experience negative emotional outcomes (Rousseau, 1989; Guzzo et al. 1994). Furthermore, the tone of the expatriate PC has changed in nature from being relational to transactional (Pate and Scullion, 2010). Relational contracts are long-term and established on a narrow scope of terms; whereas transactional contracts are short-term and subject to change over time (Rousseau and Parks, 1993). Pate and Scullion (2010) argued that the nature of the expatriate PC has become more transactional along with the new trend of more calculating employment relationships (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). Due to the more competitive global market and cost reduction strategies of multinational corporations (MNCs), expatriates may experience more negative outcomes from the PC and shift their focus from job security to career development and future employability (Pate and Scullion, 2010).

Despite the rise of SIEs in the global workforce, little research has been done in exploring the PC for SIEs. Indeed, previous PC studies treated expatriates as a homogeneous group without acknowledging the possible discrepancies in different types of expatriation. We argue that there are various factors that might differentiate SIEs from traditional OEs in the degrees of PC breach and violation. OEs may experience lower level of PC breach and violation than their peers in that they receive better organizational support, training, and career advancement opportunities. As a result, OEs are more likely to be able to seek assistance from their employer to adjust to a new culture and develop career progression strategies. In contrast, SIEs, who have less support from the employer than OEs, may review the PC more critically in order to protect themselves in a foreign country. SIEs may also encounter more difficulties as their perceived obligations of the organisation may be misinterpreted from the employer's perspective (i.e., potential stereotypes), due to economic, societal and cultural differences. Previous research on cross-cultural interaction has found that people often hold implicit/explicit stereotypical views of people that are "different" to

them, which might positively or negatively influence their attitudes and actions towards them (Browaeys and Price, 2015; Clegg, Kornberger, and Pitsis, 2016). On the flipside, SIEs may better adapt to the work environment in a foreign cultural context than OEs as they may take more initiatives in selecting the destination country (Briscoe et al., 2006; Cao et al. 2013). Indeed, previous studies showed that high turnover rate of repatriates has become a major issue as OEs frequently reported dissatisfaction in their expatriation/repatriation experience and how their expectation in the workplace failed to be met (Kraimer, Shaffer and Bolino, 2009; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007).

Since OEs and SIEs possess different characteristics that facilitate or hinder them at the workplace, we thus propose the following research questions:

1. How do OEs and SIEs differ in PC breach?
2. How do OEs and SIEs differ in PC violation?

Methods

In the present article, we adopted the methodology of mixed methods which is believed to be superior to a single method in addressing research problems in human resource management field (Bainbridge and Lee, 2014). Since the research in PCs for expatriates is relatively scarce, as suggested by Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1998), when generalizability cannot be readily inferred, standardized quantitative assessment should be supplemented by qualitative data. We thus combined a quantitative survey with four focus group interviews which we anticipate would enhance the validity of the quantitative assessment in interpretation.

Sample

In line with previous studies (Richardson 2004; Richardson and Mallon 2005; Peltokorpi and Froese 2009), we used personal contacts and snowball sampling methods to collect data from expatriates in China. We distributed an e-questionnaire through the Internet in order to avoid direct contact with respondents and ensure unbiased responses. The survey questions were in English and the respondents were expected to have sufficient English reading skills to complete the questionnaire. A total of 175 surveys were received, of which 4 were excluded due to incomplete information. The remaining 171 surveys were accepted for further data analysis.

The sample size for the present study was comprised of 52 OEs and 119 SIEs, which was based on a specific item whether respondents were sent by their home employer, or made their own decisions to come to work in China. Demographics of OEs and SIEs are listed in Table 1. The respondents were from 35 countries/regions, including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. The main sending countries were the United States (22.2%), France (9.4%), the United Kingdom (9.4%) and Germany (7.0%). Respondents worked in a variety of sectors, and mostly resided in Dalian (29.8%), Shanghai (25.1%) and Beijing (19.3%). Most respondents were in their late thirties (mean age of 37), male (78.9%) and single (59.6%). On average, respondents had stayed in China for 49.5 months, with a range of 5 months to 17 years.

