

# The influence of complexity, chance and change on the career crafting strategies of SIEs

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of SIEs

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Externalities influence the career trajectories of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) and their respective career crafting. This study aims to explore the international career crafting of SIEs (encompassing their proactive career reflection and construction), taking the combined external influences of complexity, chance and change into consideration.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors employ a qualitative (interpretative) approach, combining career crafting and the chaos theory of careers (CTC) to further understand, from an individual standpoint, the impact of externalities on the career crafting strategies of 24 SIEs who have relocated within the European Union.

**Findings** – The authors show that SIEs' proactively craft their careers to varying degrees and with varying frequency. The CTC – incorporating complexity, chance and change – allows for a more nuanced understanding of SIEs' career crafting.

**Originality/value** – This paper applies the concept of career crafting to an international context, exploring the impact of externalities on SIEs' careers. In this way, the authors combine two previously separate theories, extend the application of career crafting to an international career context and emphasise the role of temporality and the whole-life view of career in SIEs' career crafting approach.

**Keywords** Self-initiated expatriates, International careers, Career crafting, Chaos theory of careers, Complexity, Chance, Change

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Individuals' proactive involvement in the planning and managing of their careers is generally acknowledged within contemporary career concepts (Arthur, 2017; Hall *et al.*, 2018) and specifically in relation to international careers (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, the careers literature reflects profound evolution in our approach to work and working lives brought about by economic and socio-demographic changes throughout the years (De Vos *et al.*, 2019; Moore *et al.*, 2007).

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The focus of this paper is on the careers of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs): non-host-country nationals that have left their home country (ex-patria) on their own initiative, are currently legally employed by an organisation in the host country (Andresen *et al.*, 2014; McNulty and Brewster, 2017) and intend to return to their home country at some point in the future (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014). While we acknowledge the nomenclature discussions regarding the temporal boundary condition (McNulty and Brewster, 2017), we believe it is the agency (personal initiative) displayed by SIEs in their international move that is particularly relevant when exploring these individuals' career crafting behaviour.

This study adopts a whole-life perspective of career, conceiving a career as the collection of experiences across work and nonwork roles and the interpretation of the same throughout an individuals' entire life (Litano and Major, 2016). The underlying assumption is that life stages/transitions (e.g. from first job to early-career, single to parenthood, etc.) affect career decisions (cf. Adda *et al.*, 2017). Individuals, aligning their lives and careers, seek optimal *person-career fit* (Akkermans and Tims, 2017; Tims and Akkermans, 2020), this is, compatibility between their career experiences and their motivations, needs and competencies throughout their life and careers (De Vos *et al.*, 2019). Career crafting refers to proactive career reflection and construction aimed at ensuring person-career fit throughout an individual's entire career (Tims and Akkermans, 2020). The concept expands the notion of job crafting – which alludes to specific jobs an individual performs throughout their career rather than their whole career path – while highlighting the proactive cognitive and behavioural components of the person–job fit espoused in the job crafting literature (Tims and Bakker, 2010; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). To reach person-career fit, individuals acquire and apply career competencies (Akkermans and Tims, 2017; Tims and Akkermans, 2020), which have been positively linked to individual career success (Akkermans and Tims, 2017; Dickmann *et al.*, 2018). The expatriation literature supports this link, as international work experiences are generally considered to be beneficial for competence acquisition and career building (Andresen *et al.*, 2022; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). Dickmann *et al.* (2018), for example, show that international experiences increase both assigned expatriates' and SIEs' career competencies.

Proactivity, the acquisition of career competencies, and career decision making are influenced by complexity, chance and change as expressed in the chaos theory of careers (CTC) (Pryor and Bright, 2007, 2011). Given the speed of current job market and societal advancements, careers are greatly influenced by complexity, chance and change; meaning individuals need to be prepared for and ready to adapt and react to these external influences (Pryor and Bright, 2011). For SIEs, whose careers are enacted between two (or more) different geographical environments (with their respective cultural peculiarities and networks), these influences are compounded.

The objective of this paper is to unpack the dynamic nature of career crafting, exploring how SIEs improve person-career fit over time and circumstance. From this primary aim arises the study's research question:

*RQ.* How do SIEs craft their international careers while managing the influences of complexity, chance and change?

The concept of career crafting has not explicitly considered the influences of complexity, chance and change. This study's aim is to contribute to this literature by taking the influence of these externalities into account and extending the application of career crafting to the international careers of SIEs.

In the following section, we review the literature in relation to our theoretical lens – the combination of career crafting and CTC – with the aim to better understand the diverse influences at play in the careers of 24 SIEs who have moved internally within the European

Union (EU). We give further detail on our qualitative approach in the methods section, subsequently introducing the research results and discussing the findings.

### Career crafting

Career crafting is defined as “proactive behaviours that individuals perform to self-manage their career and are aimed at attaining optimal person-career fit” (Tims and Akkermans, 2020, pp. 175–176); thus, career crafting requires adaptability and career competencies (De Vos *et al.*, 2019; Nalis *et al.*, 2022). Career adaptability is a psycho-social resource operationalised as individual agency or control, self-confidence, planning and an orientation towards the future (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012), which implies proactivity. Career crafting encompasses an individual’s complete career arc – comprising work and non-work-related roles (cf. Janssen *et al.*, 2021) thus underpinning a sustainable career (De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Individuals craft their careers by engaging in proactive career reflection on the one hand and proactive career construction on the other hand (Tims and Akkermans, 2020), in other words, thinking about and acting on the competencies needed to advance their careers (Nalis *et al.*, 2022). Proactive career reflection entails “reflecting on values and motivations with regards to one’s career, and reflection on qualities, strengths, shortcomings and skills” (Tims and Akkermans, 2020, p. 173). In this regard, proactive career reflection relates to “knowing-why” and “knowing-how” competencies (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Proactive career construction (i.e. “doing”) requires communicative and behavioural career competencies, as well as the ability to self-profile (Akkermans and Tims, 2017), set goals and network; thus proficiently demonstrating one’s competencies to the labour market (Nalis *et al.*, 2022; Tims and Akkermans, 2020).

