



Re-conceptualizing the career development of self initiated expatriates: rivers not ladders

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore contemporary metaphors used in career literature pertaining to career development in an international context.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative interviews with thirty-seven skilled self-initiated expatriates in one geographical location were conducted and used for data analysis.

Findings – The metaphor of a “river” more aptly captures the career development directions and influences experienced by skilled self-initiated expatriates.

Originality/value – The paper provides an analysis of career development influences which impact on the career direction of self-initiated expatriates. It provides useful information and recommendations for career (international career) academics and practitioners with regards to career development influences to be considered with regards to skilled self-initiated expatriates.

Keywords Careers, International, Human resource management, Career development, France, Narratives

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Within career literature, different metaphors provide a more nuanced view of how career can be perceived and interpreted in and from different contexts. Career metaphors (Baruch 2004; Inkson, 2004, 2006, 2007) acknowledge the complexity inherent in career studies and research, in that different lenses can be used through which career scholars can explore careers. This paper considers the contemporary metaphors used in career literature pertaining to career development in an international context in particular. It reviews those metaphors in the context of an empirical study conducted by the author with a sample of skilled self-initiated expatriates (SEs) (Suutari and Brewster, 2000). This paper argues that a new metaphor is required to encompass the overlapping elements influencing career opportunities and choices; elements concerning the individual him/her-self (competencies, qualifications, ambition), his/her relationships and roles prioritization at different points of time, work opportunities and the economic employment situation in a particular country. The metaphor of career “rivers” to describe the career development of the sample in the study is put forth as a more succinct description of their experiences.

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, to provide an overview of commonly used career metaphors used in the context of international career development. The second aim is to propose a new metaphor, which the author feels better represents the actual careers of SEs. The final aim of the paper is to consider the implications of the new metaphor on future career research and practice through the presentation of a framework of career influences/influencers, underlining the need for more holistic career research and theory development.



In the first section of this paper, career metaphors are introduced, with a brief overview of those considered to be the primary metaphors (Inkson, 2004, 2007). Next, the career metaphors used in career development in an international context are reviewed, including career as a “path” (e.g. Cappellen and Janssens, 2005), the “boundaryless” career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), the “protean” career (Hall, 1996) and career “capital” (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1996). Then, the research approach adopted for the study is presented, along with the findings of relevance to this paper. Finally, the paper makes suggestions for further research through a proposed framework of career influences/influencers, and presents the implications of the study for career theory development and practice.

Career metaphors

Inkson (2004, 2007) considers nine primary career metaphors in his conceptual analysis of many of the career metaphors in existence. Each of those nine is outlined briefly in this section. The first of these is the “legacy metaphor” or “career as inheritance,” which Inkson (2004, 2007) describes as careers influenced by “habitus” or the “fields” within which one has developed and socialized (Bourdieu, 1983). The common “habitus” and “fields” that individuals may share tend to self-perpetuate, thereby helping to socialize individuals into specific structures.

The second career metaphor Inkson calls the “craft” metaphor or “career as construction” (Inkson, 2004), but later (Inkson, 2007) re-names as “actions,” where individual agency in career construction and development is the focus. The “protean career” (Hall, 1996) is included under this primary metaphor. The protean career is a career, which the individual manages and is control of (not the organization). Third is the “season” metaphor or “career as cycle,” which relates career to life cycle and changing priorities over the course of one’s life. Next (fourth) is the “matching” metaphor or “career as fit,” which is aligned with Parson’s (1909) and Holland’s (1992) work-worker fit aspects of careers as occupations. The fifth metaphor is the “path” metaphor, or the “career as journey,” which is the most common career metaphor (Inkson, 2004, p. 103). Schein’s (1990) career anchors (occupational self-concept) and Arthur and Rousseau’s (1996) boundaryless career concepts fit under this metaphor umbrella, which focusses on the movement within a career, organizationally and geographically.