Sixteen expatriates participated in subsequent four focus group interviews following

the initial survey. The participants included 4 OEs and 12 SIEs. In Table 2 we have provided detailed characteristics of each participant, including their gender, age, nationality, Chinese language proficiency, occupation, marital status, time spent in China, the organisational type, and their respective PC breach and PC violation scores. Each focus group interview lasted 50-60 minutes and all participants had previously responded to the survey. A relatively open, semi-structured approach was followed allowing for participants to share their experiences, thoughts and feeling in an open, inclusive manner. At the same time, several directive questions were weaved into each focus group to ensure a focus on PC (e.g., "do you have the right to negotiate with your company? If they change something, what would you do?"; "Compared to the Chinese employees, are expatriates in an especially weak position to protect themselves?"). As indicated in Table 2, a wide range of participants were present from a cultural, job profile, industry, and PC scores perspective. We did not specifically sample for particular characteristics beforehand as we were keen to explore in an open, iterative manner how SIEs and OEs experienced PC.

Table 1 Background information of survey respondents (n=171)

	OE (n=52)		SIE (n=119)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender				
Male	47	90.4%	88	73.9%
Female	5	9.6%	31	26.1%
Age				
Under 25	2	3.8%	12	10.1%
26-35	20	38.5%	58	48.8%
36-45	20	38.5%	23	19.3%
46-55	8	15.4%	13	10.9%
Over 56	2	3.8%	13	10.9%
Marital Status				
Single	24	46.2%	78	65.5%
Married	28	53.8%	41	34.5%
Chinese				
Language Proficiency				
Do not speak Chinese	8	15.4%	20	16.8%
Basic	24	46.1%	42	35.3%
Intermediate	11	21.2%	29	24.4%
Advanced	9	17.3%	28	23.5%
Length of Stay in China				
Less than 1 year	7	13.5%	22	18.5%
1-3 years	21	40.4%	42	35.3%
4-6 years	19	36.5%	27	22.7%
Over 6 years	5	9.6%	28	23.5%

Table 2 Focus group interviewees demographics

	Type	Gender	Age	Nationality	Chinese Language Proficiency	Occupation	Marital Status	Time length of stay in China (in years)	Organisation Type	PC Breach	PC Violation
Focus group 1											
Interviewee 1	SIE	Male	36	Costa Rican	Basic	English teacher	Single	6	Local	3.80	3.00
Interviewee 2	SIE	Female	28	Brazilian	Intermediate	Data analyst	Single	5.5	MNC	2.00	1.25
Interviewee 3	SIE	Female	28	Thai	Fluent	Marketing manager	Single	5	MNC	1.00	1.00
Interviewee 4	SIE	Male	36	Filipino	Basic	English teacher	Single	4	MNC	1.00	1.00
Focus group 2											
Interviewee 5	OE	Male	28	French	Intermediate	Engineer	Single	2	MNC	1.00	1.00
Interviewee 6	SIE	Male	61	American	Fluent	Admin manager	Married	3	Local	1.00	1.00
Interviewee 7	SIE	Male	34	Turkish	Intermediate	Academic	Single	4.5	Local	2.00	1.50
Interviewee 8	SIE	Male	40	Indian	Basic	Academic	Married	1	Local	3.60	2.75
Focus group 3											
Interviewee 9	SIE	Male	33	American	Basic	University teacher	Married	1.5	Local	4.40	3.70
Interviewee 10	OE	Male	27	British	Fluent	General manager	Single	2	MNC	1.60	1.25
Interviewee 11	SIE	Female	39	Korean	Intermediate	Academic	Married	3.5	Local	4.20	4.25
Interviewee 12	OE	Male	33	German	Basic	Consultant	Married	6.5	Local	1.80	1.50

Focus group 4											
Interviewee 13	OE	Male	30	American	Fluent	General manager	Single	4	MNC	2.00	1.50
Interviewee 14	SIE	Male	45	British	Basic	University staff	Single	8	Local	2.60	1.75
Interviewee 15	SIE	Male	27	French	Intermediate	Sales manager	Single	3	MNC	2.40	2.00
Interviewee 16	SIE	Male	26	Russian	Intermediate	Marketing manager	Single	7	Local	2.20	2.00

Control variables

Building on the study of Froese and Peltokorpi (2013), we also included basic individual factors (demographics and anticipatory factors), cross-cultural competencies and job-related factors. Age was measured in years, while gender was dummy coded, as well as marital status. Chinese language proficiency was coded from 1 (fluent) to 4 (I don't speak Chinese). Finally, we added length of stay in China (as measured in months) as a control factor, as previous research has found that expatriates whom have lived longer in a host-country may have developed appropriate coping strategies (Rienties and Nolan, 2014), and may experience less cross-cultural stress.