In addition to crafting their careers by proactively reflecting on what motivated them to embark in an international career (Andresen *et al.*, 2015; Pinto *et al.*, 2020), SIEs have been found to show proactive career construction by implementing the skills/competencies and networks (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018) needed to proactively construct (Akkermans and Tims, 2017; Tims and Akkermans, 2020) their international career. A recent cross-sectional study of German employees, building on career construction theory’s adaptability resources (Savickas, 1997; Savickas and Porfeli, 2012), demonstrated that proactive career reflection and construction are useful strategies for individuals coping with increasing career demands (Nalis *et al.*, 2022). Equally, considering career competencies as personal resources, Akkermans and Tims’ (2017) research shows that young workers who acquire and are aware of their career competencies can achieve better job fit through crafting. The person-career fit perspective (Tims and Akkermans, 2020) suggests that career crafting is affected by individual needs, contextual demands and the individual’s response to complexity, chance and change.

From a career management perspective, SIEs’ agency and proactivity have recently been considered in relation to motivations (Andresen *et al.*, 2015; Pinto *et al.*, 2020), host-country adjustment and integration (Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010; Hajro *et al.*, 2019) and the acquisition of career competencies (Dickmann *et al.*, 2018), which is indicative of career success (Mello *et al.*, 2022). However, while SIEs could have the competencies needed to craft their international careers, on occasion they can encounter externalities which can hinder their ability to enact those competencies. For example, Al Ariss and Özbilgin (2010) report underemployment amongst Lebanese SIEs in France due to the complexity of navigating regulations and accessing networks for non-European workers. O’Connor and Crowley-Henry (2020) observe similar multifaceted complexities in how Eastern European workers in Ireland manage their home to host country career transition.

The influence of complexity, chance and change on SIEs’ careers will be explained more systematically in the next section.

**The 3Cs of the chaos theory of careers (CTC): complexity, chance and change**

The *complexity* of career trajectories, *chance* events (the opportunity they represent) and the *change* individuals experience throughout their working lives are the hallmark elements of the CTC (Pryor and Bright, 2011). CTC conceptualises individuals as complex open systems, embedded in and interacting with other complex systems (e.g. families, societies, cultures, etc); thus positioning a career within the wider context in which it is enacted (Bright and Pryor, 2005; Pryor and Bright, 2011). Systems are constantly in flux, reorganising with every disturbance (Pryor and Bright, 2011). While the influences of complexity, chance and change are recursive – often blending into each other in practice – in the interest of clarity they are explained separately in the following section.

*Complexity*

CTC recognises the complexity inherent in the interconnection of all aspects of and/or influences (personal, organisational and contextual) on an individual's career (Pryor and Bright, 2011). These elements of complexity include, for example, the individual's background, personality traits, cognitive abilities and experience (Pryor and Bright, 2011); including considerations of time and context, which the SIE literature has investigated (Andresen *et al.*, 2020). In the careers of SIEs, this complexity of influences is compounded by a geographical split, therefore encompassing both home and host countries.

The complexity inherent in SIEs' careers is multi-faceted and multi-layered, including spatial and cultural issues regarding home and host country influences and interrelationships (Gunasekara *et al.*, 2021; Jooss *et al.*, 2021), as well as managing aspects of acculturation (Hajro *et al.*, 2019) and personal well-being, including that of trailing spouses and/or families (Mello *et al.*, 2022; Shaffer *et al.*, 2016). Käsälä *et al.* (2015), for instance, show how gender and complex considerations regarding relationship hierarchy influence the career strategies of dual career expatriate couples. While the literature generally tends to focus on assigned expatriation, this ecosystem of complex influences and relationships equally can be expected to affect SIEs' career crafting.

*Chance*

Conceptualisations of chance events commonly coincide in the assumption that such events are unpredictable and unplanned (Pryor and Bright, 2011). Chance can have positive and/or negative career outcomes. Individuals experience chance events differently, to varied degrees of intensity and/or disturbance (see Betsworth and Hansen, 1996 for a categorisation), with their response to the same also differing according to individual circumstances.

Proactive career reflection (Akkermans and Tims, 2017; Tims and Akkermans, 2020) can be a mechanism for SIEs to re-align their motivations and skills in response to a chance event (i.e. a disturbance to and reorganising of the system – Pryor and Bright (2011)).

In line with recent research on international mobility, we propose that a career enacted in at least two countries throughout an individual's working life tends to be even more complex (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018; Mello *et al.*, 2022) and more exposed to chance events due to the broader contextual forces at play over an individual's career span (Andresen *et al.*, 2020).

*Change*

Change is constant in life and careers (Pryor and Bright, 2011). In CTC and systems thinking, change indicates a new state of the (individual) system and the environment in which it operates (Pryor and Bright, 2007, 2011). Life/career changes can be more profound for expatriates as geographical mobility entails adapting to new cultures (Gunasekara *et al.*, 2021; Hajro *et al.*, 2019) and adjusting to cognitive changes – such as language and

communication style differences (Furusawa and Brewster, 2018) – and new work-related conventions (Andresen *et al.*, 2020).