The sixth metaphor Inkson classifies as the “network” metaphor, with careers perceived as encounters and relationships (social and political). Seventh is the “theater” metaphor, where careers “can be construed as performances, and career self-management as a performing art” (Inkson, 2004, p. 111). “Economic” is the eighth metaphor, with career viewed as a “resource” to fulfill organizational goals as in the resource-based view of the firm. Finally, the ninth metaphor is “narrative” or “career as story,” where the individual’s telling of his/her career story/ies is borne in mind and its subjectivity recognized. The research undertaken and shared in this paper involved a detailed analysis of a collection of career narratives from SEs. Therefore the narrative metaphor is of underlying relevance in this paper, underlining the individuality and subjectivity of the respondents in their career development narratives.

Inkson (2004, p. 100) suggests that “Other metaphors may further help us to understand both generic and individual careers.” It is this contribution to facilitating understanding of careers that prompted the author of this paper to consider the career metaphors most commonly associated with international careers, particularly with the international career development of SEs. Given the breadth of primary metaphors and

their sub-components as categorized by Inkson (2004, 2007) and outlined briefly above, space restrictions do not permit a detailed analysis of each in conjunction with the empirical research sample in this paper. However, Inkson (2007) himself files international careers under the career “journey” or “path” metaphor. Other metaphors such as “protean” (under the “actions” primary career metaphor) and “capital” (under the “resource” primary career metaphor) are also included in the further analysis due to contemporary publications on these in relation to international careers.

International careers and career development metaphors

International human resource management literature has traditionally focussed on the organization-assigned expatriate (e.g. Bonache *et al.*, 2010), possibly due to the organization’s position in controlling or co-controlling the expatriate’s international move and therefore the organization’s/managerialist interest in this dimension. The organization-assigned expatriate moves for a temporary duration, with the support of his/her employing organization, to a host country. This move is mooted as an international career “path” (Cappellen and Janssens, 2005; Dickmann and Harris, 2005), where the path may lead in different directions both within the parent organization and externally.

Within the career “journey” or “path” metaphor, the boundaryless career metaphor (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) reflects the changing relationship between individuals and their employers. The premise behind the boundaryless career is that individuals are now more open to moving across organization departments, geographies and to external organizations. The boundaryless career has been a particularly useful concept with regards to international assignees, where assignees may choose to move inter-organizationally after an international assignment (e.g. Stahl *et al.*, 2002).

Recent papers have called for a more inclusive study of career development to include micro-, meso- and macro-perspectives in order to better explain the career development challenges faced by non-nationals internationally (Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss and Ozbilgin, 2010; Cappellen and Janssens, 2005). This paper addresses the context within which individual career development options emerge, thereby including meso- and macro-factors.

In the last decade, an increasing volume of research has been conducted on non-traditional expatriates. This has been in response to calls for pluralism in international human resource management and in the international career discipline to include international assignee types other than the traditional organizationally assigned expatriate (Scullion and Paauwe, 2004; Brewster and Suutari, 2005; de Cieri *et al.*, 2007). This paper, in common with recent research and publications (e.g. Al Ariss, 2010; Cerdin and Le Pargneux, 2010; Richardson, 2009), posits the importance of research on SEs. They are a burgeoning category of international assignees, about whom a paucity of information exists, perhaps due to the very different contexts (national, political) from which they come and move to, thereby rendering their scrutiny complex andemic (Richardson, 2010, p. 146).

The “protean” career metaphor (“actions” as the primary metaphor category under which Inkson, 2007 files the “protean” metaphor) has been discussed with regards to SEs (also termed self-initiated (international) assignees (SAs)) (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Crowley-Henry and Weir, 2007). The need for SEs to “morph” into different career paths due to macro-, meso- and micro-conditions that they face at different points in time, suggests the individual controls his/her career (micro-context). However, it is stressed that careers do not develop in a vacuum but under the constraints and/or

supports from employers (meso-context) and the formal and informal labor policies and practices of the host country (macro-context).

The career capital metaphor (classified under Inkson's primary "resource" metaphor) developed from DeFillippi and Arthur (1996). They break career capital into three components: knowing why, knowing how and knowing whom. "Knowing why" relates to the individual's values and motivations; "knowing how" to the individual's skills and competences in the job; and "knowing whom" to the contacts an individual has which aid his/her career development. In the international career context, research has shown how an international work experience impacts on an individual's career capital (Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Dickmann and Doherty, 2008; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). "Knowing why" findings show that an international assignment "markedly influenced their [assigned expatriates and self-initiated expatriates] self-awareness on personal values, work interests and capabilities" (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008, p. 989). "Knowing how" is improved as "individuals found new insights and preferences during their international stays" (Dickmann and Doherty, 2008, p. 155). While "knowing whom" was found to be the most important component of career capital to international assignees, with one "key finding [...] that most expatriate interviewees realized that their social capital had suffered as a result of working abroad" (Dickmann and Harris, 2005, p. 404).

