

## How do low-status expatriates deal with crises? Stress, external support, and personal coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Purpose** – Low-status expatriates (LSEs), a highly vulnerable group, have been significantly affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This study explores the stressors that continue to impact LSEs in Germany and their access to support during the pandemic.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** – An interpretivist, qualitative research approach was employed. We utilised a multi-level data collection strategy that combined interview and questionnaire data from 16 expatriates and 16 social actors. The data were analysed using a directed content analysis method.

**Findings** – LSEs experienced high levels of stress that were further exacerbated by the introduction of COVID-19 control measures that were intended to slow the spread of the virus. LSEs are particularly vulnerable due to their overrepresentation in precarious professions and the associated job insecurity. Critically, external support from employers and social actors is generally lacking, leaving LSEs to rely on their own personal coping strategies in difficult times.

**Research Implications** – In their Expatriate-Crisis Framework, McNulty *et al.* (2019) highlight the importance of external support for expatriates. However, this framework does not sufficiently account for personal coping strategies that are particularly important for individuals that cannot access such external support (e.g. LSEs). Herein, we offer a revised framework that is more applicable to LSEs.

**Practical Implications** – Current practices are problematic, necessitating policy changes at both governmental and organisational levels.

**Originality/Value** – This study provides unique insights into the ways in which the pandemic has affected the already precarious position of LSEs and identifies the importance of personal coping strategies in the absence of external sources of support.

### Introduction

The restrictions introduced by the German government to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, had a significant impact on businesses and employees alike (Michelsen *et al.*, 2020).

While these restrictions, including partial and full lockdowns, impacted most employees, low-status expatriates (LSEs) have been severely impacted (Becker *et al.*, 2021, Buch *et al.*, 2021).

The term expatriate has almost exclusively been used to describe high-skilled individuals from developed countries that are sent abroad by multinational corporations, often referred to as business-, or high-status expatriates (HSEs; Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2019, McNulty

and Brewster, 2016). Recent research into global mobility has broadened its scope to include other types of expatriates (e.g. self-initiated expatriates; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009), into scholarly debates. However, the focus has remained on a privileged group of highly skilled individuals occupying leadership or managerial positions in multinational companies (Andresen *et al.*, 2014).

Nonetheless, the largest group of expatriates does not belong to this group, but instead, to a less privileged group which has recently been introduced as "hidden expatriates" (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017). Hidden expatriates are often low-skilled individuals, with low levels of education, who frequently work in low-status occupations and are therefore referred to as LSEs (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2019). Compared to migrants, LSEs typically remain in the host country for one to ten years solely for work, that is, they do not intend to settle in said country (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017, Holtbrügge, 2021). Moreover, LSEs are driven by financial difficulties in their home country and often find employment in the low-wage sector in the host country on their own. In comparison, HSEs typically seek international experiences and are focused on career development and resolving organisational issues (Andresen *et al.*, 2014). Taken together, and considering their status within the social hierarchy (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2021) in the host country and their employment situations (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017), the aims and the experiences of LSEs in the host country clearly differ from those of HSEs (Holtbrügge, 2021, Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2019).

While a few existing research studies have focused on LSEs in Middle Eastern countries (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2019, Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017, Holtbrügge, 2021), the prevalence of these individuals in the European labour market has largely been neglected. Within Europe, where movement is relatively unrestricted, allowing for the existence of a transnational labour market (Favell, 2008), LSEs from poorer European countries seek work opportunities in wealthier EU countries where jobs are more readily available. The German

labour market is an especially attractive destination for LSEs as there is a high demand for labour in the low-wage sector, where skill requirements are low and work permits are either not required or easily obtained (Andersson, 2019). The low-wage sector accounts for almost 25% of the German labour market (Grabka and Schröder, 2019), which, in 2017 employed more than nine million people. In total, 17.1% of the jobs in the low-wage sector are occupied by LSEs (Grabka and Schröder, 2019). These individuals, who earn below the national low-wage minimum threshold, are often under constant pressure due to job insecurity and precarious employment conditions (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2019, Holtbrügge, 2021).

Even though the estimated number of LSEs worldwide exceeds that of any other group of expatriates, there is a significant lack of knowledge and understanding regarding their experiences of work, stress, and support in the host country (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017, Holtbrügge, 2021). Given the low-status nature of their expatriation, experiences of stress and support are likely to differ from those of HSEs (Bader *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, LSEs have been shown to be more vulnerable to stressors than other groups of expatriates (Connell and Burgess, 2013, Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017). This is particularly true in times of calamity, as suggested by McNulty *et al.* (2019), who argue that personal expatriate crises develop due to acculturation stress and maladjustment that is triggered by high stress and a lack of support resources. This can result in severe consequences for expatriates, including physical and mental illness, job loss, or even injury and forced repatriation (McNulty *et al.*, 2019, Bader and Berg, 2013).

Considering the current COVID-19 pandemic and its particularly negative effects on the low-wage sector (Buch *et al.*, 2021), experiences of stress and the likelihood of personal expatriate crises among LSEs have possibly increased. Therefore, an exploration of the circumstances of LSEs in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic, provides an ideal context to extend our current understanding of the experiences of stress among these individuals, thus

offering a contribution to the global mobility literature. To this end, we build on the Expatriate-Crisis Framework from McNulty *et al.* (2019), which shows how personal expatriate crises are triggered by factors on the macro- (host-country), meso- (network, organisational, and family), and micro-levels (personal). This framework also highlights the importance of different external sources of support to prevent or manage personal crises on the macro- (external specialists) and meso- (network and organisational) level (McNulty *et al.*, 2019).