In summary, CTC underscores a *possibility* outlook (Pryor and Bright, 2011), advocating for individuals to gain comfort with the recursive system of influences of complexity, chance and change in order to better self-manage and develop their careers. In this sense, given that SIEs experience complexity, chance and change throughout their international career move(s), we believe CTC is an appropriate lens through which to explore the externalities affecting SIEs' career crafting. By combining CTC with the career crafting literature, this paper considers individual and external factors and events experienced by SIEs which directly influence their career crafting behaviours.

### Methodology

The explorative/interpretative nature of this study recognises the subjective nature of the lived experiences of our research participants and the researchers' interpretation of these experiences (Miller *et al.*, 2018). Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with Irish and Spanish SIEs living/working in Germany, German and Spanish SIEs in Ireland, and Irish and German SIEs in Spain.

Answering calls to include more occupational diversity in SIE samples (Brewster *et al.*, 2021), our purposeful sample is deliberately diverse; ranging from professional and knowledge worker roles to classical musicians working in a variety of organisations. Table 1

Pseudonym	Nationality	HostCountry	Years in host country	Age	Gender	Industry/Area
Susana	Spanish	Ireland	15	42	F	Admin–(legal firm)
Carmen	Spanish	Ireland	14	42	F	IT/sales
Arturo	Spanish	Ireland	16	44	M	Admin–sales (education)
Sandra	Spanish	Ireland	27	54	F	Community radio
Laura	German	Ireland	9	27	F	Music/Education management
Doris	German	Ireland	20	52	F	Community radio
Tania	German	Ireland	17	42	F	Admin–Aero Leasing
Simon	German	Ireland	25	45	M	Academia (STEM)
Noel	Irish	Germany	6	36	M	Research
Ivan	Irish	Germany	9	44	M	Frontend Engineer/eCommerce
Oisin	Irish	Germany	10	41	M	Media/TV
Fintan	Irish	Germany	15	42	M	Academia (Humanities)
Jose	Spanish	Germany	8	37	M	Academia (STEM)
Andres	Spanish	Germany	8	34	M	Architect, researcher
Patri	Spanish	Germany	10	28	F	Classical musician
Maitte	Spanish	Germany	7	29	F	Scientist (Biochemist)
Ciaran	Irish	Spain	9	44	M	IT/Inside Sales Management
Clodagh	Irish	Spain	22	44	F	Academia (Social Sciences)
Jason	Irish	Spain	18	49	M	Education /Entrepreneur
Kathryn	Irish	Spain	16	43	F	Languages and IT
Moritz	German	Spain	30	60	M	Consultancy/mentorship
Carl	German	Spain	22	51	M	Automotive
Helga	German	Spain	18	53	F	Primary Education
Geert	German	Spain	18	46	M	Law

**Table 1.** Participants' demographics

displays the participants' demographics, time in the host country and occupation. To ensure anonymity pseudonyms are used and company names omitted; instead, the general industry/area of employment activity are noted.

Participants were recruited via personal contacts, calls on social media (Twitter in particular) and snowball sampling. All interviews were conducted online and recorded with participants' consent. To ensure consistency an interview topic guide was utilised; however, the interviews were exploratory (Miller *et al.*, 2018).

The first author conducted and transcribed all interviews. If participants were comfortable being interviewed in English, this was the language used. A total of 22 interviews were conducted in English. The remaining two interviews were conducted in Spanish, as this was the common proficient language for the researcher and the participants (Piekkari and Reis, 2004). The intention was to capture the participants' true voice and how they made sense of their experience as SIEs (Miller *et al.*, 2018), without running the risk of infusing the researcher's own meaning/interpretation in the translation phase. Transcriptions included all-capital letters to signal participants' given emphasis and ellipsis to signal silences during the conversation.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) captured the participants' lived experiences while affording the researcher the freedom to explore contextual details (Miller *et al.*, 2018). All transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the participants themselves. Transcribed interviews were coded using MAXQDA2020 software. Consistent with the focus of this paper, the interviews were coded specifically concerning SIEs' proactive career reflection and construction (that is, the integral components of career crafting) as influenced by complexity, chance and change.

## Findings

The *complexity, chance and change* themes are presented below separately and in relation to SIEs' career crafting strategies, which we are operationalising as *proactive career reflection* and *proactive career construction*. However, these themes are interrelated, as discussed in the following sections. The findings are summarised in Table 5.

### *Complexity influencing career crafting*

Careers are complex. In addition, the complexity of SIEs' careers is compounded due to their geographical move, as some participants find themselves with a foot in both home and host countries. For example, *Andres* (Spanish architect in Germany), *Sandra* (Spanish community radio journalist in Ireland), *Fintan* (Irish academic in Germany) and *Geert* (German solicitor in Spain) crafted their careers within the complexity of operating between different macro contexts, working simultaneously in their home and host country, maintaining both home and host country (professional) networks and managing work relationships across borders, which denotes proactive career construction.

*Macro/systemic complexity influencing proactive career reflection and construction.* *Sandra* uses her personal experience as a full-time employee and resident in Ireland, to write as freelance collaborator (on political and historical issues) for a Basque/Spanish newspaper; while *Fintan's* expertise is sought-after by universities and media outlets in his home country after editing and authoring a series of books on intercultural and European issues. For professions such as law or architecture, it is compulsory to be registered with a professional body to be able to practice. As currently most of his clients are in Germany, *Andres* is registered in his host country. However, in avoiding the expense of two different professional registrations in two different countries, he partners with an architectural firm in Spain to be able to legally service his few home-country clients. Initially, *Geert* followed the same

strategy, registering to practice law in both host and home countries, but after his second year in Spain he gave up on his home-country practice as the strategy proved to be too expensive and unsustainable in the long term.