This section has introduced the primary career metaphors and discussed those career metaphors most applicable in the context of to international careers (expatriates and SA/SEs). The next section introduces the research approach.

Research approach

The research shared in this paper was conducted in the region of Sophia Antipolis (Science and Technology Park in the south of France), where 37 SEs were interviewed between mid-2002 and mid-2005. Focussing on a particular region in the south of France renders the study a geographical case. A limitation of all case studies (Stake, 1994) is in the ability to generalize the findings to other locations. However, the aim of the research in this instance was to uncover the patterns of influences impacting upon the career development of the sample as interpreted by the SEs themselves in their narratives in the context of existing career development metaphors.

Through their narratives, the respondents were able to consider, reflect upon and attempt to make sense of the career patterns in their lives (Chase, 2005). The macro-, meso- and micro-factors (including the organizational, cultural, social, family), which impact upon the career development of the sample is captured in narrative inquiry.

The interviews were informal and exploratory in nature; however, an interview guide was used to ensure a degree of consistency across all interviews. Themes covered in the interview included eliciting narratives from the interviewees on their perceived career prior to their international move, career influences/influencers, plans; and then moving to how their careers unfolded in the host country, a reconstruction of their careers as SEs. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, were tape recorded and transcribed in full. On analysis of the interviews, patterns emerged from the material, which de-constructed the career development obstacles and options experienced by the SEs. QSR NVivo was used in coding and analyzing the qualitative interview transcripts, where concepts were coded narrowly and then re-coded more broadly under headings such as structural obstacles, serendipity, career contacts. The movement from specific cases (career narratives) to theory reflects an inductive

approach. It is from a detailed analysis of those transcripts that the career development metaphors discussed previously were reviewed and explored.

The paper concentrates on a sub-category of SEs. Specifically, the sample that was investigated was non-French, western SEs that had moved to the south of France of their own accord and that are committed to remaining in the area indefinitely. A non-probability sampling technique was adopted whereby the author approached SE contacts who then recommended other SEs that also agreed to partake in the study. A total of 17 males and 20 females were interviewed, of 12 nationalities (western European, American, Australian), and aged between 29 and 62. Each of them had active professional (paid work-related) careers, with their roles ranging from senior managers, to IT consultants, to entrepreneurs, to telemarketing operators. They all can be classified as working in “skilled” jobs. Their marital and family status ranged from single to co-habiting or married or divorced/widowed; with and without children (of varying ages). The aim of the study was to uncover general patterns from the sample, the members of which were all foreign residents in the south of France for a potentially permanent duration.

This section has described the sample, sampling and research approach of the undertaking. The next section presents the findings, where the career narratives are reviewed against the existing international career development metaphors.

Findings and implications

The contemporary career development metaphors found in the context of international careers of “career path,” “boundaryless career,” “protean career” and “career capital” are represented in the research. This section provides evidence of the relevance of each metaphor for the SEs. However, the complexity of career options and choices for the SEs is highlighted in the cultural context and labor market situation specific to the country in question, France. The requirement evident from contemporary studies in international careers is for a more holistic, all encompassing framework with which to explore international careers, such as from the structure/agency perspective (Richardson and Mallon, 2005) and from a micro-, meso- and macro-perspective (Al Ariss and Ozbilgin, 2010). This author argues that the metaphor of a river better describes the career development process the SEs in the sample experience, with high or low starts, different tributaries (opportunities and challenges) flowing in and out of the career river at different stages; some rivers growing large, while others fading away and perhaps then following and growing again along a different path. A river includes history (of origin, of flow, of experience) and context (location, opportunity) in its path/journey, which this author feels better represents the need in career research to include more elements in career research (rather than focus on one or two aspects) in order to provide a more holistic overview of career in action.