Measures and data analysis

Following Robinson and Morrison (2000), PC breach and violation were measured based on the Likert response scale from 1 (=Totally Disagree) to 5 (=Totally Agree), with several reversed scored questions adjusted. Respondents were asked to assess PC breach level with five questions. Examples of items are as follows: "Almost all the promises made by my employer during recruitment have been kept so far (reversed)"; "I have not received everything promised to me in exchange for my contributions". Responses of PC violation were on four items such as "I feel a great deal of anger toward my organisation"; and "I feel betrayed by my organisation". The Cronbach's value for PC breach scale was .933 and that for PC violation scale was .934, indicating reasonable reliability. Follow-up explorative factor analysis indicated a two factor solution with items loading on the respective constructs, whereby PC violation had an Eigen Value of 6.607 and explained 73% of variance, while PC breach had an Eigen Value of .768 and explained 8% additional variance. We conducted independent sample t-tests, correlation and MANCOVAs using SPSS 22 to compare the basic individual factors and two constructs of PCs for SIEs and OEs, while we also indicated effect sizes using Cohen d-values. Cohen (1998) recommend that d = 0.20

(small effect), d = 0.50 (moderate effect) and d = 0.80 (large effect) serve as general guidelines across disciplines.

As mentioned earlier, the focus group interviews adopted an open, semi-structured approach and were conducted and transcribed in English. The interviewees were selected from the survey respondents who volunteered to participate in the focus group interviews. The interviews were conducted in English, in which all interviewees were fluent, and lasted on average 100 min. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. We started the interviews with general questions on their jobs in the host country and then extended the topics to their perception toward the fulfilment of their employers. We deliberately avoided introducing the concepts of PC breach and violation to interviewees in order not to mislead the dialogues. Further, we paid attention to encourage in-group interaction and allow the interviewees to initiate new themes. The first author (a Chinese female researcher) conducted the interviews, and both first author and second author (a Dutch male researcher) afterwards used QDA Miner 4 to analyze the transcribed qualitative data independently from each other to ensure inter-rate reliability (e.g., Lichtman, 2013). The focus group data were open-coded and an inductive approach was used to determine the emerging themes (Thomas, 2006). Afterwards, based upon our theoretical perspectives of PC breach and PC violation, we focussed our analysis on two broad themes: 1) Differences in degree of trust towards employers between OEs and SIEs; 2) perceived stereotyping of SIEs.

Results

As indicated in Table 3, OEs indeed indicated significantly lower levels of PC breach in comparison to SIEs, with a strong effect size (Cohen D = -.1.32). Although the mean of PC breach for SIEs was 2.66, taking a cut-off value of 3.4, 29% of SIEs indicated to have experienced PC breach, while only 1 OE indicated similar experiences. With respect to Research Question 2, again OEs indicated they had experienced significantly fewer PC violations in comparison to SIEs, again with a strong effect size (Cohen D = -.0.98). Again taking a cut-off value of 3.4, none of the OEs indicated to have experienced PC violations, while 19% of SIE expressed that they experienced these PC violations.

In terms of the control variables, significant differences were found in terms of gender and marital status between the two groups of expatriates, with a small effect size. In line with Andreson, Biemann, and Pattie (2015), it appeared that women were more likely to become SIEs. In addition, more OEs were married in comparison to SIEs. Yet, we could not find any correlations between any of the controlling variables and the PC breach and violation. Our results showed that the typology of expatriates explained the differences in PC breach and violation that OEs and SIEs experienced.

As a second step, we conducted correlation analyses with the key individual variables and the two constructs of PC breach and violation in Table 4. The SIE group was positively correlated with gender (women), PC breach and PC violation, and negatively correlated with marital status. None of the individual control factors were significantly correlated to PC breach or violation. Finally, MANCOVA analyses were

conducted, with PC breach and violation as the two dependent variables, and with covariates of age, language proficiency, length of stay, and finally gender, marital status, and SIE vs. OE as independent variables. The results indicated that only the dummy SIE vs. OE was a significant factor. In other words, higher reported values of PC breach and PC violation seemed to primarily related to whether expatriates were self-initiated or not.