Our contribution is three-fold. First, we offer deeper insights into the experience of stress and support in times of calamity among LSEs in Germany. Second, we highlight the importance of personal coping strategies for LSEs in the absence of external support. Third, we provide a revised version of the Expatriate-Crisis Framework by differentiating between LSEs and HSEs, and by accounting for the internal domain (i.e. personal coping strategies) that makes it more applicable to LSEs.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the literature on expatriate stressors and support is reviewed with a focus on the dimensions outlined in the Expatriate-Crisis Framework. Next, the research methodology is explained, followed by the presentation and discussion of the main findings. Contributions to theory and practice are discussed in the final section along with implications for future research.

## **Literature review**

### **Expatriates and stress**

Expatriates are a vulnerable group of employees who face a variety of stressors as part of their expatriation experience (Bader and Berg, 2013). Such stressors can lead to negative behavioural and emotional reactions (Silbiger and Pines, 2014). While some stressors are common among the different types of expatriates, such as acculturation stress relating to an unfamiliar environment and family adjustment and conflict (Rosenbusch *et al.*, 2015), others

are specific to the expatriation context, such as the fear of terrorism or armed conflict in countries with political instability (Faeth and Kittler, 2020, Bader *et al.*, 2019).

The rapid spread and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has generated stressors that were unknown under normal circumstances, for host-country nationals and expatriates alike (Tripathi and Singh, 2021, Hamouche, 2020). Such stressors range from fear of contagion, quarantine, and social exclusion, to financial ruin and job insecurity (Hamouche, 2020). While these stressors have affected most employed individuals in Germany, LSEs are potentially even more vulnerable due to their social standing, acculturation issues, and the work conditions they endure in the low-wage sector (Holtbrügge, 2021). A large number of LSEs are employed on a reduced working hours basis, and some are fearful of employment termination and lack of access to social security (Holtbrügge, 2021, Gardiner and Slaughter, 2020). Therefore, we can deduce that the pandemic has had a disproportionately negative effect on LSEs compared to HSEs. In turn, this may affect their experiences of stress, thereby potentially increasing the likelihood of a personal expatriate crisis (McNulty *et al.*, 2019).

The Expatriate-Crisis Framework conceptualises five dimensions of expatriate stressors referred to as "domains of causes" (McNulty *et al.*, 2019). These expatriate stressors are conceptualised as trigger points that can result in high levels of stress for expatriates, which can eventually lead to a personal expatriate crisis. The framework identifies five key stressors – namely, personal, family, network, organisational, and host country – that are commonly experienced by expatriates during their assignment abroad. The framework offers a means of identifying stressors which can result in a personal expatriate crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it suggests that personal expatriate crises can be prevented or overcome with different sources of support. Consequently, this presents an opportunity to study the ways in which this might operate for the LSE community.

### Sources of support

McNulty *et al.* (2019) conceptualised three “domains of support” that can prevent personal expatriate crises: within the organisation, within the network, and from external specialists. Support from within the organisation includes pre-expatriation cross-cultural training or language courses that prepare expatriates for their work abroad, or support during the assignment from human resources (HR), supervisors, or colleagues to reduce stressors for expatriates (Littrell *et al.*, 2006). Support from within the network can be received from the expatriates’ social relationships that provide emotional and instrumental support during their assignment (Bader *et al.*, 2019). These relationships can include family, friends, or colleagues in the host country and, to a limited extent, networks in their home country (Chiu *et al.*, 2009, Farh *et al.*, 2010). External specialists are conceptualised as all external social actors that can provide support for expatriates. These include host-country governments and councils, embassies, lawyers, religious institutions, or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (McNulty *et al.*, 2019).

These three domains of support are useful in identifying available sources of assistance for HSEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, due to the nature of LSEs, their difficult employment situations, and the power imbalances involved, many of these sources of support are not as readily available to them as they are for HSEs (Connell and Burgess, 2013, Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2021). Haak-Saheem *et al.* (2021) highlight the importance of organisational support for LSEs if they cannot draw from a well-functioning network and external sources of support, which are more commonly available to HSEs. However, if none of these sources of support are available, it is unclear how LSEs deal with their circumstances to remain in the host-country. Previous research has highlighted the use of personal coping strategies by HSEs as a tool to successfully deal with stressful situations during their managerial expatriate assignments (Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005, Chen and Shaffer, 2018).

### **Coping strategies**

Coping is defined as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses employed by people to manage the demands of stressful situations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). A situation can be appraised as less stressful if external sources of support are available, as in the case of HSEs (van der Laken *et al.*, 2016). Two coping strategies can be distinguished: problem- and emotion-focused coping (Carver *et al.*, 1989). Emotion-focused coping is often used when a situation is perceived as unmanageable and aims to reduce the emotional distress associated with the situation (Carver *et al.*, 1989). Problem-focused coping requires a belief in the possibility and ability to either change the source of the problem or reframe the problem, thus leading to a more positive evaluation of the situation (Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005).