In these examples, both the profession of the SIEs and the home and host country macro contexts influence the level of complexity these individuals must contend with in crafting their international career. Often macro-level constraints – such as professional qualifications/registration regulations, labour and taxation rules – restrict SIEs' agency and control. However, *Sandra*, *Fintan*, *Andres* and *Geert* proactively reflected on their particular goals, the skills and competencies needed to advance their careers within these macro-level constraints, establishing/maintaining international networks (proactive career construction) to support their career across home and host countries in a sustainable manner. As per these examples, the degree of individuals' proactivity varies over time and is influenced by complexity, chance and change.

*Personal, cognitive and relational complexity influencing proactive career reflection and construction.* Moving countries without organisational support highlights the influence of the SIEs' social background, personality traits, cognitive abilities and experience on the complexity of enacting an international career. *Noel* (Irish researcher in Germany) shares that, on reflection, he believes his personality and his ability to recognise the opportunity his initial host-country job represented were instrumental to his resilience in the face of what he termed “*the grind of German bureaucracy*”, given his limited German language skills on arrival. He reflects on the easiness of ‘being part of the system’ in his own country, comparing it to the challenge of “getting set up” in a foreign system:

“... how many things happen AUTOMATICALLY because you have been born into the other system, and so ... you arrive in Germany and you have to do the Anmeldung, you have to register with the tax department, you have to get your tax ID, health insurance and all of these other things ... they could also make it a bit easier to get married in Germany for someone who has NOT lived in their country of birth for as long as I did” Noel (researcher), Irish in Germany.

Also engaging in proactive career reflection, participants such as *Sandra* and *Arturo* (both Spanish in Ireland), *Oisín* (Irish in Germany) and *Simon* (German in Ireland) felt that relational and societal influences—their family/social backgrounds and/or education (complexity) – constrained their career development in their home countries, while their host country careers provoked a change or a “return” to their freer self.

From a whole-life perspective of careers, complexity is evident in SIEs' familial ties to both their home and host countries and how these ties influence their proactive career reflection. Naturally, changes in participants' civil status prompt them to reflect, beyond their competencies, on the motivations and values underpinning their career strategies while re-orienting their goals and building/maintaining host and home country networks. [Table 2](#) summarises participants' current civil status as opposed to their civil status upon moving to the host country.

Sixteen of our participants were single when they initiated their international move, seven were in a relationship with host-country nationals and one SIE was in a relationship with a third-country national (i.e. neither *Kathryn* or her partner were host-country nationals). None of the interviewees moved as a family, however, at the time of the interviews, half of the SIEs had formed a family in the host country (see [Table 2](#)). As time passed and their status changed, these SIEs proactively reflected on their motivations, goals and values and on how these fit with their changing family status and changing circumstances. For the participants who formed families, ensuring their children maintained a link to their extended families, their culture and their language was also a priority.

Most SIEs in the sample have lived away from their home-country families for a long time. Those who have elderly or ageing parents reported feeling the responsibility to care for them

**Table 2.**  
Civil/Relationship  
status – currently and  
on arrival in the host  
country

Nationality	Host country	Pseudonym	Status home	Status host	Partner	Children
Spanish	Ireland	Susana	single	single	NA	NA
Spanish	Ireland	Carmen	single	family	host country	host country
Spanish	Ireland	Arturo	single	single	NA	NA
Spanish	Ireland	Sandra	single	family	home country	host country
German	Ireland	Laura	single	single	NA	NA
German	Ireland	Doris	single	family	host country	host country
German	Ireland	Tania	in relationship	couple	host country	NA
German	Ireland	Simon	single	single	NA	NA
Irish	Germany	Noel	single	family	host country	host country
Irish	Germany	Ivan	in relationship	couple	host country	NA
Irish	Germany	Oisin	in relationship	family	host country	host country
Irish	Germany	Fintan	in relationship	family	host country	host country
Spanish	Germany	Jose	single	couple	3rd country	NA
Spanish	Germany	Andres	single	couple	3rd country	NA
Spanish	Germany	Patri	single	couple	3rd country	NA
Spanish	Germany	Maite	single	single	NA	NA
Irish	Spain	Ciaran	in relationship	couple	host country	NA
Irish	Spain	Clodagh	single	family	host country	host country
Irish	Spain	Jason	single	family	host country	host country
Irish	Spain	Kathryn	in relationship	family	3rd country	host country
German	Spain	Moritz	in relationship	family	home country	host country
German	Spain	Carl	in relationship	family	host country	host country
German	Spain	Helga	single	family	host country	home country
German	Spain	Geert	in relationship	family	host country	host country

and/or feeling guilty for not being physically there for them (due to the focus on their international career). This illustrates a whole-life perspective of career prompting proactive career reflection (on motivations, values) compounded by the complexity of co-existing in two different country/cultural spheres. A quote from *Maite* highlights the strong pull of family ties:

my parents getting older . . . but also, I have a niece now and she changes so much that . . . It does not necessarily have to be in Madrid, but I am considering moving closer to home” Maite (Scientist), Spanish in Germany.

For SIEs with host-country partners and/or families, the extended host-country family generally provides support and psycho-social resources, although it can also represent a challenge or constraint, as per Jason’s comment:

The best thing about Spain is the family, and the worst thing about Spain is the family. So, the family is very supportive and if you have a problem, that is great . . . but it also holds you back from doing something different to whatever the tradition was Jason (Entrepreneur/Academic), Irish in Spain.

