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Shades of Darkness in Expatriation: The Effects of Cultural Discrimination and Underemployment on Self-Initiated Expatriates' Role Adjustment

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Abstract

This study examines the implications of workplace underemployment and discrimination for self-initiated expatriates' (SIE) role adjustment in terms of their task-related and social roles. Analyzing a sample of 379 expatriates in the United Arab Emirates and drawing from role theory, it shows that not all effects of underemployment and discrimination are negative. While discrimination negatively affects SIEs' role adjustment by hindering the quality of social interaction and job clarity, underemployment, in contrast, enhances SIEs' socialization and job clarity. The analysis also finds SIEs' gender to moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and the quality of SIEs' social interaction. The study uncovers the nuanced influences of discrimination and underemployment on SIEs' role adjustment, mediated by job clarity and social interactions, and partially moderated by gender. It calls for further exploration of their complex effects on SIEs' task-related and social role adjustment.

Keywords Self-initiated expatriates · Cultural discrimination · Underemployment · Job clarity · Social interaction · Gender · Role adjustment

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1 Introduction

Prior expatriation research largely assumes that expatriate success is primarily a function of cultural adjustment, organizational integration, and/or personal adaptability (e.g. Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Mahajan & Hassan, 2024; Sathish et al., 2024). While these perspectives emphasize the expatriate's agency in adjusting to their new environment, they seem to neglect how host organizations shape expatriates' experiences through structural barriers such as discrimination and underemployment. In other words, the dominant framing in prior literature places the focus of adjustment on expatriates, while not paying adequate attention to how host organizations may create conditions that can actively hinder expatriates' role adjustment. Specifically, many expatriates, especially those from non-dominant cultural backgrounds, face workplace discrimination that can limit job clarity and restrict access to informal networks which are crucial for expatriates' effective role adjustment (e.g. Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Köllen et al., 2020; Syed et al., 2014). Moreover, expatriates often experience underemployment when they perceive that not all their skills and competences are utilized during expatriation, and that the tasks and responsibilities they undertake in the host organization do not fully align with the level and breadth of their competence (e.g. Chwialkowska, 2020; Koveshnikov et al., 2023; Lee, 2005). This mismatch between expatriates' skills and responsibilities can lead to frustration and perceived ambiguity regarding one's job responsibilities, ultimately hindering role adjustment.

Thus, our study departs from the prevailing assumptions in expatriate literature and offers an alternative view on expatriate adjustment by shifting attention to the thus far little understood role of structural barriers such as discrimination and underemployment in influencing expatriates' role adjustment. This is even more critical and relevant for self-initiated expatriates (SIE), defined as globally mobile individuals 'who self-initiate their international relocation, with the intention of regular employment and temporary stay, and with skills/professional qualifications' (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014: 1293). With no formal support from their home organizations, SIEs need to face and cope with these structural barriers on their own by clarifying their job-related tasks and responsibilities (i.e. adapting to their job-related role as an expatriate) and actively building workplace relationships with their colleagues (i.e. adapting to their social role as an expatriate) (Doherty, 2013; Kubovcikova & van Bakel, 2022; Singh et al., 2021).

Importantly, the abovementioned structural barriers can hamper SIEs' adjustment to the job-related and social aspects of their expatriation role by causing role ambiguity whereby SIEs face unclear expectations about their job-related tasks and responsibilities and role conflict whereby SIEs may face contradictions between their self-perceived expatriation role and the way they are viewed by local colleagues (i.e. being treated in an inclusive and fair manner vs. being discriminated). Yet, our current understanding of how workplace experiences influence the different aspects of SIEs' role adjustment remains partial. For instance, it remains little understood whether there are any differences in how such experiences affect the adjustment of SIEs to task related as compared to social aspects of their role. In this study, we focus specifically on SIEs' work-related role adjustment and, drawing on role theory,

examine the effect of SIEs' perceived discrimination and underemployment on SIEs' work-related role adjustment as well as the mechanisms through which these effects operate. Building on role theory, we posit that these effects are mediated by job clarity, reflecting the importance of job-related responsibilities and expectations' clarity, and the quality of social interaction of SIEs with their local colleagues, highlighting the importance of social environment for SIEs' role adjustment.

Following Shaffer et al. (2016), we conceptualize work role adjustment as comprising two facets: work role task (WRT) and work role relationship (WRR) adjustment. The WRT adjustment concerns the level of psychological comfort SIEs feel towards their job-related responsibilities, work-related activities, expected working hours, and workload inherent to their expatriation role. The WRR adjustment relates to the psychological comfort perceived by SIEs regarding their role a cooperative, professional, and sociable colleague to local employees in the host organization. We then put forth the following research questions: (1) *How do perceived underemployment and discrimination affect the WRT and WRR adjustment among SIEs?* and (2) *What are the mediating mechanisms underlying these relationships?* Empirically, we analyze a sample of 379 SIEs residing and working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to elucidate the mechanisms through which underemployment and discrimination influence SIEs' role adjustment.

In doing so, our study is well-positioned to extend the burgeoning literature discussing the challenges of SIEs and expatriates, more generally, related to discrimination (Bader et al., 2018; Syed et al., 2014) and underemployment (Koveshnikov et al., 2023; Lee, 2005), the so-called 'dark side of expatriation', by providing a more nuanced understanding of how these factors influence expatriate role adjustment in the workplace. More specifically, by differentiating between the job-related and social aspects of role adjustment and investigating two mediating mechanisms through which perceived underemployment and discrimination influence SIEs' role adjustment, our analysis sheds additional light on the complex nature of SIEs' negative experiences and their implications, which thus far have remained relatively underexplored in the extant literature.

2 Theory and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Work Role Adjustment and Role Theory

While prior literature has generated different typologies of roles for corporate expatriates (e.g. Connelly, 2010; Harzing, 2001), such categorizations are often difficult to transpose to SIEs who are not sent abroad with a specific objective in mind. Instead, they often relocate abroad for personal reasons and pursue their own agendas in the host organization. These could be related to gaining cultural experience or advancing one's professional competence (e.g. Doherty, 2013). From an SIE's perspective, the absence of an organizationally imposed role often implies that the SIEs' relocation success is largely dependent on their ability to navigate and adjust to their expatriate role in the host workplace. Such adjustment, then, takes place through social interaction as the SIE learns more about the organization's norms and values and,

conversely, adjustment can be hindered by local employees potentially treating the SIE with suspicion, biases, and mistrust (Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Shen et al., 2021). At the same time, scholars have proposed that workplace role adjustment can encompass several dimensions and the adjustment across these different dimensions might unfold asynchronously and asymmetrically, and be influenced by distinct factors (Haslberger et al., 2013; Shaffer et al., 2016).