The career journey metaphor is evident in the SE’s career narratives. Shaun (39, British, married, two children: 2.5 years, eight months) comments that:

[...] only last week I was on an assessment centre for 3 days [...] and that’s part of [a] career development programme for me personally, but I’m one of the exceptions. I know not everyone’s being treated like this.

Shaun experiences a traditional, organizational career trajectory, moving vertically up the hierarchy. He acknowledges he is “one of the exceptions,” however. For other SEs, the boundaryless career is more evident, with inter-organizational opportunities

(meso-context) arising thanks to their international acumen (micro-context). Donal (36, Irish, married, two step-children) reflects that:

Certainly in the [...] roles I've ended up [...] working with or for [...] multi-cultural people and doing different things. [...] I [...] keep dealing with [...] people that are all spread over Europe – whether they're customers, colleagues, or whatever. [...] That's probably one of the reasons I ended up doing what I'm doing now, because of my experience. Because I had worked with European wide teams and that was what I was taken on to do here.

Evidence of the boundaryless career concept as a career journey the SEs encounter is present in the career narratives of the SEs in this study. However, it is also apparent in their narratives that macro-conditions have impacted on the boundarylessness opportunities. Hilda (41, German, married, seven-year-old daughter) notes that “nowadays it's not so easy to find a job.”

The boundaryless and organizational career development options are therefore relevant for SEs but within a wider context as shown above. The river metaphor which conjures up images of water flowing not only of its own accord, but having to deal with challenges of terrain, external challenges (such as dams being built or rivers redirected) reflects the more holistic nature of career. The river metaphor would appear particularly relevant in the international context where many factors seem beyond the control of the individual, such as employment policies (macro-context), as experienced by Hilda (41, German, married, seven-year-old daughter):

I studied German to become a German teacher in France because I liked that. And then I realised that it was not possible as a foreigner to participate to the [...] French official exams and once you have passed them then you become a teacher at the school or at the university [...] And as a German at that time I couldn't.

Other research has also noted the career barriers that SEs face in the macro-context (Al Ariss, 2010; Richardson, 2009). Due to the macro-legalities in France at the time, Hilda had to re-assess her career (knowing why) development, and through contacts (knowing whom), she morphed (in protean terms) her training into IT in order to proactively target a new multinational organization she had heard was opening up in the area at the time, that was looking for international staff in the IT area (knowing how). In keeping with the “protean career” concept, she managed her own career development at that stage so as to better position herself for job opportunities in the new multinational organization.

Other respondents noted the prevailing protean or self-managing aspect to career development within an organizational career (micro-context). Steve (34, British, married) finds that:

[...] you look after yourself here. It's a bit chaotic to be quite honest with you. You have to look after yourself.

Those respondents with partners and/or children were further influenced by their significant others in weighing up potential career progression and continued residency in the area. Billy (52, Welsh, divorced, three children aged 19, 14 and 11) consciously chose to prioritize his family over an ambitious external career development option:

I think you have to take a choice at some time in your career: either you want to stay around your family or you decide to, you want to make a career. My choice was to stay around my family, to avoid travelling if I could. So that limited my career path.

Individual ambitions therefore need to be considered in light of a more holistic (Wolfe and Kolb, 1980) picture of career development, which includes micro-, meso- macro-, relational and structural influences. It is the collage of influencing elements (family, ambition, organizational support, labor policies, etc.) that determine the way the individual's career could go.

Time was also found to be very relevant in the study. The use of past experiences in building up potential future career scenarios dependent on the structural conditions in which an individual finds him/her-self is consciously considered by the respondents. For instance, Rick (43, British, engaged) notes how his career has morphed from technical to business, and how his past experiences would serve him well should he be forced to change career due to potential lay-offs in his current organization:

One of the things I've been priding myself on is being able to pick up a new topic: [...] so you've got two or three aspects to your job. [...] And so if I'm laid off, or if I was forced to move for one reason or the other, I would be looking at trying to expand that [other] role out.