In summary, the influence of complexity is evident in our sample of SIEs’ career crafting. These are just some instances in which complexity (identity struggles, cognitive and relational complexity) and change (international move, cognitive changes, civil status changes and cultural changes in home and host countries) interrelate, also showing how participants proactively reflected on their values and motivations to continue an international career. They also proactively reflected on the qualities/skills/abilities needed for international career advancement.

*Chance influencing career crafting*

The SIE participants responded to chance events (of different intensities and outcomes) in various ways throughout their international career, crafting their careers in the process.

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*Ivan* (Irish in Germany), recounts how his girlfriend's chance encounter with a like-minded dog walker determined his first career move in Germany.

(Girlfriend) was walking the dog . . . and she met some lady who was walking her dog and they just started chatting. And she started telling her about me . . . "Oh yeah, my boyfriend, he works on web development, and he is moving over and will be looking for work" . . . And then the woman said . . . "Oh, my son has a web development company!" . . . As in, he owns it!" *Ivan* (font-end engineer), Irish in Germany.

Of course, it was *Ivan's* initiative to follow up on the chance event, proactively reflecting on his motivations, values and career qualities/competencies. However, it was that chance event which instigated the process that followed. This first job, for which he was not required to speak German, gave *Ivan* the opportunity to improve his language skills (cognitive change) and the confidence to find a job which was a better fit for him afterwards.

In *Ivan's* example, he could avail of the opportunity presented by his girlfriend's chance encounter, because the use of English as a working language is common in the IT industry worldwide. However, unlike the IT industry, most professions/occupations require a (medium to high level) command of the host-country language, which might have curtailed other participants' opportunities to capitalise on chance events.

For instance, *Arturo's* lack of English language competency when he first arrived in Ireland complicated his career advancement. He initially worked in many temporary jobs, "doing a bit of everything" and saved up to self-fund a Master's degree in journalism (therefore, engaging in career crafting) in order to improve both his English and his chances of employment. While enrolled in this Masters, he met a mentor who encouraged him to apply for a job in the university. This chance encounter sent *Arturo* in a completely different direction (professionally), and he now has an administrative/sales role in one of Dublin's top universities, where he can use his language and copywriting/communication skills.

The job I am doing now . . . is something I never thought about . . . and everything just came by having a boss at the time (in the university) that trusted me . . . and having a discussion about the opportunities to promote a Master abroad", *Arturo* (admin/sales), Spanish in Ireland.

*Arturo* took a very active role in recognising and using the opportunity offered by his mentor, therefore capitalising on this "lucky chance" (indicating proactive career reflection and construction); illustrating how past experiences and competencies acquired over time can culminate and be crafted in present roles. *Arturo's* account also evidences complexity both at a micro level, reflecting individual aptitude for languages, and a macro level (ie. across the different educational systems; and/or the practice of language voice-over (or not) in foreign-language movies).

*Simon*, a German academic also living in Ireland, had a similar chance encounter with a mentor (while on an Erasmus year in Ireland) who encouraged him to pursue a PhD and thus a career in academia. *Simon* recounts that the education system in Germany is (or was, at the time of his move) quite rigid, with two distinct paths for secondary school children to continue either to technical/vocational college (applied learning outlook) or university. *Simon*, as a technical school path candidate, believes he could not have pursued an academic career in Germany, as in his perception the German system would have not allowed it. However, this was an opportunity that was open to him in Ireland, pointing to the complexity of systems in different countries (e.g., education).

All participants experienced "low intensity" chance events of the "right place, right time" type, and/or chance encounters with a person who influenced their career direction. Three Spanish and one German participants reported (macro) obstacles in their intended career path, ranging from socio-economic conditions and lack of job opportunities in the home country to regulatory and systemic issues (as evidenced in *Simon's* story above).

These home-country-related challenges made them more open to proactively taking the opportunities presented by chance events. For eight participants, chance events provided unintended exposure to their current career areas. Most chance events experienced were of the low intensity type. However, five participants reported experiencing career shocks, ranging from health-related issues (i.e. *Susana, Carmen and Moritz*) affecting their career direction to redundancies (*Tania*), and as a result of their partner's business closing (*Kathryn*), illustrating how family-related events also affect SIEs' careers (i.e. complexity).

#### *Change influencing career crafting*

Change is a recurrent theme in our participants' stories. Obviously, changes of location, culture and often language and communication styles are inherent in SIEs' careers; and can have a considerable effect in their planned career trajectories. As we have detailed before, SIEs' international experience also provokes change in terms of the acquisition of new career competencies/capitals, re-affirmation or re-alignment of values and in some cases even changes in how they perceive or re-imagine themselves. All these changes are strongly influenced by encountering other cultures and different ways of working and living, which illustrates the interdependence of the influences of complexity and change.

*Moritz* (a German consultant living in Spain), recounts how he proactively reflected on the cultural competencies he needed while living and working in Spain, prompting him to imagine his future professional self "more Spanish than German", thus changing his professional behaviour. As an example of the flexibility and openness he prized, *Moritz* explained the Spanish discretionary attitude to pedestrian traffic lights, crossing when deemed to be safe rather than routinely stopping at the red light; as opposed to the rigid behaviour of his compatriots, who always abide by the rules. *Moritz* considers the Spanish flexible outlook beneficial from both a societal and business point of view:

There is a healthy level of . . . reflection . . . against the AUTHORITY . . . if something makes sense or does not make sense", *Moritz* (consultant), German living in Spain.