In this paper, we draw on Shaffer et al., (2016: 3), who suggested that work adjustment is role-based comprising the WRT and WRR dimensions of adjustment. The basis of Shaffer et al.'s (2016) argument is role theory (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1978) that offers a suitable theoretical framework for understanding how SIE's workplace experiences might impact SIEs' ability and willingness to fulfill their roles and meet role expectations in the host organization. The theory posits that individuals assume distinct roles as they engage in various social structures (Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978). For instance, a person might embody the role of a competent professional (i.e. a task-related work role) and the role of an amiable colleague (i.e. a relationship-related work role).

Each role an individual adopts carries specific expectations, representing behaviors that other actors within the role anticipate the role holder to exhibit (Biddle, 1986). These expectations might encompass tasks, responsibilities, and activities (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Moreover, adjusting to or being comfortable with a role involves not only accepting the role's tasks and responsibilities but also successfully navigating relationships with other actors within the role (e.g. one's co-workers). Effective navigation of a particular in-role environment necessitates adaptation to associated tasks and responsibilities as well as to the relationships inherent within that role. We now proceed to derive our hypotheses concerning the effects of discrimination and under-employment on SIEs' WRT and WRR adjustment.

2.2 Hypotheses Development

2.2.1 Baseline Direct Hypotheses

The existing body of research suggests that SIEs are often treated with mistrust and suspicion by host country nationals, being perceived as 'outsiders' or out-group members (Shen et al., 2021). This demarcation driven by SIEs' cultural or ethnic dissimilarity to host country nationals often cultivates prejudiced attitudes towards SIEs, leading to social exclusion (Köllen et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2021) and discrimination (Haak-Saheem et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2013). Although studies exploring the consequences of cultural discrimination among SIEs are limited, it is known that discrimination and prejudiced attitudes often arise from SIEs being categorized as out-group members by host country nationals (see Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). Such categorization has been shown to diminish the inclination of host country nationals to provide support to SIEs (Singh et al., 2021).

Building on role theory, we anticipate that cultural discrimination at the workplace could undermine the psychological comfort SIEs feel towards the need to fulfill their role of an amiable and sociable colleague to host country nationals. It is likely to hinder SIEs' ability and willingness to embody such a role and to navigate social

relationships with co-workers successfully. A rare study by Bader et al. (2018) discovered that gender discrimination affected expatriates' frustration and job satisfaction. However, the impact of workplace cultural discrimination has largely remained unexplored in prior research, despite growing recognition that many expatriates encounter various, including cultural, forms of discrimination abroad (Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017; Haak-Saheem et al., 2019; Hutchings et al., 2013). Discriminated SIEs are likely to feel socially excluded and potentially unappreciated within the host organization's cultural and social environment, thus possibly preventing them from accepting and fulfilling their relationship-related work roles.

Furthermore, workplace discrimination, often manifested as unfair and prejudiced treatment in daily job-related matters (Triana et al., 2015), may also impede SIEs' adjustment to their work role tasks and responsibilities. Discriminated against, SIEs are unlikely to feel psychologically comfortable with their direct tasks, responsibilities, and workplace activities. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a) *SIEs' workplace cultural discrimination is negatively associated with their WRT adjustment.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b) *SIEs' workplace cultural discrimination is negatively associated with their WRR adjustment.*

Underemployment has been found to be relatively common among SIEs (Koveshnikov et al., 2023; Lee, 2005). It describes a situation where employees perceive their qualifications or skills to exceed the requirements or utilization in their current job (Erdogan et al., 2011). Under such circumstances, employees are likely to experience poor alignment between their competencies and the job demands and expectations set by the host organization. The inability to fully utilize one's competencies, coupled with feelings of underemployment, has been associated with negative work attitudes (Feldman & Turnley, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 2000) and stress (Johnson et al., 2002). In a rare study on SIEs, Lee (2005) investigated a sample of SIEs in Singapore, finding perceived underemployment negatively related to job and career satisfaction while being positively related to work alienation. In a recent review, Tharenou and Kulik (2020) reported that prior research suggests underemployed skilled migrants often experience shock, surprise, sadness, and disappointment in their employment situations. Drawing on role theory, it can be argued that underemployment causes a range of the abovementioned negative reactions among migrants or SIEs because it makes them confused and dissatisfied regarding the specifics of their workplace role in terms of job-related tasks and expectations.

Feeling underemployed may adversely impact SIEs' acceptance of, and psychological comfort with, both aspects of their work role adjustment. Underemployed SIEs are likely to feel that their skills and competencies are misapplied, exceeding the demands of their current roles, and neither adequately appreciated nor valued by the host organization. They are also likely to feel undervalued by the host organization's social community. Thus, akin to the effects of perceived discrimination, the impact of perceived underemployment is likely to span both job-related and social realms,

affecting both WRT and WRR adjustment. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a) *SIEs' perceived underemployment is negatively associated with their WRT adjustment.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b) *SIEs' perceived underemployment is negatively associated with their WRR adjustment.*

2.2.2 Mediation Hypotheses

Job clarity refers to the perceived clarity employees have regarding the expectations, tasks, and goals related to their job performance (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991; Storermer et al., 2022). Previous research has indicated that a lack of job clarity negatively impacts employees' job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and performance (O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994; Tubre & Collins, 2000). The experience of job clarity, or the lack thereof, stems from the expectations and the communication of these expectations from a role sender, typically the organization and its leadership (Kahn et al., 1964). When such communication is ambiguous or in some ways unexpected, employees are likely to feel confused regarding their work-related role at the workplace and experience increased tension, anxiety, and stress (House & Rizzo, 1972; Rizzo et al., 1970).

