

Näsholm, Malin

**Article**

## An identity construction perspective on careers of Swedish international itinerants

Management Revue

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Rainer Hampp Verlag

*Suggested Citation:* Näsholm, Malin (2009) : An identity construction perspective on careers of Swedish international itinerants, Management Revue, ISSN 1861-9916, Rainer Hampp Verlag, Mering, Vol. 20, Iss. 1, pp. 53-69,  
[https://doi.org/10.1688/1861-9908\\_mrev\\_2009\\_01\\_Naesholm](https://doi.org/10.1688/1861-9908_mrev_2009_01_Naesholm)

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/79045>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

Malin Näsholm\*

## **An Identity Construction Perspective on Careers of Swedish International Itinerants\*\***

Considering international assignments as part of an individual's career, beyond the traditional expatriate assignment as employed and sent out by a company, this paper focuses on international itinerants. The purpose of this paper is to increase the understanding of individuals with multiple international work experiences, crossing the boundaries of a single employer, their experiences, identifications and identity construction. In the study an identity construction perspective is applied on four in-depth interviews with Swedish international itinerants. Categories of narratives are identified where the itinerants experience ambiguities and paradoxes in their identity construction, what they identify with and implications are discussed.

**Key words:** international assignments, international itinerants,  
identity construction, career, social identity

---

\* Malin Näsholm, Umeå School of Business (USBE), Umeå University, SE – 901 87 Umeå, Sweden. E-mail: Malin.Nasholm@usbe.umu.se.

\*\* Article received: August 29, 2008  
Revised version accepted after double blind review: March 10, 2009.

### **Alternative ways of considering careers**

The traditional ways of careers are changing, and the implications for individuals, for whom work is a source of identity, can for example be to develop multiple commitments and networks to maintain employability (Baruch 2004). The relationship with an employer is no longer by definition expected to last a lifetime and individuals are to a greater extent taking charge of their own career paths. Short term project work and contracting are therefore not uncommon options. Concepts such as protean career (Hall 1996) and boundaryless career (Arthur/ Rousseau 1996) can be used to describe these alternative careers. In an attempt to clarify the related yet distinct concepts, Briscoe and Hall (2006) see the protean career orientation as self-directed and values driven and the boundaryless career in terms of physical and/or psychological mobility. The extent to which the individual is oriented towards these aspects gives combinations of the protean and boundaryless approaches to describe an individual's career profile (Briscoe/Hall 2006). Hall (1996) suggested that "the new career" would be characterized by, and require, continuous learning, adaptability and reflection about one's identity. DeFillippi and Arthur (1996:123-124) defined the boundaryless career as:

"...characterized by a career identity that is independent of the employer (e.g., 'I'm a software engineer'); the accumulation of employment-flexible know-how (e.g., how to work in an innovative, efficient, and/or quality-enhancing way); and the development of networks that are independent of the firm (e.g., occupation or industry based), non-hierarchical (e.g., communities of practice), and worker enacted."

The boundaryless career concept suggests that boundaries between organizations are becoming permeable but as argued by Gunz et al. (2000) there are different, more complex, boundaries becoming salient. Boundaries on the level of the industry such as the timescales, level of maturity and size of organizations and relationship between them, or geographical and professional boundaries may be perceived, influencing individuals' propensity to move, in addition to their skills being industry specific or a lack of understanding of the labor market (Gunz et al. 2000). Individuals may even seek boundaries and the identities that these entail through alternative social groupings and networks (Currie et al. 2006). However, the boundaries between different employers can be seen to have opened up and the national boundaries are easier to cross. There are new conditions that make working abroad a plausible option; for example with the European Union's ideal of free movement of labour, migration has been facilitated. Furthermore, organizations are increasingly working with transnationalization strategies; multi-centred, simultaneously aiming for local adjustment and global integration. The concept transnational can encompass migration, companies and organizations as well as other flows and communities. It implies moving across or a problematizing, blurring or breaking down of boundaries between nations (Hearn 2004). The boundaryless career model has increased our understanding of individuals within this setting, yet there is a need for further study of different types of international managers and their career paths (Banai/Harry 2004).