*Jose*, a Spanish academic living in Germany, seconds *Moritz's* observation, but at a more personal level. He recounts how adapting to a new country culture and its customs – including learning the language and other communication and behavioural nuances – was a challenge that he has overcome, evidencing a great sense of pride in his professional achievements.

Host-country language competency facilitates host-country integration and career progression. Participants' language competencies, current and on arrival to the host country, are displayed in [Table 3](#). As Ireland is an English-speaking country, having a good command of English is a requirement for all SIEs working in Ireland. Three of the four Spanish SIEs in Ireland had limited or very limited command of English on arrival, which forced them to accept jobs below their qualifications and expertise. *Sandra* secured a job as an au-pair before departing Spain, and both *Susana* and *Arturo* crafted their careers by initially working in many low-level, manual, temporary jobs until they improved their English, which enabled them to secure jobs fitting their qualifications and motivations (demonstrating proactive career reflection and construction). In contrast, all four Germans in Ireland had a self-reported good or very good level of English on arrival. Even though both *Doris* and *Tania* started their careers in Ireland availing of temporary administrative jobs, or in a field that did not correspond with their qualifications, they have crafted their current careers through further education and/or availing of networks/internal promotions in their current organisation.

In our sample, English is also the working language for five Germany-based and two Spain-based SIEs. For the rest, a good command of the host-country language is either

Home	Host	Pseudonym	Language on arrival	Current level	Working language
Spanish	Ireland	Susana	very limited	very good	host country language
Spanish	Ireland	Carmen	good	excellent	host country language
Spanish	Ireland	Arturo	limited	very good	host country language
Spanish	Ireland	Sandra	very limited	good	host country language
German	Ireland	Laura	good	very good	host country language
German	Ireland	Doris	good	excellent	host country language
German	Ireland	Tania	good	excellent	host country language
German	Ireland	Simon	good	excellent	host country language
Irish	Germany	Noel	limited	good	English
Irish	Germany	Ivan	very limited	good	English
Irish	Germany	Oisín	very limited	limited	English
Irish	Germany	Fintan	very good	excellent	HCL and English
Spanish	Germany	Jose	none	limited	English
Spanish	Germany	Andres	very limited	good	English
Spanish	Germany	Patri	very limited	very good	host country language
Spanish	Germany	Maite	limited	very good	HCL and English
Irish	Spain	Ciaran	some knowledge	good	English
Irish	Spain	Clodagh	some knowledge	excellent	HCL and English
Irish	Spain	Jason	none	very good	HCL and English
Irish	Spain	Kathryn	very limited	good	HCL and English
German	Spain	Moritz	limited	excellent	HCL and English
German	Spain	Carl	limited	very good	HCL and German
German	Spain	Helga	very good	excellent	host country language
German	Spain	Geert	limited	very good	HCL, English and German

**Note(s):** \*HCL = Host country language

**Table 3.** Participants' host-country language proficiency (currently and on arrival), plus working language

required (three in Germany and four in Spain) or preferred (two in Spain). Only two SIEs in Germany and Spain – *Fintan* (Irish in Germany) and *Helga* (German in Spain) – had a good/very good command of the host country language on arrival. All the other SIEs had limited/very limited knowledge of their host country languages and instead used English to communicate at the start (see [Table 3](#)). Currently all SIEs interviewed have working knowledge of their host country language.

As illustrated in [Table 4](#), enhancing career competencies through furthering their formal education is a career crafting strategy that was used by eleven of the 24 SIEs sampled. Of those, only *Laura* (German in Ireland) and *Patri* (Spanish in Germany) – both musicians, living/working in their host countries for nine and ten years respectively – obtained both their

Nationality	Host country	Pseudonym	None	Bachelor	Masters	PhD
Spanish	Ireland	Susana	1			
Spanish	Ireland	Carmen	1			
Spanish	Ireland	Arturo			1	
Spanish	Ireland	Sandra			1	
German	Ireland	Laura		1	1	
German	Ireland	Doris			1	
German	Ireland	Tania	1			

**Table 4.** Continued education in the host country  
(continued)

Nationality	Host country	Pseudonym	None	Bachelor	Masters	PhD
German	Ireland	Simon				1
Irish	Germany	Noel	1			
Irish	Germany	Ivan	1			
Irish	Germany	Oisin	1			
Irish	Germany	Fintan				1
Spanish	Germany	Jose	1			
Spanish	Germany	Andres				1
Spanish	Germany	Patri		1	1	
Spanish	Germany	Maite			1	1
Irish	Spain	Ciaran	1			
Irish	Spain	Clodagh			1	1
Irish	Spain	Jason			1	
Irish	Spain	Kathryn	1			
German	Spain	Moritz	1			
German	Spain	Carl	1			
German	Spain	Helga	1			
German	Spain	Geert	1			
<i>No further education in the host country</i>			13			
<i>Continued their education in the host country</i>			11			

Table 4.

undergraduate and master’s degrees in their host countries. In addition to *Laura* and *Patri*, six other SIEs (*Arturo*, *Sandra*, *Doris*, *Maite*, *Clodagh* and *Jason*) obtained master’s in their host countries. *Maite* and *Clodagh* furthered their careers in the host country by also obtaining a PhD, as did *Simon*, *Fintan* and *Andres*.