Research has found that unfair treatment in the workplace increases employees' ambiguity related to job-related tasks and goals (De Clercq & Pereira, 2023) and reduces employees' job clarity (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004). By extension, we can expect perceived cultural discrimination to reduce SIEs' job clarity regarding their job-related goals and tasks, as they will perceive the discriminatory treatment at the host workplace as unfair and prejudiced. Such treatment is likely to make SIEs question their professional standing within the host organization and feel confused regarding what expectations, tasks, and goals their work-related role entails.

Further, Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. (2005) argued that in the context of expatriation, high job clarity can reduce the ambiguity associated with the host organization's work environment, while its absence can leave expatriates confused about what behaviors are expected of them and considered appropriate. They found job clarity to be strongly associated with work adjustment, which, in the conceptualization of Black and Stephens (1989), is similar to WRT adjustment ($r=0.57$). Thus, we argue that experiencing cultural discrimination is likely to hamper SIEs' WRT adjustment because it will confuse expatriates concerning the job-related tasks and responsibilities expected of them at the workplace. Therefore, we put forth the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a) *The relationship between SIEs' workplace cultural discrimination and WRT adjustment is mediated by decreased SIEs' job clarity.*

Previous research has shown that discrimination and prejudiced attitudes often arise from host country nationals categorizing expatriates as out-group members (see

Varma et al., 2006) reducing their inclination to provide support and assistance to expatriates (Peltokorpi, 2020; Singh et al., 2021). On the other hand, experiencing cultural discrimination is likely to inflate expatriates' perceptions of host country nationals being different culturally and socially from them. It may negatively affect the expatriates' perceptions of social interactions with them increasing the likelihood of rating such interactions as exclusionary and unfair (Broudy et al., 2007). Subsequently, perceived workplace cultural discrimination is likely to diminish the willingness and propensity of SIEs to socialize with their host country national colleagues both within and outside the workplace to meet the in-role expectations of being amiable and sociable colleagues.

The absence of social interaction may adversely affect the WRR adjustment of SIEs, as they will miss opportunities to get to know their colleagues better and build the social rapport and networks crucial for fostering smooth and friendly workplace relations. Several studies have confirmed the importance of connections with host country nationals for expatriate adjustment (Pustovit, 2020; van Bakel, 2019). Through such connections SIEs can obtain social and informational support and acquire a better understanding of the norms and expectations of their new job and social role in the host organization (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Mahajan & Toh, 2014), all of which are critical for SIEs' WRR adjustment. Therefore, we argue that the adverse effect of perceived cultural discrimination on WRR adjustment is likely to be mediated by the decreased social interaction of SIEs with their local colleagues.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b) *The relationship between SIEs' workplace cultural discrimination and WRR adjustment is mediated by the decreased social interaction of SIEs with their local colleagues.*

Experiencing underemployment is likely to leave SIEs uncertain about the organization's actual expectations for them and the specific goals toward which they should strive. Perceived underemployment represents a mismatch between the needs of SIEs and the opportunities offered by the host organization (see Lee, 2005; Koveshnikov et al., 2023). It suggests that the host organization provides jobs that do not align with SIEs' expectations and requirements, thereby creating a state in which the host organization's role expectations and the SIEs' role behaviors are incompatible. This situation can lead to confusion among SIEs regarding their actual role expectations from the host organization.

In support, emerging research confirms that perceived underemployment contributes to employee role conflict (Zhou et al., 2023) and decreases employee's obligations towards the organization (Wu et al., 2022). Interestingly, Erdogan et al. (2011) argue that by diluting employees' job clarity, underemployment also motivates underemployed employees to engage in job crafting creating their own job-related expectations. Therefore, since perceived underemployment decreases SIEs' job clarity, which, in turn, is likely to negatively impact their WRT adjustment, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4a (H4a) *The relationship between SIEs' perceived underemployment and WRT adjustment is mediated by decreased SIEs' job clarity.*

Although research on underemployment among expatriates remains limited, primarily focusing on job-related implications (e.g. Kawai & Mohr, 2020), some evidence suggests that perceived underemployment might negatively impact expatriates' psychological wellbeing, affecting their willingness and ability to navigate their social environment and fulfill the social aspect of their work role successfully. For instance, Lee (2005) analyzed a sample of SIEs in Singapore and discovered a negative correlation between perceived underemployment and job and career satisfaction, and a positive correlation with work alienation. Furthermore, Tharenou and Kulik (2020) noted that underemployed expatriates often experience a range of negative emotions, such as sadness and disappointment, in relation to their employment situation.

This suggests that, beset by sadness and feelings of alienation, SIEs are likely to face challenges not only in accepting the ambiguous task-related aspects of their work role but also in navigating relationships with other relevant actors (i.e. their co-workers) within the role. In fact, research shows that underemployment is a serious source of workplace stress for employees (Maynard et al., 2015) and can result in employee withdrawal (Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013) or incivility (Howard et al., 2022). All of these are likely to hamper the quality of employees' social interaction with their colleagues. Therefore, we argue that SIEs' perceived underemployment diminishes their WRR adjustment as the quality of their interaction with host country coworkers and thus their ability to fulfill the social aspects of their work role decline.

Hypothesis 4b (H4b) *The relationship between SIEs' perceived underemployment and WRR adjustment is mediated by decreased social interaction of SIEs with their local colleagues.*

2.2.3 Moderation Hypotheses

While our core theoretical model focuses on how structural barriers—discrimination and underemployment—shape SIEs' role adjustment, we also examine whether these effects vary by gender. Studies drawing on role theory convincingly argue that gender is one of the most critical social categories in explaining behavior (e.g., Anglin et al., 2022). Relatedly, research has highlighted persistent gender inequalities in the expatriation process (e.g. Berry & Bell, 2012; Tharenou, 2008). Specifically, female expatriates have been shown to face wage discrimination (Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015), encounter limited opportunities for learning and development (Stalker & Mavin, 2011), and experience higher levels of workplace gender harassment than their male counterparts, especially in host countries with strong institutional gender discrimination (Bader et al., 2018). Recently, Shortland and Perkins (2020) demonstrated that, over time, female expatriates tend to lose faith in the enforcement of diversity and equity policies intended to support their career progression abroad. Some scholars argue that the unjust treatment of assigned female expatriates has contributed to an increase in females self-initiating their international relocations (Tharenou, 2010).