### **International itinerants – an alternative to the traditional expatriate**

The realization that knowledge creation and transfer from international experiences is strategically important has emphasized the need for developing global competences through international assignments (Thomas et al. 2005). Studies of expatriation have frequently focused on traditional expatriation and ways to handle aspects in the expatriate cycle successfully and have often been prescriptive. Additional research is needed beyond the traditional assignment within a multinational organization. As is often illustrated with the expatriate cycle an international assignment has tended to be considered as a single event starting with selection and ending in repatriation. Less is known about global careers involving multiple international relocations (Suutari/Mäkelä 2007). With increasing hesitations to accept expatriate assignments it has been suggested that companies should identify and draw on those individuals that have proven themselves successful in previous international assignments (Selmer 1999). Forster (2000) saw such internationally mobile professionals as a myth that has been exaggerated and claims that such careers are too challenging and that it would be almost impossible for any individuals to cope with such frequent relocations. Yet, studies have shown that those who have been on international assignments are often willing, and go on to additional assignments (Suutari/Brewster 2003). Out of 300 Finnish expatriates studied, 42% had been on an assignment abroad before, 91% were interested in new foreign assignments and 59% would even be interested in more permanent expatriation (Riusala/Suutari 2000).

One such group, which is largely understudied, can be referred to as international itinerants (Banai/Harry 2004; McKenna/Richardson 2007), expatriating without organizational sponsorship. These individuals undertake a number of international work experiences, working for several different companies. From a company perspective there might be advantages of hiring such an independent internationally mobile professional, such as cost savings and assignment management yet little is known about them and the potential implication (McKenna/Richardson 2007). As the traditional expatriate career in some senses has become less attractive and the global competitive pressures have caused organizations to look for talents regardless of nationality, the role of international itinerants have developed (Banai/Harry 2004). It has been shown that individuals may also be interested in changing employers after repatriating from a traditional company-sponsored expatriate assignment and receive external offers while abroad as well as after their return (Suutari/Brewster 2003). In a sample of over 400 Finnish graduate engineers working abroad, Suutari and Brewster (2000) found that 33% had found their work abroad on their own initiative.

Suutari and Brewster (2000) suggest that findings of research focused on expatriation might not be relevant for self-initiated work experiences as they may have different characteristics, not follow the same assumptions and be a more heterogeneous group. Some of the characteristics that differentiated the self-initiated group from expatriates were that they tended to more commonly work for foreign organizations, that are not as multinational in their approach as the companies the expatriates worked for; they tended to consider themselves as “experts”; and more commonly worked in lower level non-managerial jobs on project or temporary contracts (Suu-

tari/Brewster 2000). This self-initiated group can be compared to what Barley and Kunda (2004) described as independent contractors moving between companies by maintaining their employability through their skills and reputation within their networks. International itinerants have career paths different from expatriates staying with one company throughout their careers or that decide to remain in their host country instead of repatriating as they are self-directed and have left the organizational context (Banai/Harry 2004). Their career paths can be described as a type of global career. However, as I find more relevant, international itinerants can also be discussed in terms of the individuals own orientation to his/her career with a protean career approach, as self-directed, and a boundaryless career orientation, involving physical and psychological mobility. International itinerants careers can be regarded as corresponding to the meanings implied with the concept of boundaryless careers in terms of being independent from the traditional organizational career arrangements; involving moving across boundaries of single employers, subjective interpretations of career advancement and boundaries between work and personal/family life, sustained through external networks and information with external validation (Arthur/Rousseau 1996).