Table 3 Differences between SIEs and OEs (independent sample t-test)

| | OEs | | SIEs | | | |
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t value	Cohen D
Age	38.23	8.87	36.46	11.42	0.993	0.17
Gender	1.10	0.30	1.26	0.44	-2.453*	-0.43
Marital Status	1.54	0.50	1.34	0.48	2.404*	0.41
Chinese Language Proficiency	2.60	0.96	2.45	1.03	0.849	0.15
Length of stay in China	45.12	46.12	51.50	42.75	-0.876	-0.14
PC breach	1.57	0.58	2.66	1.02	-7.209**	-1.32
PC violation	1.33	0.43	2.24	1.24	-5.162**	-0.98

*p< .05, ** p < .01.

Table 4 Correlation matrix of PC breach and violation

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	37.00	10.71							
2. Gender	1.21	0.41	-.138						
3. Marital Status	1.40	0.49	.462**	-.220**					
4. Chinese Language Proficiency	2.50	1.01	.139	.016	-.087				
5. Length of stay in China	49.56	43.77	.181*	-.100	.176*	-.364**			
6. PC breach	2.33	1.04	-.013	.082	-.027	-.042	.016		
7. PC violation	1.96	1.14	.052	.030	.054	.013	.029	.805**	
8. SIE vs. OE	1.70	0.46	-.076	.185*	-.182*	-.065	.067	.485**	.369**

*p< .05, ** p < .01.

Triangulation with focus group interviews

While the results of the survey indicated that the levels of PC breach and violation were significantly different between OEs and SIEs and large in terms of effect size, the underlining mechanisms that contributed to the phenomena need further unpacking in order to understand how organisations can address these issues.

The qualitative analysis aimed to explore in-depth the reasons for the differences in the nature of PCs between the two types of expatriates. From the open-coding of the data and our focus on PC breach and PC violation, we specifically looked at : differences in degree of trust toward employers between OEs and SIEs and perceived stereotyping of SIEs. As was already evident from Table 2, all OEs interviewees were from Western countries and were primarily working in management positions in MCNs. Given space limitations, we will not again report on individual characteristics

of respondents and their respective PC scores in the narratives below, as these are all available in Table 2 for readers to compare and contrast. A large diversity was present in terms of culture, job profile, and industry amongst SIEs. Nonetheless, several SIEs were also working in MCNs, while others were working in local, Chinese organisations. At the same time, the PC scores of the 12 interviewees do indicate a mixed, more nuanced perspective.

Differences in degree of trust toward employers between OEs and SIEs
In our study, OEs indicated a higher degree of trust towards the employer than SIEs, which would generate a better understanding of their cross-border roles in the organisation and effective performance at the workplace despite of the relocation pains. The advantages that OEs possess may be related to the higher level of organisational support, training and job security they could access than their peers (De Araujo Teixeira, da Cruz and Malini, 2013; Lee, 2015). Relationship conflict, which involves "irritation about personal taste and interpersonal style, disagreements about political preferences or opposing values" (De Dreu and Beersma, 2005: 106), has been proved to have a negative impact on trust and identification, and is difficult to manage (Jehn et al., 2008). According to Conway and Briner (2009), one core value of PC is to explore how reciprocal promises bind employees at work. In the context where relationship conflicts arose, several SIEs expressed trust concerns that might result in perceived lack of fulfillment of obligations, while OEs were more likely to take action to communicate with their employer and resolve the conflict (Interviewee 1, 4, 10, 12). A possible explanation is that SIEs tended to consider themselves as foreigners in a weak position in their organisation, without adequate organisational support and local cultural knowledge. Hence, several SIEs seemed to be more alerted to potential negative work-related factors. Indeed, one SIE in our interviews described that she had to "watch her back" to avoid any breach of contract as she could not fully trust what the employer had promised (Interviewee 2).