Experiencing gender-based discrimination in their home countries is likely to shape female SIEs' role expectations when relocating abroad, making them more psychologically prepared to cope with potential negative experiences, such as work-

place cultural discrimination in host organizations. At the same time, research has shown that female expatriates tend to be more emotionally intelligent compared to their male colleagues (Koveshnikov et al., 2014), enabling them to regulate and utilize emotions in problem solving more effectively. This finding aligns with broader research indicating that females tend to score consistently higher on emotional intelligence and respond more adaptively to stressors, and are more skillful in using emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g. Ciarrochi et al., 2001; Deane et al., 2001).

Thus, we expect female SIEs to react less strongly to negative experiences related to perceived discrimination in the host workplace than their male counterparts. In role theory terms, female SIEs may show greater persistence and capability in fulfilling their work-related task and social roles despite facing discrimination. That is, workplace discrimination is likely to have a weaker negative impact on job clarity and the quality of social interactions with local colleagues for female, as compared to male, SIEs. Supporting this, Cole and McNulty (2011) found that female SIEs, on average, scored higher on self-transcendence, a personality trait encompassing tolerance, broad-mindedness, wisdom, forgiveness, and loyalty. In turn, self-transcendence was positively associated with both interactional and work-related adjustment in their study. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5 (H5) The relationships between SIEs' perceived cultural discrimination and (a) job clarity and (b) the quality of social interactions are moderated by SIEs' gender, such that the negative relationships are weaker among female expatriates.

Research indicates that gender influences individuals' assessments of performance and accomplishments in various status-related tasks (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013; Ridgeway et al., 1985). Correll (2004) posits that when females are informed that males tend to perform better in a given task, they may perceive themselves as less competent, even when their actual performance is equivalent.

More broadly, a substantial body of research indicates that females are more likely than males to experience underemployment (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). This difference reflects several structural, cultural, and behavioral factors that limit females' career outcomes. First, females' comparatively higher levels of family-related commitments can constrain the full utilization of their human capital (Feldman, 1996). In the context of expatriation, for example, married females are more likely than married males to experience underemployment, as family relocation decisions frequently prioritize the husband's career over the wife's. Second, persistent gender-based stereotypes often hinder females' career advancement. Managers may perceive female employees as facing greater work-family conflict than male employees (Hoobler et al., 2009), which can reduce their willingness to assign females to high-responsibility roles or promote them. Third, research consistently finds that females are less likely than males to initiate negotiations for better work conditions (e.g. Babcock et al., 2003; Bowles et al., 2007) and are more likely to experience greater anxiety around negotiating and view situations as non-negotiable (Small et al., 2007). Together, these factors create a reinforcing cycle that increases the likelihood of underemployment among females, both in domestic and international work contexts.

At the same time, as noted earlier, females tend to score higher on emotional intelligence and demonstrate more adaptive responses to stressors, making them potentially better equipped to handle the psychological strain associated with underemployment. These capabilities suggest that female SIEs may be better prepared than male SIEs to carry out work-related roles and tasks for which they are, to some extent, underemployed. In other words, perceived underemployment is likely to have a less negative impact on female SIEs’ job clarity and the quality of their social interactions with local colleagues compared to male SIEs. We thus propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6 (H6) The relationships between SIEs’ perceived underemployment and (a) job clarity and (b) the quality of social interactions are moderated by SIEs’ gender, such that the negative relationships are weaker among female SIEs.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model tested in this study.

3 Methodology and Research Design

Sample and procedure Data for this study were collected from SIEs living and working in the UAE, recognized as one of the global expatriation hubs (e.g. Budhwar et al., 2019). The UAE, akin to several other Gulf countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Qatar), relies heavily on a foreign workforce for both managing day-to-day operations and aiding in diversifying away from fossil fuel dependency. Concurrently, the UAE’s nationalization policies (i.e. Emiratization) have incentivized organizations to employ host country nationals. It is not uncommon for expatriates to be recruited to develop the competencies of host country nationals, aiming to eventually terminate the expatriates’ contracts. Moreover, given the near impossibility of naturalization in the UAE, many expatriates view the country as a transient location. There appears to be a two-tier system suggesting a differential treatment concerning employment and legal matters between locals and expatriates (e.g. Forstenlechner, 2010). However, while the phenomena discussed in this paper may be more pronounced in the UAE

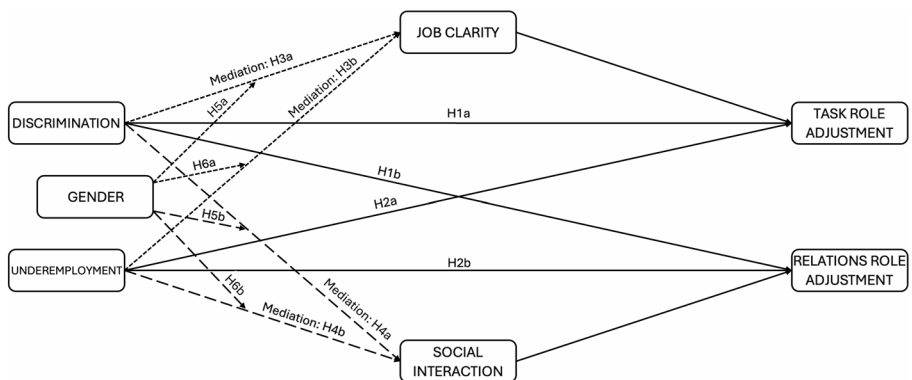


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

compared to other countries, cultural discrimination and underemployment are common challenges expatriates face in many parts of the world.

An online questionnaire in English was distributed to potential respondents who met the following criteria: being of foreign origin, living and working full time in the UAE, residing in the UAE for less than 10 years (to minimize the ‘going native’ effect), and possessing at least an undergraduate degree (for a discussion of these criteria, see Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). The questionnaire was sent to 4868 SIEs via a social network platform (Facebook), yielding 379 usable responses (a response rate of 8%). Of the respondents, 50% were female, with an average age of 39.05 (ranging from 23 to 69). Additionally, 24% had children under 18 years old, and 78% had a spouse. Regarding job positions, 24% held supervisory roles (such as top and line managers), while 76% were in non-supervisory roles (encompassing various specialist service-oriented positions, e.g. teacher, salesperson, nurse, etc.). The three most represented industries in the sample were education and research (18%), healthcare (14%), and tourism and hospitality (14%). Origin-wise, 8% were from Africa, 44% from Southeast Asia, 28% from South Asia, 15% from Europe, and 5% from North America and Australia. On average, respondents had spent 4.13 years in the UAE.