The sole focus on HSEs in the existing global mobility literature that evaluates the effects of coping strategies on expatriates is problematic, since they can also draw from other external sources of support (Hack-Polay and Mahmoud, 2021). Additionally, as evidenced by the Expatriate-Crisis Framework (McNulty *et al.*, 2019), coping strategies are often conceptualised as potential sources of stress. The focus is limited to the possibility of maladjustment and destructive behaviours, including substance abuse due to improper coping strategies that can trigger a personal expatriate crisis. However, the authors do not consider the fact that personal coping strategies do not necessarily lead to destructive behaviours and negative outcomes. They overlook the potential positive effects of coping on stress management (Carver *et al.*, 1989, Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005, Chen and Shaffer, 2018).

In contrast to the negative interpretation of coping by McNulty *et al.* (2019), Hack-Polay and Mahmoud (2021) show that coping strategies are not necessarily a source of stress. Rather, they can be an important internal resource to reduce stress in HSEs. Despite such recent findings, it is still unclear whether personal coping strategies are of equal or even higher

importance for LSEs compared to HSEs, considering the high levels of stress and limited availability of external sources of support.

### **Research questions**

Herein, the aim of this study is to extend our understanding of the experience of stress and support for LSEs in times of calamity. Considering the different circumstances of LSEs in comparison to HSEs, the role of external sources of support and personal coping strategies in times of crisis remains unclear. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to use the Expatriate-Crisis Framework (McNulty *et al.*, 2019) to explore the sources of stress and support that LSEs draw from. Within the context of the overall objective and to contribute to the theoretical discourse surrounding LSEs, we seek to address the following more specific research questions: (1) what are the key stressors and the main sources of support for LSEs in times of crisis, (2) what is the role of personal coping strategies for LSEs in times of calamity, and (3) do personal coping strategies need to be represented in the Expatriate-Crisis Framework?

### **Methodology and methods**

This interpretivist and qualitative study was designed to investigate the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected LSEs' experience of work, stress, and support. A multi-level approach to data collection was adopted that included semi-structured interviews with LSEs, employers, support agencies, unions, as well as council and county officials. This data collection method was chosen to include the perspectives of different actors involved in the experiences of LSEs and, thus, to provide novel contextual insights. This approach also provided a more holistic perspective of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of stress and support among LSEs in Germany (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2013, Duberley *et al.*, 2006). Further, this approach helped to identify overarching issues that are not only based



on an individual perspective, but that also provided insights into the availability and visibility of external sources of support for LSEs (Rousseau and Fried, 2001).

### **Sampling**

In line with previous studies (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009, Richardson and Mallon, 2005, Zhang and Rienties, 2017), we made use of personal contacts, intermediaries, and snowball sampling methods to collect data from LSEs and different policy actors across Germany. Of particular interest were sectors employing large numbers of LSEs, including healthcare, elderly care, food production, and metal industries (Morse, 2015). The inclusion criteria for this research were restricted to LSEs from other European countries who have worked in the low-wage sector in Germany for at least one year but less than ten years. We undertook a total of 32 interviews with 16 expatriates from eight countries, and 16 representatives of social actors in Germany (Table 1). Due to the sensitive nature of this research and LSEs being a hard-to-reach target group, the sample size was considered sufficiently large to answer the set research questions (Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

[Include Table 1 here]

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and Skype, providing participants with an opportunity to answer sensitive questions in a private and safe environment. This environment also allowed participants to develop rapport and trust with the interviewer (Hanna, 2012, Johnson *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, the use of online interviews enabled us to access participants during the pandemic while maintaining social distancing guidelines, thus, reducing risk to either party.

**Empirical data**

Initially, interviews focused on the difficulties and experiences of stress of LSEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, we concentrated on the availability of support from various policy actors (e.g. employers, government, NGOs), and the personal coping strategies employed by LSEs during the pandemic. Interviews with the policy actors (experts in Table 1) focused on the current situation of LSEs, the difficulties they were facing, and the availability of sources of support.

**Data analysis**

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. QSR NVivo was used to support data analysis by applying a directed content analysis approach (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008, Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). To ensure the quality of the coding and the appropriate thematic structure, a coding framework was developed (Morse, 2015). Similar to Bader *et al.* (2018), the analysis was then conducted in two steps.

In the first step, we used a deductive approach and coded the data based on the five dimensions of stress and the three dimensions of external support as outlined by McNulty *et al.* (2019), along the personal coping strategies. This approach helped to define the external sources of support in place for LSEs and their reliance on internal (coping) strategies in times of calamity (Bader, 2015, Bader *et al.*, 2015). Data that could not be coded into the coding framework were highlighted. In the second step, the highlighted content was inductively analysed along with the stressors described by the LSEs and the support received during the pandemic. To validate the coding process, both researchers coded the data independently. The inter-rater reliability of the coding indicated substantial agreement between the coders, with a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.79 (Hallgren, 2012).

Overall, the coding aligned with the dimensions of stress identified in the McNulty framework but identified personal coping strategies as an additional and even more important domain than the dimensions of support for LSEs (Figure 1).