For Interviewee 4, 9, 11, who were working in the educational sector and had relatively high PC scores, their trust was undermined by the gap between the function of the contract and their expectation. They indicated several misunderstandings due to cultural differences and language barriers:

> I believe how the contract is used and the contract itself is different…On arrival, some of the things I was expecting which were pretty important for me in my schedule didn't happen. So even if it is a relatively small issue, it means a lot to me in terms of trust. (Interviewee 9)

> For me these are like minor changes…but, as a foreigner, you don't want to be abused, so you have to set some boundaries. (Interviewee 4)

In the case when the job responsibilities were interpreted differently by the employer, it appeared to be rather difficult for SIEs to (re-)negotiate the contract (e.g., Interviewee 8, Interviewee 11). In certain situations, according to Interviewee 1 and 8, a formal document was missing and agreement was merely reached verbally. Since OEs appeared to have developed a stronger trust relation with their employer, they would more likely view conflicts as functional and manageable by initiating

interaction with the organisation. Interviewee 10 expressed how he felt anxious about his job responsibilities at the beginning and then successfully reached a solution with his employer:

> The initial job description was clear but brief. As I later found out, my responsibilities and my overall workload was much larger than I first anticipated…Then I accepted the additional responsibilities and negotiated about the salary. My salary was later adjusted to match my additional responsibilities. (Interviewee 10)

Perceived stereotype of SIEs

The perceived stereotype of SIEs in their employers' eyes seemed to be a major issue as indicated by several SIE interviewees in our study. SIEs expressed their perceptions that their employers did not take SIEs as seriously as they should have since the employers expected a less committed attitude towards their jobs and a relatively high turnover rate of SIEs (Interviewee 11, 15, 16). The protean-attitude of SIEs, their different motivators from OEs such as seeking a cultural adventure or new experience, and their potential flexibility in changing jobs may be the factors that result in the claimed stereotype of SIEs (Bricoe et al., 2006; Inkson and Myers 2003; Richardson and McKenna, 2011). SIEs further pointed out that this might be reflected in lower job security, fewer training and career advancement opportunities, as indicated:

> Unlike my colleagues sent by our headquarter, (my boss may suppose) my job position does not necessarily require a foreigner. They have a long line of Chinese people, who can speak both good Chinese and English, to fill my job role, so I feel a lot of stress. (Interviewee 2)

> Theoretically there is still some room for me to grow my career in this company but I'm afraid there might be more difficulties to prevent from that to happen. (Interviewee 16)

Hence, SIEs failed to foresee their career prospects as they assumed that, in their employer's vision, SIEs were more replaceable and were not provided with the organisational resources that they deserved (Interviewee 14, 15, 16). In return, SIEs seemed to be more prepared to leave the job in case of any unexpected change and were reluctant to develop a long term career plan:

> I feel unstable about my job as anything could happen the next day such as my boss might change his mind or changes in government policies. So it's not possible for me to feel happy and relaxed, and think long term working at this job. (Interviewee 1)

> I can't see a future in my job as a foreigner here. I feel like I might have to quit everything any time even though I invested a lot of time and energy in the company. (Interviewee 15)

By contrast, as OEs are assigned to international posts, with mutually understood expatriate packages, their overseas positions are usually fixed and secure. SIEs, feeling disadvantaged in a foreign country, were prone to receiving the negative messages related to their careers. Moreover, theses negative messages expanded when

cultural differences took place in the mean time, as indicated by Interviewee 9:

> I think the opportunity for dialogue and mutual understanding is missing in that much of the information comes from the top and goes downward without dialogue or communication from downward. I didn't know what they expected of me. (Interviewee 9)

Hence, perceiving the stereotype towards SIEs from the employers and unfair treatment, several SIEs appeared to come up with the judgement that the obligations of the employer were not successfully fulfilled when disputes emerged.

Discussion

In recent years, the number of SIEs has been growing rapidly and this particular group of expatriates has attracted attention of researchers worldwide. However, to the best of our knowledge no existing study has dealt with the differences in the PC for OEs and SIEs. Previous studies in expatriate PC treated expatriates as a homogeneous group, while the findings of the present study, nested in China, shed light on the importance of differentiating the PC according to different types of expatriates, which indicated a multifaceted nature of PC in expatriation context. Further, the results of the current paper implied a significant difference between SIEs and OEs in the nature of PC, which answered the call for SIE research in the organisational setting (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009).

In the present study, we utilized a mixed-method study, using a quantitative survey and follow-up semi-structured focus group interviews, to discuss PC breach and violation of OEs and SIEs. The main contribution of our evaluation-oriented assessment approach is that OEs sample experienced significantly lower levels of PC breach and violation compared to SIEs (Research Question 1 & 2).