To increase the understanding of international itinerants, this paper will treat the alternative international assignment from an identity construction perspective as a part of the individuals' career. As an international assignment is not only a career transition but a major life change contextualised in a new social setting, it can be an experience that influences identity construction. The purpose of this study is to increase the understanding of individuals with multiple international work experiences, crossing the boundaries of a single employer, their experiences, identification and identity construction. With this purpose the research question of this paper can be stated as: What are the identity construction processes and social identities of international itinerants like, as they not only experience a transition between countries but also between organizations with multiple international work experiences?

### **An identity construction perspective on international assignments**

An identity construction perspective can contribute to our understanding of international work experiences and what impact these experiences have on these individuals. The complexity of identity has been considered from different views and is a multifaceted concept (Kohonen 2005). Identity can be a source of distinctiveness and plurality, yet at the same time provide coherence and belonging. An individual's identity may not be fixed throughout our lifetimes; rather it is continuously constructed and reconstructed in a process of self-reflection as we move through different environments over time (Lindgren/Wählin 2001). Jenkins (2004) claims that understanding the ongoing processes of social identity construction is central to understand identity. This process is more or less continuous, though specifically engaged in situations of transition, surprises, encounters or times of strain.

An international assignment is a critical situation and a career transition where the expatriate has the chance to reflect on who s/he is (Kohonen 2004). Occasions to reflect occur as we are removed from our routine everyday context as Lindgren and Wählin (2001) explain in relation to boundary-crossing individuals and how they construct their identities. Expatriates, therefore, as removed from their normal life, social

groups, culture and work role, is of particular interest to study from an identity perspective. Sanchez et al. (2000) emphasize this by saying that an international assignment even requires that the individual is willing to change his/her identity. Kohonen (2004) showed that an international assignment gave expatriates opportunities for learning, development and self-reflection and that identity construction processes were engaged as the social ties to the home culture and organization were weakened. Kohonen (2005) stressed the need for further research on the implications of an international assignment on identity construction and what impact the transformation of identity has on the future career and competencies of international managers. She further suggests that research could explore the impact of multiple assignments in different locations on expatriates learning and identity construction. The experiences of international itinerants, who not only experience a transition between countries but also between organizations, might be different as they do not have the company support of more traditional expatriates and no home-organization to repatriate to. Considering social identity aspects (Tajfel/Turner 1979) can further develop our knowledge of where these individuals' allegiances lie and what they identify with. Social identities, together with more individual, personal identity aspects can provide a basis for distinction as well as self categorization and an answer to the question "who am I?" (Ashforth/Mael 1989).

### ***Social identity aspects – identifying with others***

Social identity "consists ... of those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel/Turner 1979). To identify with some type of group, or aggregate of people, is a way for an individual to locate or define himself in a social setting and to have a perception of belonging (Ashforth/Mael 1989). To varying degrees, individuals construct their identities by drawing from the organizations and workgroups they belong to (Hogg/Terry 2000). The move from a linear, more traditional view of careers implies a transition in the relationship with the employer and multiple commitments and identifications spanning outside the organization and workgroup for the individual (Baruch 2004). Social identity processes are dynamic and changes in the social context affect the self conception as other comparative groups are brought up and social identity aspects become salient (Hogg/Terry 2000). It has been suggested that the sociocultural skills developed by expatriates may be difficult to transfer to different locations and that expatriates will have to start over for each new assignment (Selmer 2002). For international itinerants frequently relocating to a new country and/or organization there is a reoccurring transition to new social settings that could impact the social identity construction.

One thing that drives the social identity processes is the need to reduce uncertainty about ones own feelings, behavior, perceptions, self-concept and place in society. It matches social categories to properties in the social context and the most meaningful place for the individual within it (Hogg/Terry 2000). One way of approaching this is through the diverse sets of allegiances of expatriates and what they identify themselves with. Previous studies have brought up some aspects of paradoxes in the

expatriation experience concerning identification, the relationship with the other culture and job-related conflicts (Osland/Osland 2005).