[Include Figure 1 here]

### **Findings**

When asked about the implications of COVID-19, all 16 interviewees highlighted the stressful nature of the situation, especially in respect to all stressor dimensions in the Expatriate-Crisis Framework. While some stressors were related to the experiences of LSEs in normal times, most were caused or intensified by the pandemic. Participants agreed that their stress was worsened due to a lack of external support, such as temporarily closed council offices, cancelled German language classes, increased stress at the workplace, and a lack of sufficient external support due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Fifteen interviewees described the COVID-19 restrictions as the most prominent stressors in their daily lives during the pandemic. These restrictions resulted in high levels of anxiety in LSEs for multiple reasons, including an inability to travel back to their home country, increased bureaucratic burdens, a lack of social interactions in the host country, and the removal of language classes. Interviewees and experts reported that the lack of clarity and coherence surrounding the restrictions, and the way in which they were implemented and repeatedly changed within short periods of time, made it difficult for LSEs to understand the current rules and plan their daily lives. Expert 10 stated that:

There was a two-fold aggravation of the situation – many jobs have disappeared and, with them, wages. The precarious situation has become even worse.

Participants highlighted that these restrictions were not only stressors on their own, but that they increased the other five dimensions of stress. These stressors, as well as the domains of support, will now be individually explored along with the internal domain.

### **External and host-country domain**

COVID-19 restrictions were especially severe for those in high-risk jobs in the healthcare sector and those with low German language proficiency. The language barrier was described as a key source of stress, especially for new LSEs because they could not easily comprehend the meaning of the changing rules. Interviewee 12 said:

In my case, the main reason for increased stress levels was that I couldn't take German classes due to the pandemic.

Another host-country stressor for LSEs was the difficulty to obtain official work and registration documents due to temporary closures of community, county, and governmental agencies. While telephone appointments were available in various councils (Expert 6), very few LSEs used this service due to a lack of information, insufficient language skills, and a lack of translators. Expert 6 and Expert 7 stated that the provision of multilingual information material and consulting was inadequately implemented at the federal, council, and community levels. This was due to language issues as well as a lack of consideration regarding internet or telephone accessibility for LSEs to make use of the few available appointments.

Only six participants reported that they received support from external specialists. Four interviewees relied on religious institutions for emotional and practical support and three LSEs highlighted financial COVID-19 bonuses. Seven experts referred to a substantial increase in the number of LSEs seeking help from NGOs such as Arbeit und Leben and

Arbeitsmarktmentoren due to a combination of increased levels of stress and insufficient support from employers and official agencies. Nine experts also highlighted that the necessary documentation, as well as the volume and speed of bureaucratic processes when applying for financial and integration support for support-dependent LSEs, were impossible to obtain without in-person consultations.

Even though Expert 7 and Expert 8 referred to new support systems provided by the government, such as the COVID-19 aid or the Ausbildungsprämie, all 16 experts agreed that there are no explicit support systems and that there is a lack of protective legislation and policies in place for LSEs at the federal and state level. This illustrates the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the already difficult work and life conditions for LSEs.

### **Organisational domain**

Fifteen interviewees reported a significant increase in work-related stress during the pandemic. Expert 10 noted that LSEs in precarious working conditions face additional stressors such as the constant fear of job loss and unequal treatment at work. Moreover, seven experts alluded to illegal activities by some employers who exploit the current situation by withholding salaries or paying part-time allowances for full-time work. Expert 13 explained that:

These workers (expatriates) felt like lower-class workers. Many employers simply dismissed these people immediately because they could not or did not want to apply for reduced working hours for them.

The situation was particularly stressful on a personal and emotional level for LSEs employed in hospitals and care homes. The combination of social distancing with the difficulties of communicating with patients while wearing a mask, which were further worsened by language barriers, and work overload due to staff shortages caused by illness led to emotional

breakdowns. LSEs were left to deal with these circumstances on their own and did not receive mental health support or any other forms of support from their employers. Interviewee 7 shared that:

The death of a lot of clients from the [care] home where I work felt like mountains of corpses. I will deal with this for years.

### **Network and family domain**

The increased work-related exposure to the virus and the lack of safety measures resulted in LSEs considering themselves at risk and fearing viral transmission to accompanying family members in Germany. However, LSEs who lived with their families/partners were not alone in reporting increased levels of stress. Four unaccompanied LSEs stated that COVID-19-related travel restrictions and the ensuing loneliness were additional key stressors since they had left loved ones behind. They were concerned about the health and well-being of their families in their home countries and felt helpless and anxious.

The long distance and travel restrictions to go there are particularly hard for me. I'll lose my job if I go and come back because I would have to be in quarantine for 14 days. And knowing that my mother might die, and I can't go to her, this knowledge by itself already creates fear.  
(Interviewee 4)

Nine participants mentioned having difficulties with developing social contacts in Germany. LSEs, especially those who began their expatriate life in Germany shortly before or during the pandemic, complained that social contacts were limited or non-existent due to imposed COVID-19 control measures. Therefore, participants reported intensified feelings of

loneliness and sadness due to isolation and a lack of social networks as highlighted by Interviewee 4:

I can say that I have no contact with anyone here. I haven't managed to make friends in a year since my arrival. I have a friend from work, but there is no way to get to know anyone outside because we don't have the opportunity to go to the club or to play sport.

The COVID-19 pandemic limited the ability of LSEs to draw support from local networks, requiring them to focus instead on friends and family in their home countries via telephone and video communication. Although 14 participants considered the virtual contact to their home-country network a source of support, the lack of a local network was a key source of stress for most participants.