Measures All measures used in this study have been validated in previous studies and, unless a dummy variable, are measured on a 5-point Likert scale from ‘1’- ‘not at all’ to ‘5’ – ‘extremely’.

Workplace cultural discrimination Discrimination was measured using six items developed and validated by James et al. (1994) to assess racial / ethnic / cultural discrimination in the workplace. We asked our respondents about the extent to which they agree with a number of statements regarding their workplace. Sample item: “At work, I feel socially isolated because of my racial/ethnic/cultural group belonging”. Cronbach’s alpha was .87.

Perceived underemployment We measured underemployment with four items developed by Maynard et al. (2006). Sample item: “I have more abilities than I need in order to do my job”. Cronbach’s alpha was .74.

Job clarity We measured job clarity with three items from Rizzo et al. (1970). Sample item: “I know exactly what is expected of me in my job”. Cronbach’s alpha was .89.

Social interaction with colleagues We measured interaction with colleagues using four items adapted from O’Reilly et al. (1989). Sample item: “I get along well with my co-workers off the job”. Cronbach’s alpha was .84.

Gender was measured as a dummy variable (‘0’—female and ‘1’—male).

Role adjustment The two dimensions of role adjustment were measured using a six-item construct developed by Shaffer et al. (2016). The items measure WRT adjustment (three items, sample item: “I feel comfortable with my workload”) and WRR adjustment (three items, sample item: “I feel comfortable with the communication among my colleagues”). Cronbach’s alphas were .87 and .88, respectively.

Controls We controlled for age (measured in years), time in the host country (measured in years), job position (‘supervisory position’ was coded as ‘0’ and ‘non-supervisory position’ as ‘1’), and marital status (‘single’ was coded as ‘0’ and ‘married or in a relationship’ as ‘1’). We also controlled for cultural origin of SIEs. We coded ‘North America and Australia’ as our base group and used dummy variables to code

the four remaining cultural clusters in our sample ('Africa', 'Southeast Asia', 'South Asia', and 'Europe').

Quality of Measurements Cronbach's alphas, composite reliability (CR), average variance explained (AVE), and discriminant validity (DV) were calculated for each of our constructs. The Cronbach's alphas and CRs were greater than 0.7, the AVE scores were greater than 0.5, and the DVs were larger than the correlations between constructs. Therefore, the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of our measures were demonstrated. Tables 1 and 2 report descriptive statistics, measurements validity indexes and correlations for the variables in our model.

3.1 Confirmatory Analyses and Common Method Bias

To evaluate the quality of our model, we conducted a series of confirmatory analyses and compared our theoretical model with other alternatives, as detailed in Table 3. We discovered that the theoretical model (six-factor model: discrimination, under-employment, job clarity, quality of social interaction, WRT adjustment, and WRR adjustment) demonstrated a better fit than other configurations. Specifically, the χ^2 difference test confirmed that the theoretical six-factor model had a better fit with the data than the five-factor model ($\Delta \chi^2 = 256.87$; $\Delta df = 5$; $p < .001$).

Moreover, given that our study relies on self-reported data, there's a potential for common method variance bias to inflate the correlations among our variables. Mindful of this risk, we employed the Unmeasured Latent Method Construct (ULMC) method to assess the common source variance bias and validate the authenticity of our results (Williams & McGonagle, 2016). To this end, we executed a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in which each item was associated with both its theoretical construct and a latent method construct (refer to Table 3). By analyzing the total amount of variance (see Williams et al., 1989), our results indicate that the variance associated with the latent method construct was about 7%, significantly lower than the accepted threshold of 25% (Williams et al., 1989). Thus, we can conclude that common method variance bias does not pose a threat to the interpretation of our results.

4 Results

To test our hypotheses, we conducted covariance-based structural equation modeling using AMOS Version 29. The fit statistics showed a high overall fit with the data: Chi-square = 946.53; $df = 397$; CFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.05. The results are summarized in Table 4. Notably—and somewhat surprisingly—none of our control variables were significantly associated with any of the dependent variables in the model. We come back to this interesting finding in the discussion section. To assess the robustness of our results, we re-estimated the model without including any control variables. While some coefficient values changed, the significance levels of all hypothesized relationships remained consistent, with only one exception: the relationship between *social interaction* and *relationship adjustment*, for which the significance level decreased

Table 1 Correlation table

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age (years)	38.99	9.21	—										
2. Gender (female=0)	0.50	0.50	0.073	—									
3. Marital status (single=0)	0.66	0.47	0.334**	0.086	—								
4. Job position (supervisor=0)	0.77	0.42	-0.172**	-0.037	-0.073	—							
5. Years in the UAE (years)	4.13	2.88	0.050	-0.048	0.042	-0.075	—						
6. Cultural discrimination	2.54	0.91	-0.128**	-0.069	-0.052	0.136**	-0.037	(.87)					
7. Underemployment	3.25	0.79	-0.277**	0.068	-1.28**	0.017	-0.038	0.190**	(.74)				
8. Job clarity	4.18	0.69	0.015	0.053	-0.079	0.007	0.061	-0.377**	0.016	(.89)			
9. Social interaction	3.49	0.90	-0.069	0.033	0.010	0.016	-0.015	-0.164**	0.073	0.245**	(.84)		
10. WRT adjustment	3.94	0.83	0.131**	0.059	0.030	-0.015	0.113*	-0.363**	-0.106*	0.535**	0.166**	(.87)	
11. WRR adjustment	3.91	0.79	0.082	0.011	-0.004	-0.018	0.062	-0.499**	-0.013	0.523**	0.290**	0.678**	(.88)

from $p < .001$ to $p < .01$. Overall, this robustness test supports the stability of our results.

Regarding the direct relationships, both components of Hypothesis 1, which stated that workplace cultural discrimination is negatively related to the level of expatriates' (a) WRT and (b) WRR adjustment were supported ($b = -.136, p = .012$ and $b = -.350, p < .001$, respectively). Thus, both Hypothesis 1a and 1b were supported. Then, only the (a) component of Hypothesis 2, stating that expatriates' perceived underemployment is negatively related to their (a) WRT and (b) WRR adjustments, was supported ($b = -.129, p = .012$ and $b = .022, ns$, respectively). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was supported and Hypothesis 2b was not supported.