The perception of their home country being static while their lives in the host country are dynamic (open to change) might influence SIEs openness to take up new opportunities in the *host country* – as opposed to being open to opportunities in the home country. Indeed, *Carmen* (Spanish sales professional living in Ireland) describes how her work attitude and career expectations have changed due to her Irish experience, denoting proactive career reflection. She shares that, even though she and her husband made a five-year plan to move their family to Spain, she fears that she will not “fit in” with the traditionally hierarchical Spanish organisational culture, having experienced the Irish business culture. Many of the participants share this concern with not “fitting in” with the working culture if they repatriate. This proactive career reflection strategy possibly influences their initiation to take up new opportunities in their host countries (or in a different host country).

In summary, all participants experienced change in their international careers, but their proactive career reflection and construction towards these changes varies according to the type of change, the complexity of their personal context and in alignment with their personal motivations, values and goals (see [Table 5](#)). For some SIEs, their international move was clearly a rational career-related decision (i.e. to acquire international experience, or to access job opportunities); while others displayed more irrational (unpredictable, not pre-planned, or not entirely utilitarian/instrumental) behaviour. For instance, *Fintan* admitted that while it did not make sense for him (career-wise) to move to Germany, he currently has a successful career in his host country. Some participants proactively seek and embrace (cultural, cognitive, motivational, identity, etc.) change as an inevitable part of their international career. Others, like *Carmen* (Spanish in Ireland), once they adjust to the initial relocation-related changes, appear more reticent to change.

	Complexity	Chance	Change
Literature	Multifaceted Multi-layered Across geographical boundaries	Opportunity Luck Serendipity Unplanned and unexpected events “Shock” events (including career shocks)	Geographical Cultural Organisational Cognitive (incl. language and communication) Behavioural
Career crafting (thinking) <i>Proactive career reflection</i>	<i>Multifaceted:</i> - Freedom to be their “real self” and/or re-invent themselves—reflecting on motivation, values and goals, qualities, strengths, shortcomings and skills - Identity struggles—reflecting on values  <i>Multi-layered:</i> Complexity of transnational work-family interactions—reflecting on motivation, values and goals, qualities and strengths  <i>Foot in both camps:</i> Distrust of host-country institutions or preference for home-country institutions/regulations and conventions while working in host country—reflecting on motivation and goals	Reflecting on possible responses to chance events (in terms of motivations, goals, competencies needed to seize the opportunity the chance event presents) Reflecting on reactive responses to chance events (in terms of minimising career and/or family/social life disturbance) Proactive career reflection prompted by encouragement of random individuals Reflecting on values/motivations/goals in terms of possible responses according to the degree of disturbance (or opportunity) presented by the chance event	Cultural change. Reflecting on changes of values, motivations—fear of not “fitting back” in the home country Reflecting on competencies and values: Seeing their lives and careers abroad as “dynamic” as opposed to those who stayed in home country Reflecting on values/motivations: Missing out on home-country culture and cultural references Identity struggles Reflecting on time-related changes (ageing parents in home country, family in host country) making them re-calibrate motivations and thus influencing career crafting
Career crafting (doing) <i>Proactive career construction</i>	<i>Multifaceted:</i> Cultural complexity—crafting their careers while navigating host-country rules and conventions  <i>Foot in both camps:</i> - Maintaining work-related and personal networks in both home and host countries - Working across geographical boundaries and different macro contexts - Wondering about transnational skill/known-how transferability	Proactively seizing the opportunity afforded by chance events to self-profile Expatriation and/or change of direction resulting from health-related shocks, forced redundancy and unexpected business closure Accessing new networks Sensation of being “in the right place at the right time” and taking advantage of it	Acquiring and/or improving language skills, which in some cases resulted in job crafting Adjusting communication styles to “fit” with host-country culture Further education in the host country: self-profiling to “fit” host country requirements Maintain and alternate between host and home country networks

Table 5. Findings

## Discussion

Complexity, chance and change (combined) have a more fundamental part to play in career trajectories than is currently portrayed in career research in general and in the expatriation literature in particular. This study’s [research question](#) explores the different ways in which SIEs have engaged in proactive career reflection and construction, crafting their careers while dealing with the influences of complexity, chance and change throughout their international career lifespan.

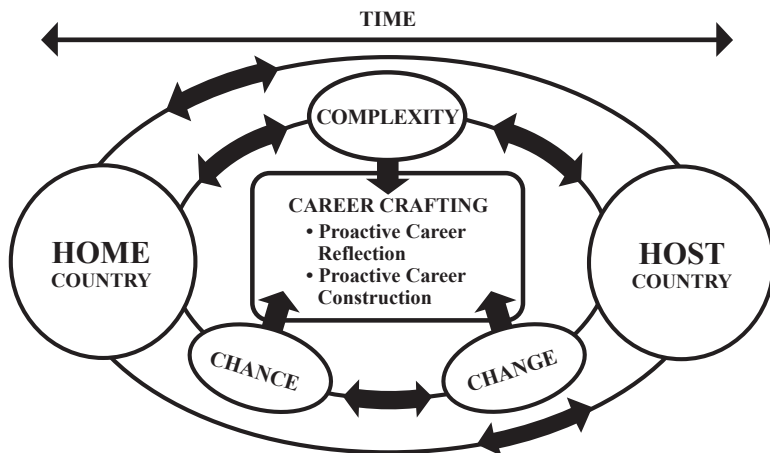
As presented in our findings, and consistent with [McNulty and Vance \(2017\)](#) and CTC ([Pryor and Bright, 2011](#)), SIEs make both rational and non-rational career decisions. Proactive career

decisions come into play to varying degrees and with varying frequency in SIEs' lives, and are influenced by complexity, chance and change. In managing (or attempting to manage) the chaos of their unfolding careers in an international context, our diverse sample of SIEs craft their careers according to their unique circumstances, experiences and relationships. It is evident in the interview narratives that complexity, chance and change are relational, influencing SIEs' career motivations and decisions; although – as presented in the findings – there is nuance to how complexity, chance and change respectively influence each SIE's career.