### **Personal (Internal) domain**

All 16 LSEs emphasised the fact that they could not rely on external support during the pandemic. They argued that due to the issues within their networks and organisation, and the struggle to reach external specialists, they were forced to focus on individual approaches to manage the various demands they faced during the pandemic. Fourteen participants perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as unchangeable and expressed that they felt helpless. As a result, they relied on emotion-focused coping strategies. Twelve LSEs described how they concentrated on ignoring the effects of the pandemic or distracting themselves by focusing on new activities, as described by Interviewee 4:

We devote our time to work and ourselves by cooking with each other. We watch films or go for walks in the forest; we distract ourselves so as not to think about the virus all the time.

Two LSEs talked about problem-focused coping strategies with Interviewee 1 describing how they actively avoided high-exposure situations in the hospital that they worked to decrease the likelihood of contracting COVID-19. Interviewee 13 displayed agentic, forward-thinking career-focused behaviour to mitigate future problems by taking different online classes for personal development and to better adjust in the host country. Nine participants stated that their individual approach to deal with their difficult situation was the reason why they remained in Germany.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The present paper explores the situation of LSEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw from the Expatriate-Crisis Framework (McNulty *et al.*, 2019) to evaluate the circumstances faced by LSEs in relation to stress, support, and the use of personal coping strategies. To respond to the research questions, we first evaluate the domains of stress and support and then explore the importance of personal coping strategies for LSEs.

The domains of causes encompass five dimensions: host-country, organisation, network, family, and personal. Herein, the findings of this work provide evidence for the applicability of the Expatriate-Crisis Framework to evaluate the stressors experienced by LSEs during the pandemic. Our findings highlight the fact that pandemic-related stressors, such as the fear of contracting and transmitting the virus as well as the social and travel restrictions were key stressors to LSEs during the pandemic. However, they also show that all stressor dimensions outlined by McNulty *et al.* (2019) are severely impacted by the pandemic and related stressors due to the increased exposure of LSEs to the virus as a result of their life and employment situation (Buch *et al.*, 2021).



Chiu *et al.* (2009) demonstrate the importance of social networks in the host country for cultural adaptation and the reduction of adjustment stress. In particular, contacts with host-country nationals are crucial for the acclimatisation process (McNulty *et al.*, 2019). However, due to the COVID-19 measures, social contacts were either limited or non-existent. Therefore, LSEs suffered from increased feelings of loneliness and sadness due to isolation and a lack of social networks (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009, Dang, 2020, McNulty *et al.*, 2019).

The absence of language courses and closures of councils were additional stressors for LSEs since they, in turn, impacted other dimensions of stress in the host-country. Language is an especially crucial part of successful expatriation as it is central to social capital accrual and in fostering an understanding of the host country's culture and job-related requirements (Selmer and Lauring, 2015). The suspension of all face-to-face language courses from March 2020 because of the COVID-19 counter measures, negatively affected communication between LSEs, colleagues, patients, and clients, resulting in restricted acculturation.

As such, this has also negatively impacted LSEs in the organisational context along with various other stressors, including high exposure to COVID-19 due to the nature of their work (Gardiner and Slaughter, 2020, Vaughan-Whitehead, 2011, Kohte and Rabe-Rosendahl, 2020) and the constant fear of losing their job. Even if there were reduced working-hour allowances available for a small number of employees during the pandemic, the common practice was the retention of permanent (often host-country national) workers and the termination of employees on short- and fixed-term contracts (Kohte and Rabe-Rosendahl, 2020). Additionally, some employers exploited the current situation by either not paying LSEs at all or by paying part-time allowances for full-time work. Taken together, our data suggest that the Expatriate-Crisis Framework is useful for identifying stressors experienced by LSEs.

In addition to the domains of causes, McNulty *et al.* (2019) outlined three dimensions of external domains of support for HSEs; the organisation, the network, and external

specialists. Key sources of support for HSEs are typically the employing organisation, language and cultural training, and external specialists, such as lawyers (Abdul Malek *et al.*, 2015, McNulty *et al.*, 2019). However, the findings of this research show that there is little to no external support available to LSEs.

With the exception of the provision of safety equipment as a response to new legislation (Kohte and Rabe-Rosendahl, 2020), no other sources of support from employers or HR departments were reported in this study. Likewise, while support from the network was not completely absent due to technology-supported contact to networks in the home-country, the support they provide is not as effective as an immediate physical network in the host country (Bader *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, these networks remained important due to the lack of alternatives (Farh *et al.*, 2010, Richardson, 2006). Similarly, even if some LSEs had access to COVID-19 financial aid paid to (some) nursing and care staff (BMG, 2020), the majority of participants reported a complete lack of available support from external specialists.

While COVID-19 restrictions have affected most of the workforce (Hamouche, 2020), they have intensified the already existing stressors and the paucity of external sources of support to further worsen the already precarious situation for LSEs (Gardiner and Slaughter, 2020). All experts in this study agreed that there is a substantial lack of protective legislation and available support for LSEs at the federal, state, and organisational level. While this was true pre-COVID-19 (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2011), this has been aggravated during the pandemic because no additional support systems were implemented to help this vulnerable group of expatriates (Becker *et al.*, 2021, Buch *et al.*, 2021). These findings underscore the insufficient preparation of the German state and unethical behaviour of some organisations (Fowler *et al.*, 2007, Vaughan-Whitehead, 2011).