To test for mediation, we followed Zhao et al. (2010)'s recommendation to use bootstrapping to determine whether an indirect effect is significant as the way to establish mediation. Concretely, we used a user-defined script in AMOS version 29 to run a bootstrap analysis with a 95% confidence interval to estimate direct, indirect, and total effects in the focal relationships. We applied the classification of mediation effects offered by Zhao et al. (2010) to classify the identified mediation effects.

We found expatriates' job clarity to be positively and significantly related to their WRT and WRR adjustment ($b = .529, p < .001$ and $b = .390, p < .001$, respectively). Social interaction was positively and significantly related only to expatriates' WRR and not WRT adjustment (task: $b = .071, ns$ and relationship: $b = .167, p < .001$). The relationship between expatriates' cultural discrimination and WRT adjustment was mediated by job clarity (indirect effect: $b = -.222, p = .005$; total effect: $b = -.328, p = .004$), thus providing support for Hypothesis 3a. In this case, we found a complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). Moreover, the relationship between expatriates' cultural discrimination and their WRR adjustment was positively mediated by social interaction with colleagues, indicating another complementary mediation and supporting Hypothesis 3b (indirect effect: $b = -.053, p = .006$; total effect: $b = -.344, p = .003$).

The relationship between expatriates' underemployment and WRT adjustment was non-significantly mediated by job clarity (indirect effect: $b = .191, ns$; total effect: $b = -.002, ns$), thus indicating that the direct negative effect of underemployment on WRT adjustment ($b = -.129, p = .012$) is cancelled out by the positive influence of job clarity on WRT adjustment ($b = .529, p < .001$). In this way, there was no support for Hypothesis 4a as we found direct-only non-mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). Finally, Hypothesis 4b was supported as the relationship between expatriates' underemployment and WRR adjustment was significantly mediated by social interaction with colleagues (indirect effect: $b = .064, p < .043$; total effect: $b = .099, ns$) with non-significant total effect, suggesting an indirect-only mediation (Zhao et al., 2010).

As for the moderation hypotheses, only one moderation effect was significant—gender moderated the relationship between discrimination and the quality of social relations ($b = .195, p < .05$). This means that the negative effect of discrimination on social interaction is weaker among female than male SIEs. Other moderation effects were non-significant. Therefore, Hypotheses 5b was supported and Hypotheses 5a, 6a and 6b were rejected. We will discuss these results in the discussion section in more detail.

Table 2 Constructs validity and reliability

	CR	AVE	CA
Cultural discrimination	0.821	0.535	0.87
Underemployment	0.748	0.500	0.74
Job clarity	0.883	0.653	0.89
Social interaction	0.838	0.567	0.84
Task role adjustment	0.883	0.716	0.87
Relationship role adjustment	0.886	0.723	0.88

CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted; CA, Cronbach's alpha

Table 3 Confirmatory analyses and common method variance examination

	Chi-square	Df	CFI	RMSEA
One-factor model	2567.34	229	0.50	0.16
Five-factor model	746.77	218	0.89	0.08
Six-factor model	489.90	213	0.95	0.06
ULMC model	491.95	212	0.94	0.06

One-factor model: all items on one single factor; Five-factor model: the two dimensions of work adjustment together; Six-factor model: each item loading on its theoretical construct (chosen model); ULMC model: each item loading on its theoretical construct and a latent method construct

5 Discussion

The objective of our study was to delve into the effects of two relatively common structural barriers often encountered by expatriates and especially SIEs during relocation—cultural discrimination and underemployment—topics that have either remained minimally explored or have yielded inconclusive results in past inquiries. Our study was motivated by various calls for further research on these phenomena in existing literature (see Bader et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2021). We extended the scope by building on role theory to theorize and investigate the impacts of these phenomena on two distinct dimensions of role adjustment—WRT and WRR. The findings from our analysis are compelling. Cultural discrimination negatively influences both the task and social aspects of SIEs' role adjustment; underemployment, however, only impacts the task aspect, leaving the social aspect of role adjustment unaffected. These results are largely congruent with earlier studies in non-expatriation contexts (e.g. Deng et al., 2018) but offer initial insights specifically into the expatriation realm. The analysis accentuates an intriguing distinction in the effects of cultural discrimination and underemployment: discrimination seems to impede both aspects of SIEs' role adjustment, signifying that discriminatory experiences in daily work-related practices also spill into the social environment of their workplace, eventually adversely affecting collegiality and teamwork among SIEs and their colleagues. Conversely, the negative consequences of underemployment remain confined to the task-related domain, with no adversarial implications for the social sphere. Figure 2 below depicts our empirical results.

To explain how discrimination and underemployment exert their negative impacts, we postulated and examined the mediating effects of two mechanisms—social interaction with colleagues and job clarity. Ours is one of the first studies to propose potential mechanisms through which these phenomena operate on SIEs and expatriates, more generally. As anticipated, our analysis revealed that cultural discrimination

Table 4 SEM estimates

	Est	<i>p</i> value	95% CI	R sq
Job clarity				.211
<i>Direct effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Job clarity	-.539	<.001		
Underemployment → Job clarity	.240	.032		
Gender → Job clarity	.020	.661		
The quality of social interaction				.084
<i>Direct effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Social interaction	-.383	<.001		
Underemployment → Social interaction	.239	.047		
Gender → Social interaction	.015	.758		
Work role task adjustment				.402
<i>Direct effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Task adjustment	-.136	.012		
Underemployment → Task adjustment	-.129	.012		
Job clarity → Task adjustment	.529	<.001		
Social interaction → Task adjustment	.071	.212		
<i>Mediation effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Job clarity → Task adjustment	-.222	.005	[-.540; -.130]	
Underemployment → Job clarity → Task adjustment	.191	.155	[-.084; .817]	
<i>Total effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Task adjustment	-.328	.004	[-.609; -.203]	
Underemployment → Task adjustment	.254	.089	[-.059; .769]	
Work role relationship adjustment				.464
<i>Direct effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Relationship adjustment	-.350	<.001		
Underemployment → Relationship adjustment	.022	.641		
Job clarity → Relationship adjustment	.390	<.001		
Social interaction → Relationship adjustment	.167	<.001		
<i>Mediation effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Social interaction → Relationship adjustment	-.053	.006	[-.171; -.017]	
Underemployment → Social interaction → Relationship adjustment	.064	.043	[.001; .100]	
<i>Total effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination → Relationship adjustment	-.344	.003	[-.481; -.227]	
Underemployment → Relationship adjustment	.099	.445	[-.130; .481]	
<i>Moderation effects</i>				
Cultural discrimination x Gender → Job clarity	.112	.146		
Underemployment x Gender → Job clarity	-.106	.283		
Cultural discrimination x Gender → Social interaction	.195	.019		
Underemployment x Gender → Social interaction	-.118	.269		