The results offer empirical evidence consistent with the CTC (Pryor and Bright, 2011), showing that the influences of complexity, chance and change are interrelated, can co-occur (either in sequence or simultaneously) and may be difficult to disentangle. For instance, as above, a chance encounter can prompt a change in career direction; but the results also show that change (of geographical location, organisation, etc.) exposed participants to chance events (i.e. meeting a partner or an influential mentor). The empirical data suggests that SIEs engage in proactive career reflection and construction, self-organising in response to these influences. Consistent with recent observations considering the role of context and contextual influences in the expatriation literature (Andresen *et al.*, 2020; Harzing and Pudelko, 2014), the findings show that some SIEs are more open to influences of complexity, chance and change than others and thus they display proactive career crafting to varying degrees and with varying frequency throughout their lives. There is also nuance to how complexity, chance and change respectively influence each SIE's career.

We found evidence of proactive career reflection as a pre-departure activity, connected with SIEs' motivations for expatriation and consideration of the competencies needed to start or continue their careers in the host country. However, SIEs engaged in proactive career reflection along their career crafting in the host country, as well as thinking how their careers will look beyond their current host country (i.e. repatriation or continuing their careers in a different host country). Proactive career construction, in contrast, was mainly directed towards achieving goals and building/maintaining networks in the host country. Most SIEs in our sample have kept only their personal/private (not professional) home-country networks, concentrating their efforts instead in building host-country professional and personal networks. Four of our sample (Sandra, Fintan, Andres and Clodagh), explicitly demonstrated currently maintaining professional and personal networks in both their home and host countries.

The findings show that proactive career reflection and construction are influenced by complexity, chance and change. As presented in Figure 1, the weight of each of these



**Figure 1.**  
The influence of complexity, chance, and change on SIEs' career crafting

influences on the career crafting of SIEs differs according to their personal and contextual circumstances, which in turn are affected by home and host country factors.

The expatriation literature has explored the influence of complexity in global careers, e.g. regarding cultural adaptation (Hajro *et al.*, 2019), negotiating familial and/or cultural ties across two or more geographical locations (Shaffer *et al.*, 2016) and general complexity in managing contextual influences and demands (Andresen *et al.*, 2020). A change in geographical location – an international career move – is central to all international careers. Equally, the expatriation literature considers changes in career orientation (McNulty and Vance, 2017), motivational changes (Pinto *et al.*, 2020) and work/family role adjustments amongst global professionals (Shaffer *et al.*, 2016), to name a few. In line with recent career literature, we argue that, as chance is inherent in career decisions (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018), it should take a more prominent position in discussions on career crafting, in particular pertaining SIEs' careers. However, to our knowledge, complexity, chance and change have not been explicitly considered in the literature to date as influencing SIEs' career behaviours.

### *Implications for theory*

Our theoretical contribution is presented in Figure 1 and Table 5. The findings suggest that SIEs craft their careers, engaging in proactive career reflection and construction, in response to their own individual exposure, and reaction to, the complexity, chance and change experienced across their international career. The weight of each of these influences on the career crafting (proactive career reflection and/or construction) of SIEs varies according to their personal and contextual circumstances at a given time. As shown in Figure 1: The influences of complexity, chance and change can originate in either home or host countries (or both), are interrelated, can co-occur (either in sequence or simultaneously) and may be difficult to disentangle.

As presented in Table 5, SIEs' career crafting ranges from reflecting on and enacting career competencies in order to adapt to the host country working culture, to re-inventing themselves and completely changing the course of their career.

Participants reported considering and reconsidering career values and goals throughout their international career, as well as thinking about the skills and resources (qualities) needed for career development/advancement (Tims and Akkermans, 2020). However, as presented in the findings, proactive career reflection and construction varied according to participants' age and family status; adjusting their proactive behaviour according to their career/life stages and needs. Our analysis validates the CTC theory as allowing for and explaining nuance and diversity in SIEs' career trajectories and career crafting.

### *Practical implications*

Our results highlight SIEs' capabilities, enhanced by their international experience and flexibility in the face of external influences. From a whole-life view of career, engaging in proactive career reflection promotes a better alignment with SIEs' motivations and values and those of their families and extended families in both home and host countries, throughout the different stages of their careers. Striving for better person-career fit is important for all individuals, but in particular for SIEs given their career-related decisions can have ramifications across two or more geographical contexts.

### *Limitations and implications for future research*

The limitations of this study should be considered. First, this is an exploratory study conducted with a small sample of intra-European Union (EU) SIEs. The regulatory space of the EU facilitates the labour mobility of its citizens, in terms of EU-wide regulation, social protection,

etc. – however, non-EU SIEs may face greater complexity and change when navigating residency regulations in their host countries. For example, complexity would be expected to increase due to visa issues, which might also affect the likelihood to capitalise on chance events. We therefore see an opportunity for future research to explore the combined influence of complexity, chance and change on non-EU SIEs' career crafting and/or in non-Western settings.

Second, the international experiences of the SIEs in our sample are, in the most part, quite positive. Given that most of our sample responded to calls on social media to participate in this study, we believe there could be two reasons for this positive bias: (1) Participants tend to retrospectively remember mainly positive aspects of their international careers/experiences; and (2) people who encountered more negative or troublesome experiences might not be as willing to participate. Future research may seek to uncover and unpack career crafting arising from negative experiences and mistakes.

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