As a result, all participants described a strong focus on personal coping strategies to survive in these times of calamity (Heilbrunn *et al.*, 2010, Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005). In contrast

to the focus of McNulty *et al.* (2019) on the potentially harmful side of coping, participants stated that their individual approach to dealing with stress was the only reason they remained on their assignment in Germany. Therefore, this study highlights the shortcomings of the Expatriate-Crisis Framework when applied to LSEs.

According to the framework, the high levels of stress in combination with the limited availability of all three domains of external support implies that LSEs would experience personal crises without resolution (McNulty *et al.*, 2019). LSEs in this study demonstrated strong coherence in the ways that they evaluated the available sources of support in Germany during these times of calamity. Our findings highlight the strong self-reliance and the focus on personal coping strategies of LSEs, which concur with those of recent studies in different national and cultural contexts (Yen *et al.*, In press). Therefore, we argue that the framework by McNulty *et al.* (2019) does not sufficiently capture the importance of personal coping strategies in avoiding personal expatriate crises.

Herein, we propose a revised Expatriate-Crisis Framework (Figure 2) that includes personal coping strategies as an additional internal domain alongside the external domains of support. Once the internal domain is represented in the framework, it can then be used to identify the internal and external sources used by LSEs to survive in times of calamity.

[Include Figure 2 here]

This additional internal domain is especially important for LSEs who will likely have reduced access to external sources of support. Accordingly, these individuals may need to rely extensively on personal coping strategies to deal with difficult situations during their international assignment to avoid a personal expatriate crisis (Heilbrunn *et al.*, 2010, Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005).

**Theoretical contributions**

By focusing on LSEs, we enrich the global mobility literature by offering a deeper examination of the lived experiences of this under-studied and disadvantaged group of expatriates. We extend the existing body of research on LSEs by highlighting the differences in the experience of stress and the availability of sources of support for LSEs in comparison to HSEs (McNulty *et al.*, 2019). We demonstrate that LSEs rely largely on personal coping strategies to prevent personal expatriate crises in the absence of other external sources of support.

This study shows that due to the narrow focus on expatriates of higher status and the emphasis on external sources of support, the Expatriate-Crisis Framework (McNulty *et al.*, 2019) is not fully applicable to other forms of expatriates, namely LSEs. The framework does not sufficiently cover personal coping strategies that are particularly important for LSEs. Thus, this study contributes to the global mobility literature by further developing the framework, making it more nuanced and sophisticated. Our revised version of the Expatriate-Crisis Framework (Figure 2) accounts for personal coping strategies alongside external sources of support. This is especially important if the framework is adopted to explore the processes leading to personal expatriate crises in LSEs and their prevention.

**Practical implications**

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for social actors that wish to attract and retain expatriate workers in key industries such as healthcare, elderly care, and manufacturing. Governments are encouraged to support LSEs by eliminating questionable employment practices (e.g. subcontracts). Further, we urge governments to establish and fund external support systems for LSEs (Kohte and Rabe-Rosendahl, 2020). Local councils should ensure

the availability and accessibility of resources for LSEs (e.g. multilingual resources, language training courses, and easier access to appointments).

Organisations need to focus on their responsibilities as social actors and introduce human resource practices that focus on equal opportunities in employment, job security, and the social inclusion of LSEs (Connell and Burgess, 2013, Buch *et al.*, 2021). Such practices could include pay at or above the low-wage threshold, thereby ensuring sufficient staffing to avoid long overtime hours and implementing training to help LSEs develop problem-focused strategies to deal with the demands of their experiences in the host country. This could include the provision of opportunities to network with host-country nationals and, if possible, other expatriates to provide support opportunities to accrue both social and career capital. The provision of language courses to LSEs will also aid social inclusion.

### **Implications for future research**

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. Due to the applied sampling strategy, the findings are restricted to participants in a small range of sectors, and more extreme cases were potentially not covered. This is underlined by the fact that some participants withdrew from the study following threats of job losses if they spoke to external entities about their working conditions. Nevertheless, by using a multi-level approach, this study offers insights into the issues that LSEs continue to experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research could involve a longitudinal study to explore how these participants adapted as the vaccination programme was rolled out, as well as a measure of the effects of recently implemented changes in the working conditions of LSEs in Germany.

Furthermore, we encourage future research into the work–life dynamics of LSEs. It would be interesting to explore how these individuals make sense of their work and current situation, despite being publicly viewed as low-status workers in a foreign country. Additionally, because the model by McNulty *et al.* (2019) was mainly geared towards assigned

HSEs while our model extends this framework to include LSEs, future research should review this model in the light of stressors and sources of support specific to self-initiated HSEs.