The combination of past experiences in developing future career pathways is a central element of the protean career concept. The ability to transform over time depending on the life focus is apparent in the narratives. The protean career also focusses on the subjective career dimension rather than on the objective one. Learning new tasks, combining work and personal life, thereby taking a holistic approach to careers is underlined. Individuals using their past experience in re-inventing their careers or in progressing more in their careers, correspond with the concept of the protean career whereby individuals morph their career focus over time, depending on opportunity and circumstance, in order to survive. The morphing of careers within the protean career concept describes how pieces of one's life's jigsaw of experiences and make-up contribute to the direction most attractive to the individual at particular points in time and under context specific circumstances.

This paper has focussed on the findings relating to international career development metaphors as experienced by the sample in question. There are many opportunities and challenges faced by the SEs in their career development, some of which they have no control over. The process or evolving nature of an international career, which is influenced by chance, by the individual (agency), by structural facilitators or limiters, and by the temporal conditions, is underlined. The notion of taking a simple uni-dimensional approach toward examining international career development is not practical. A more comprehensive examination of career development, as represented more aptly, the author here feels, by a river metaphor is warranted.

There is a dearth of empirical research on careers which attempt to encompass a more comprehensive examination of factors influencing career development (Gunz *et al.*, 2008, p. 307). Patton and McMahon (2006) have attempted to address the gap between theory and practice in developing a systems theory framework of career development, which encompasses individual, contextual, social and environmental elements with the acknowledgment that these elements change over time and are subject to chance, etc. This study shows the constant negotiation between macro-conditions (such as employment opportunity), family conditions (the preferences of family members) and individual ambitions, which vary over time. The metaphor of a river would better encompass the meandering, evolving, protean nature of the careers represented in the study in reality.

Table I is built up inductively from the research conducted. It presents a framework for more holistic career development studies, breaking down somewhat the different career influences/influencers.

Table I presents an overview of the career influencers that emerged from the study. It unpicks different concerns that individuals have when contemplating their career future. Different aspects impacting on career choice and development were coded during analysis of the interviewee transcripts. These were then re-coded into broader themes/influencers, which are presented on the left side of Table I (primary career influencers), with examples of the different aspects under those themes on the right-hand side of Table I (dependent on).

The study found that individual and relational aspects impact on career decisions (micro-context). Equally, the meso-context needs to be considered: concerning the organization(s) where the individuals are employed and the work/technical job aspects,

Primary career influencers ^b	Dependent on (examples, not exclusive)
Individual	Personality (habitus, openness to working in another country/culture, tolerance, dedication, perseverance, technologies of the self ...)
“I am fulfilled”	
Micro-context	Motivations, vision, goals (ambition, work/life priorities, preference theory)
Family Situation	Spouse/partner (dual career, trailing spouse, single income ...)
“work/life balance”	Children (ages, schooling)
Relational context	Extended family dependents
	Responsibilities and role priorities
Organization	Structure (flat or hierarchical, domestic, multinational)
“where, with whom I work”	Intra organization mobility (open systems, blocked by management)
	Power (line manager, HR ...)
Meso-context	Politics (gender, ageism, networks, social capital)
	Organization culture (informal, individualistic, collective, team work, open door)
	Traditional career, boundaryless career, self employed, portfolio career
Job	Technical ability (suitability to the job/aptitude)
“I love my job”	Protean career concept (adaptability, self reliance, identity; psychological success)
Technical context	Work preferences (individual or in group)
	Enthusiasm/interest (Hobby Job)
	Learning (ongoing challenge, change)
	Travel (desire to travel with job)
	Own boss/autonomy
Society	Social groupings (membership of professional associations, informal social societies)
“what others think”	
Social identity context	Perception of individual among peers, among social group
	Perception of individual among wider community
Country	Legal (employment law)
“context”	Language
Macro-context	Social welfare (unemployment benefit, childcare support ...)
	Economic situation (labor market)
	Global influences

Notes: ^aAn earlier version of this model featured in Crowley-Henry and Weir (2009). ^bThe prioritization of the career influences/rs changes and evolves over time due to age/life stage, significant life occurrence, circumstance, and temporal and structural context

Table I.
Framework of career influencers^a

which the individual encounters in that workplace. Additionally, societal pressures and cultural norms may insert barriers or challenges in career progression (such as the expectation for females to support their partners' careers). Also in the macro-context, legislation and policies existing in the particular country where the international assignee is based, impact on career choice and opportunity. An example of this would be the requirement of working visas or residency permits. All of these factors, in their many varying forms as shown by the examples presented in Table I, affect the individual's career development.