undermines SIEs' WRT by diminishing job clarity and impedes WRR adjustment by downgrading the quality of social interactions with local colleagues. These insights offer a more nuanced understanding of how cultural discrimination affects SIEs at the workplace. They also supplement previous studies that explored the adverse effects

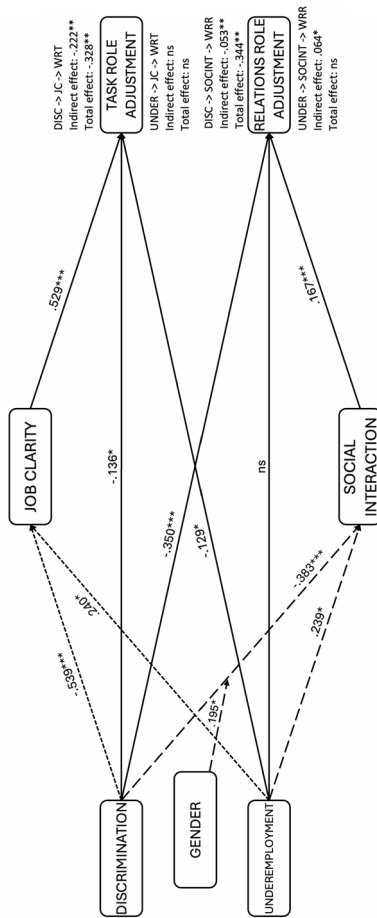


Fig. 2 Empirical model

of discrimination on expatriates but either did not examine the mechanisms through which these effects are manifested (see Bader et al., 2018) or concentrated on the discriminatory tendencies among host country nationals who ethnocentrically categorize expatriates as outgroup members (Singh et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2006).

Regarding underemployment, while our findings are unexpected in terms of the negative implications, they are also thought-provoking in the sense that there are also positive implications. Namely, our analysis posits that although underemployment negatively influences the WRT adjustment of SIEs, it also results in several positive implications for SIEs and their experiences in the host organization. Being underemployed seems to instill a sense of confidence and clarity in SIEs regarding their job-related tasks and responsibilities, rendering them more effective at socializing with local colleagues. These outcomes contradict our initial predictions but concur with prior findings from migrant research demonstrating that migrants often seek employment in contexts where they are underemployed to maintain their pride and attain social acceptance amidst potential stigmatization by host country nationals (see Wassermann & Hoppe, 2019). It appears that SIEs can adopt a similar approach—perceived underemployment empowers them to project a self-competent image in front of their coworkers by leveraging their surplus skills and knowledge, thereby gaining social acceptance from local colleagues, and enhancing the quality of social interactions with them.

Interestingly, our findings suggest that the direct negative effect of underemployment on SIEs' WRT adjustment is balanced by the positive influence of underemployment on SIEs' job clarity, so that the total effect becomes non-significant. We also found an indirect-only mediation by social interaction of the relationship between SIEs' underemployment and their WRR adjustment. These results further highlight the complex nature of underemployment and its impact on SIEs and employees in general (Deng et al., 2018; Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). This also suggests that the boundary conditions, influence mechanisms, and implications of underemployment warrant more extensive and thorough examination in future research.

We would also like to emphasize our findings regarding the role and effects of job clarity. The significance of job clarity as a crucial job characteristic that elucidates several expatriation outcomes has been accentuated in previous studies (Selmer & Lauring, 2011; Stoermer et al., 2022). However, its role in mediating possible negative experiences of expatriates at the workplace has remained unexplored. Our study delineates that this role varies in the cases of cultural discrimination and underemployment. In the former case, the mediation is negative, indicating that cultural discrimination impairs SIEs' job clarity, consequently reducing SIEs' WRT adjustment. In the latter case, however, although the mediation is indirect-only, but underemployment appears to increase SIEs' job clarity and quality of social interaction.

In terms of role theory, our findings indicate that workplace cultural discrimination creates role confusion among SIEs as they experience incompatible demands placed on them by their expatriate position and host country nationals in the workplace (the demands to fulfil the role of an expatriate, on the one hand, and of a culturally discriminated employee of lower status, on the other hand). In contrast, perceived underemployment does not seem to add to SIEs' role confusion. Whereas underemployment has ultimate negative effect on SIEs' WRT adjustment, it nonetheless

also strengthens the SIEs' ability to fulfil their role of supportive and knowledgeable colleagues who can help host country nationals. In other terms, while cultural discrimination increases SIEs' role strain as they are pressured to accept the role of discriminated and lower status employees, perceived underemployment—in some ways at least—reduces such strain as it enables SIEs to fulfill their expatriate work-related and social roles more effectively.

More generally, our model explained a significant variance in our dependent variables (40% in WRT and 46% in WRR adjustment). This suggests that our model included powerful antecedents that indeed predict SIEs' role adjustment along its two dimensions to a significant extent. It also alludes to the necessity of addressing both discrimination and underemployment, as well as the mediating mechanisms in our model, as pivotal variables if SIEs' role adjustment is of interest.

Another notable outcome of our analysis is the non-significance of control variables, indicating that the focal effects examined in our study are generic and do not depend on the age, job position, time in the host country, cultural origin, or marital status of the SIE. What is even more significant from the perspective of our study is that gender did not affect significantly SIEs' job clarity or the quality of social interaction in our model. Interestingly, however, gender moderated the relationship between discrimination and the quality of social interaction, suggesting that cultural discrimination has a more negative impact on the quality of social interactions among male SIEs than female SIEs. This finding offers partial support for our theorizing grounded in role theory and prior expatriation research. Female SIEs may possess psychological resources, such as higher emotional intelligence and stronger emotion-focused coping strategies, that help them sustain social engagement even when facing discrimination (Koveshnikov et al., 2014). There were no other significant moderation effects, indicating that the effects of cultural discrimination and underemployment on SIEs' job clarity, as well as the effect of underemployment of SIEs' social interaction, do not vary between female and male SIEs.