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Table 1: Demographic characteristics of all interview and survey participants

Characteristics of expatriates							
#	Participant	Gender	Nationality	Length of expatriate employment (years)	Total time in Germany (years)	Industry	Including family
1	Interviewee 1	f	England	1	2	Healthcare	Yes
2	Interviewee 2	m	Czech Republic	8	8	Manufacturing	No
3	Interviewee 3	f	Portugal	2	3	Hospitality	No
4	Interviewee 4	f	Bulgaria	1	1	Care	Yes
5	Interviewee 5	m	Bulgaria	1	1	Care	Yes
6	Interviewee 6	f	Romania	1	1	Healthcare	No
7	Interviewee 7	f	Czech Republic	3	5	Healthcare	No
8	Interviewee 8	m	Romania	4	6	Industry	Yes
9	Interviewee 9	f	Moldavia	1	1	Childcare	Yes
10	Interviewee 10	m	Romania	1	1	Industry	Yes
11	Interviewee 11	f	Romania	1	1	Care	Yes
12	Interviewee 12	m	Romania	5	6	Industry	Yes
13	Interviewee 13	m	Bulgaria	6	8	Care	Yes
14	Interviewee 14	m	Romania	3	3	Industry	Yes
15	Interviewee 15	m	Ukraine	1	5	Healthcare	No
16	Interviewee 16	f	Poland	2	2	Healthcare	No
Characteristics of organisations, NGOs, and state institutions							

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Type of institution	Expertise
16	Expert 1	f	Germany	Union	Public relations worker, press spokesperson, focus on European regional policy Poland Czech Republic, Germany
17	Expert 2	m	Germany	County	Migration and Integration officer for the Integration Policy Department at the federal state level
18	Expert 3	m	Germany	NGO	Consultant in labour legislation for migrants and third-country nationals
19	Expert 4	f	Germany	NGO	Consultant in labour legislation for migrants
20	Expert 5	f	Romania	NGO	Member association of Romanian-German society
21	Expert 6	f	Germany	Council	Integration officer of a large city, coordination of the integration alliance of the city, department of the youth and social welfare office
22	Expert 7	f	Germany	County	Integration and migration commissioner at county level
23	Expert 8	f	Poland	Council	Head of Department for integration, Integration Officer for a medium sized city
24	Expert 9	f	Germany	Employer	Spokeswomen for recruitment and training agency of skilled workers within the EU
25	Expert 10	m	Germany	NGO	Manager association, consulting in labour legislation
26	Expert 11	f	Germany	Council	Integration Officer, responsible for development of support and assistance programs for foreign workers
27	Expert 12	f	Germany	NGO	Consultant association, consulting in labour legislation
28	Expert 13	f	Poland	NGO	Consultant association, consulting in labour legislation
29	Expert 14	f	Poland	County	Coordination Officer for an Integration Network Ministry of Economics, Labour and Energy of the federal state
30	Expert 15	f	Spain	NGO	Consultant association, consulting and voluntary support for migrants
31	Expert 16	m	German	County	Integration Officer, responsible for development of support and assistance programs for foreign workers at county level