Importantly, these factors are not static, with different factors being prioritized at different life points, for different people. For instance, one respondent (Susan, 39, British, single), after the death of her father, reprioritized her career outlook from that which had previously favored individual progression and advancement to prioritizing her work-life balance:

I'm not particularly interested in [...] rising up a ladder in a corporation [...] I have a very different attitude now because my father died when I was 25 [...] And so now I tend to really live my life where [...] money isn't [...] the be all and end all.

The diversity of influencers, varying in priority over time, adds further weight to the conceptualization of careers as rivers, with the potential of moving into different streams, growing, or subsiding at varying points in an individual's career. This framework is useful as a guide for further developing career research and theory, particularly in an international context. The different influencers could be investigated quantitatively with a large sample in order to ascertain if there are common trends with regards to individual characteristics (age, gender, relationship status, family status, etc.) and prioritization of career influencers. A longitudinal qualitative study would also shed light on exploring motivations for career influence prioritization change over time.

The framework is also of benefit to HRM professionals in the career development practice. It persuades practitioners to re-consider career development processes in their organizations so that other influencers besides job, organization and the individual's ability and skills are taken into account. It highlights that at different periods during an individual's life, different priorities come to the forefront, which may require different career development options, such as the ability to take career breaks, reducing working hours or to increase responsibility, depending on the individual's personal circumstances and opportunities in the organization. The framework presented in Table I serves as a check-list which HRD practitioners can use when assessing the development support an organization provides to its employees, depending on the relative prioritization of the factors at each career development meeting, recognizing that these prioritizations will change depending on individual circumstances.

The implication of this study for practice is to highlight the requirement to re-develop HRD and career development within organizations, particularly for non-national employees that face even more influencers (as depicted in Table I). It suggests that more innovative approaches to HRD and career development are required within organizations; approaches that accept the different influencers impacting on an individual's career choices from a structure (meso, macro) and agent (micro/individual) standpoint over time.

Conclusions: limitations and further research opportunities

This paper was limited in its analysis of specific metaphors relating to the career development of international assignees. Further research could be conducted of a

broader scale in order to more comprehensively encompass each of Inkson's (2004, 2007) nine primary career metaphors and their sub-components in an analysis of international career development. In that respect, the analysis shared in this paper could be seen as a preliminary discussion on career metaphors most pertinent for SEs and other categories of international assignees.

The research collected, coded thematically and inductively from the interview transcripts, and analyzed the career narratives collected from the respondents during in-depth interviews. While the use of the QSR NVivo software package for coding and analysis facilitated the coding and recoding of themes into trees and nodes, other researchers may have coded differently, which is always a consideration in qualitative research undertakings.

This paper suggests a more nuanced metaphor (river) to describe the SEs career development. The research was conducted in a specific geographical case study location where an ethnographical approach was adopted and narratives were collected. Despite the specificity of the research, the author suggests that the more holistic nature of the study contributes to the development of career theory, which attempts to incorporate multiple aspects which impact upon career development.

Contemporary career theory notes the "need to tailor psychological contractual conditions to the specific needs of the individual" (Larsen and Ellehave, 2000, p. 114). This mirrors Swart and Kinnie (2004) that organizations adopting a uniform, one size fits all approach to career management is not sufficient. This underlines the requirement for different individual career alternatives to be discussed in career management sessions (potentially using elements from Table I for guidance).

While the career metaphors analyzed in this study showed their relevance and existence among the SEs, the description of careers running along a river that meanders, can run dry, go to sea, grow wider, deeper or shallower over its course seems a more nuanced description of the careers this study explored. However, one should not dismiss other metaphors in contributing new ones. Inkson (2004, p. 98): "Every metaphor has its own strengths and weaknesses, its applicability and non-applicability to the specific situation. True understanding comes from considering a range of metaphors." Thus the river metaphor described in this paper should be considered as one of many different perspectives with which to view careers, but which seems to aptly describe the sample considered as well as to enable a more holistic incorporation of career influencers.

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