Importantly, the absence of significant moderation in these areas should not be overlooked. Rather, it highlights the complexity of gender dynamics in expatriation and, consequently, the need for further empirical exploration. Our non-significant findings may reflect context-specific factors or unobserved variables that influence how gender might shape role adjustment. They point to the need for more nuanced, intersectional approaches in future research. Given that prior research (Campbell & Hahl, 2022) has provided evidence on how underemployment operates differently between male and female domestic employees, our findings illustrate a necessity to extend this line of inquiry among SIEs and expatriates more generally to better explain disparities between local hires and expatriates.

However, we also acknowledge several prior studies that have found no gender differences in the context of expatriation. Concerning discrimination, Bader et al., (2018: 41) noted that prior research has yielded conflicting, both supportive and unsupportive, results regarding female expatriates' discrimination. Moreover, some studies even found certain advantages associated with being a female expatriate (e.g. Varma et al., 2006). Our results imply that—except for the effect on social interaction—both male and female SIEs experience cultural workplace discrimination similarly. Furthermore, even though several previous studies have found no gender effect

also in relation to underemployment (e.g. Johnson & Johnson, 2000), ours is one of the first studies to demonstrate that there is no gender effect not only in the levels of perceived cultural discrimination and underemployment but also in the effects of the two on SIEs' job clarity.

With these results, our findings contribute to the growing literature discussing the challenges of SIEs and expatriates, more generally, related to discrimination (Bader et al., 2018; Syed et al., 2014) and underemployment (Kawai & Mohr, 2020; Lee, 2005) by providing a more nuanced understanding of how these factors influence SIEs' role adjustment in the workplace. By differentiating between the task-related and social aspects of role adjustment and investigating two mediating mechanisms through which perceived underemployment and cultural discrimination influence SIEs' role adjustment, our analysis sheds additional light on the complex nature of SIEs' negative experiences and their implications, which thus far have remained relatively underexplored in extant literature. Moreover, we unveil an intriguing aspect of underemployment among SIEs, potentially elucidating why underemployment is common and perhaps even desirable for some SIEs and globally mobile employees. Our findings suggest that underemployment facilitates socialization with work colleagues and clarity about job tasks and responsibilities for SIEs. Although this might not alleviate the psychological discomfort associated with perceived underemployment, it does enhance SIEs' overall comfort in the work setting. In this way, our analysis points toward the need to continue examining the complex and multifaceted nature of underemployment among SIEs and expatriates, more generally, in future research.

5.1 Practical Implications

In terms of practical implications, our study draws attention to the notion that cultural discrimination and underemployment are substantial concerns for expatriates, warranting organizational intervention, albeit of different kinds. Concerning discrimination, organizations should closely monitor the treatment of expatriates in the workplace to identify any discriminatory practices enacted by peers or top managers towards expatriates. There is a necessity to invest in psychological training and support for expatriates who might perceive or encounter discrimination. Moreover, organizations should continuously gauge and monitor expatriates' perceptions of discrimination to ensure early provision of support and consultation, preventing the escalation of the adverse effects of perceived discrimination. To address the mediating mechanisms of discrimination, organizations should evaluate the degree of job clarity expatriates perceive concerning their job-related tasks and responsibilities and promote social interactions between expatriates and host country colleagues through team-building exercises and other socialization events.

Regarding underemployment, it is advisable for organizations to accommodate a certain degree of underemployment among expatriates initially to foster self-confidence and surplus skills necessary for building professional relations with peers. However, this approach is recommended only during the early stages of the expatriates' tenure. Over time, their competence levels should be reassessed, and job responsibilities adjusted to mitigate any negative psychological effects stemming

from prolonged perceived underemployment. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that underemployed expatriates require organizational support to aid their task adjustment, thus highlighting the importance of investing in mentoring programs concerning their job-related tasks.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our study has several limitations that also open possible avenues for further research. First, our data is single-sourced and self-reported. To evaluate the risk of common method variance bias, we conducted various tests, all of which indicated that the risk is not substantial. Second, our data is derived solely from one country. Although the UAE provides an ideal backdrop for studying SIEs' experiences of cultural discrimination and underemployment due to its large-scale (with up to 90% of the population being of foreign origin) and diverse expatriate population across job positions, industries, and expatriation conditions, it is advisable for future research to replicate our study in other contexts featuring different types and extents of discrimination and underemployment.

Third, we explored only two possible mechanisms through which cultural discrimination and underemployment operate. Future research should delve into other potential mechanisms and outcomes. For instance, other job-related factors such as job insecurity (Ali et al., 2020), supervisor support (Van der Laken et al., 2019), or employer's expectations (some SIEs might be recruited specifically to coach and transfer knowledge to local employees) could be investigated, and outcomes like cultural adjustment or host country withdrawal intention could be examined.

Fourth, future research should probe how various organizational and/or personal factors may moderate the effects of cultural discrimination and underemployment on SIE outcomes. These could encompass HRM practices (e.g. appraisal, remuneration, training), leadership approaches, or individual personality traits and cultural orientations (e.g. power distance orientation). Finally, while our findings yielded no differences between genders in terms of discrimination and underemployment and mostly non-significant moderation gender effects, we believe much is still left to be explored in this regard. Considering the overall inequality of genders in workplaces, it is reasonable to suspect some differences in terms of how SIEs and other types of expatriates of different genders experience cultural discrimination and underemployment. As prior work has shown, the effects of gender can differ significantly depending on expatriates' cultural background and how they are categorized by host country nationals (Bader et al., 2018; Varma et al., 2006). As such, given that gender alone does not necessarily fully account for the complexities of SIEs' experiences, we encourage future studies to consider, for instance, how intersectionality (e.g., gender, ethnicity, position in the organization) could advance our understanding of the influence of discrimination and underemployment on SIEs.

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Data availability The dataset analysed during the current study is not publicly available due to privacy concerns.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no competing financial or non-financial interests.

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