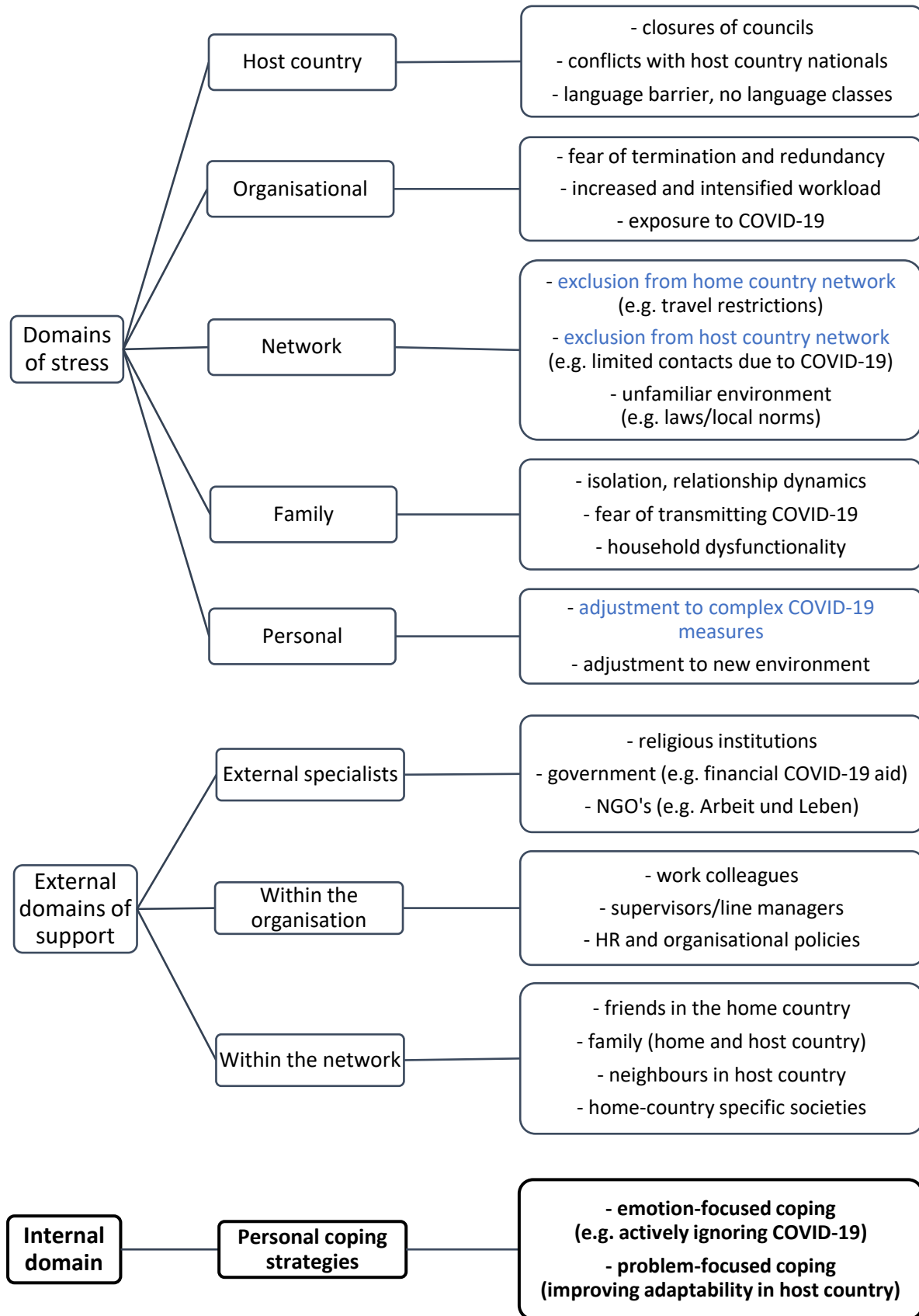


Figure 1: Coding framework

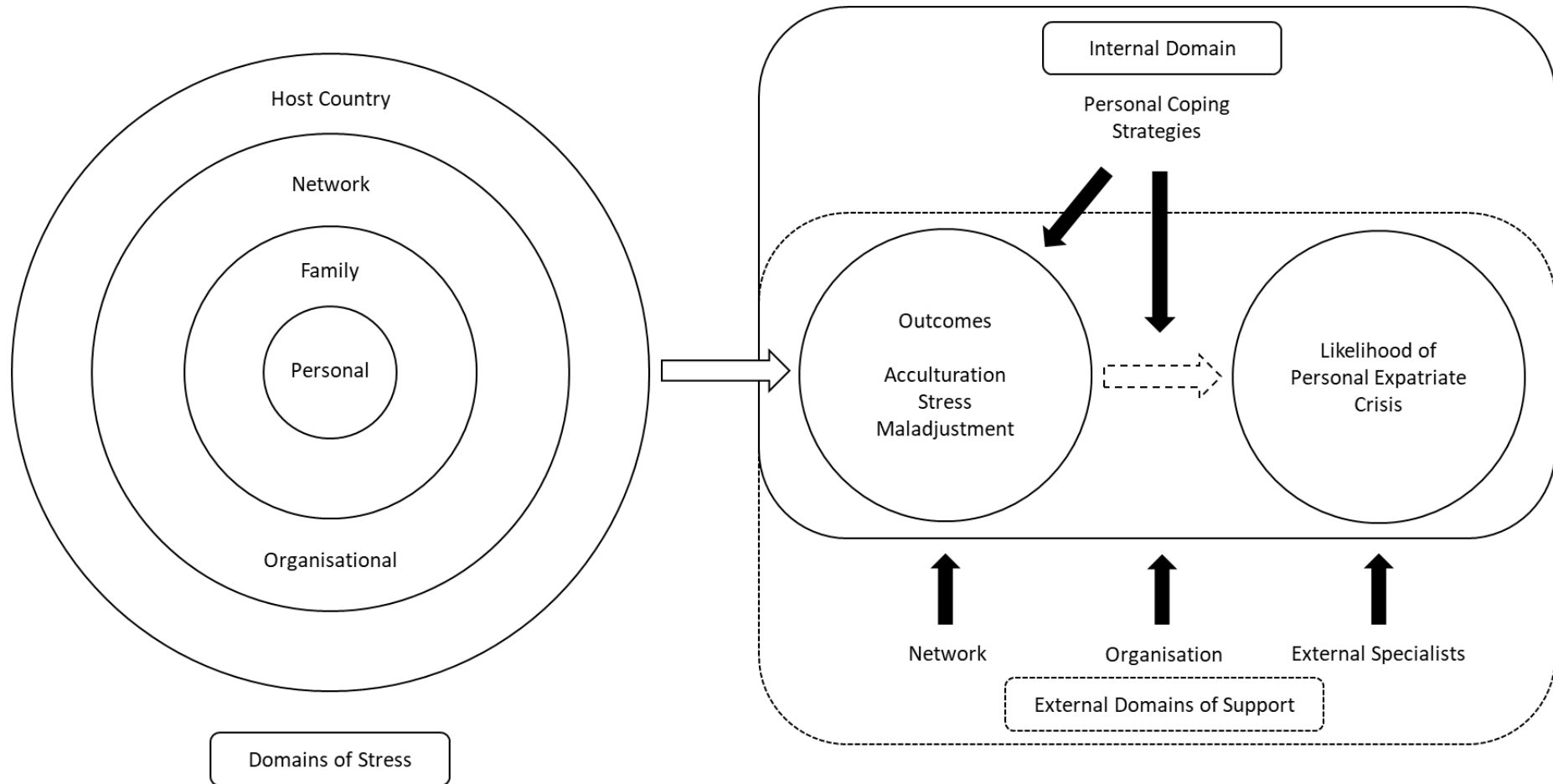


Figure 2: Revised model of the Expatriate-Crisis Framework

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