The qualitative data indicated possible underpinned reasons to further unpack and potentially explain the relatively stark differences in PC scores between OEs and SIEs. First, several SIEs tended to encounter more trust issues towards their employers in the host country than OEs, which might be aggregated in conflicting situations. SIEs appeared to be more likely to perceive a lack of fulfilment of the employer's promises than OEs, even in similar circumstances, which could cause a higher degree of perceived PC breach and violation as indicated in Table 2. For example, in the situation where a job description seemed to mismatch with an employee's expectation, several SIEs in our study believed they would be taken advantage of, while OEs viewed such situation as a collapse of communication and put efforts to renegotiate with their employers. Second, several SIEs had the perception that their employers had a biased, stereotypical view towards them and failed to provide equal job security, training and career advancement opportunities. When problems at the workplace arose, they tended to understand the conflict from a negative perspective, leading to perceived failure of fulfilling obligations.

Our findings showed that the PC, measured by PC breach and violation in the current study, is one significant factor that differentiates SIEs from OEs. By triangulating the qualitative data, we provide insights into the possible explanations of the difference in the PC between the two groups. The results indicate that researchers, employers,

IHRM and employees would need to take specific attention to the sensitive position in which many SIEs find themselves. By treating expatriates as heterogeneous groups, with SIEs in the centre of attention due to their significantly lower levels of PC breach and violation, this might provide more agency to SIEs to help them to reach their full potential. Further, the results provide valuable information in broadening the research range of SIE studies and developing differentiation IHRM strategies with special consideration to SIEs.

In practice, our findings imply that it is imperative to build a solid foundation of mutual trust between SIEs and their employers by enhancing SIEs' organisational commitment. In particular, affective commitment, defined as "a desire to remain a member of an organisation due to an emotional attachment to, and involvement with, that organisation" (p.65, Colquitt, LePine, & Wesson, 2016) may resolve the trust concerns that SIEs hold. In order to strengthen the level of affective commitment, employers could consider building a platform to facilitate employees to communicate with the leadership team, provide cross-cultural orientation and advising, and launch personalized information service system for SIEs in need (e.g. language exchange programs, property information, spouse and children support) (Chen and Chiu, 2009; Wu and Ang, 2011; Waxin and Panaccio, 2005). Moreover, employers may create a more diverse workforce in the organisation, which would not only make SIEs feel a stronger sense of belonging, but also would align with the IHRM trend to take advantage of the expertise, skills, and visions of the global talent pool.

Limitations and avenues for future research

First, one limitation of this study is the self-reported nature of the study, whereby social desirable behaviour might prevent expatriates to express their "true" beliefs and emotions. However, given the substantial effect sizes in PC breach and violation between OEs and SIEs, a substantial perceived difference is present between these two groups of expatriates. Our findings propose an important element that differentiates SIEs from OEs. Future research in exploring how various elements based on the PC differ between OEs and SIEs is required. Second, another limitation of this study is that we only analysed the PC from an employee perspective. A potential avenue for future research is to extend the discussion to both employers and employees. Third, in our quantitative survey we did not specifically ask whether expatriates were working for MCNs or local Chinese organisations, and in particular in which sector and their respective job role. While previous research (Guzzo et al., 1994; Haslberger and Brewster, 2009) has found that MCNs might have better arrangements for establishing PC with expatriates, our qualitative findings seemed to indicate a mixed result.

Our findings do highlight that not all SIEs experiences PC breach and violation, and several SIEs were content with their employee-employer relation. One potential avenue for future research is to take into consideration the notions of social networking in how OEs and SIEs develop webs of certainty and connections with host-national workers, employers and the wider social network. Our own studies indicated that support networks are of particular importance for cross-cultural

adjustment (Rienties and Nolan, 2014; Rienties, Johan, and Jindal-Snape, 2015). Recent methodological innovations (e.g., Social Network Analysis, Big Data) have been introduced to map and understand these formal and informal relationships, which indicate that some groups of expatriates are more "at-risk" in terms of isolation and stress, while others successfully build social relations and professional identities over time. The interactions of expatriates with expatriates from the same country, other expatriates and host-national employees may shape the nature of PC in different ways.

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