Black and Gregersen (1992) studied the problem of the sent out expatriate having allegiances simultaneously to the parent company and the local operations. They identify allegiance patterns and argue that the expatriate should not be too committed to either of them, rather form a pattern of dual allegiance. The more time spent away from the home office, the more likely it is that the expatriates identify with the new country and untie their identities from the parent company (Black/Gregersen 1992). What Black and Gregersen (1992) describe as Hired-Gun Free Agents most corresponds to what is referred to here as international itinerants. These have low levels of commitment to both the parent and local operations and are rather committed to their careers internationally with little or no plans to return home. In an expansion of this framework for individuals who independently sought their position abroad Richardson and McKenna (2006) found that the relationships with home and host countries were dynamic and could shift over time and point to the importance of social interaction and relationships. While studying academics as an example of self-selecting expatriates, Richardson and McKenna (2000) found that for some there are difficulties integrating into local communities and friendships tended to be shallow. In contrast, the authors found that expatriates formed cohesive communities and developed friendships quickly as they were in the same situation and considered themselves outsiders. Sanchez et al. (2000) consider the identification with the home culture as dominating in the early stages of adjustment and if successful the expatriate would place his identification midway between the host and home cultures. If so, what would the implications be for individuals with multiple transitions? A paradox is that expatriates may give up on some of their cultural values in order to be accepted, while others become even stronger (Osland/Osland 2005). Banai and Harry (2004) found that the itinerants drive to be cosmopolitan might make them citizens of the world and disrupt their families' needs for stability and a national culture to identify with. Being abroad for a long time might lead to feeling comfortable anywhere while at the same time not really belonging anywhere (Osland/Osland 2005).

Importantly however, countries and organizations are only a small part of what we use to define ourselves. Individuals belong to and feel allegiances to a number of different communities. For individuals with a boundaryless career, the informal networks and communities of practice they take part in may be of great importance. Barley and Kunda (2004) emphasized the importance of building "networks of practice", informal and more formal communities, including virtual, in the world of contracting. Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001) claim that for individuals with boundaryless careers networks across organizational boundaries can provide a sense of continuity as the organization no longer fills this function. Contracting individuals need to develop a coherent identity as itinerant experts by referring to groups outside the corporate boundaries (Barley/Kunda 2004).

In an attempt to explore identity-related outcomes of global careers, Suutari and Mäkelä (2007) found that their respondents, half of which had remained with one single employer and half of which had worked for several companies, had developed a "global career identity" clarifying what they wanted to, and were capable of doing, and

that they “had found their place in working life”. Multiple international work experiences had clear developmental effects and involved new learning and increased career capital. The respondents showed increased self confidence and belief in their employability in a broader future job market, to meet their needs of finding interesting and challenging work opportunities (Suutari/Mäkelä 2007). Although this study contributes to the understanding of individuals with multiple international work experiences the authors did not differentiate between those with one, and those with several employers. For example they found high levels of commitments to the employing organizations (Suutari/Mäkelä 2007), a result that I think could be different when distinguishing the international itinerants who move between different organizations.

### Methodology

The study consists of four interviews with Swedish international itinerants, who themselves have decided to work abroad and do not repatriate with the same employer. This small sample is selected as this is an exploratory study where more in-depth understanding of individual experiences is what is sought after, as a basis for conceptualization (further studies will involve a larger sample). I define international itinerants as professionals with boundaryless global careers who have been employed by at least two independent companies in foreign countries (Adapted from Banai/Harry 2004: 97). These itinerants were approached through contacts and networks on the internet and interviewed over the phone as they are currently living away from Sweden. I first got in contact with two of the itinerants through a Swedish internet community for Swedes abroad. Itinerants are difficult to locate as they are scattered over the world and hard to get in touch with through the organizations they work for, which also makes personal contacts a key way of reaching them (Banai/Harry 2004).

The interviews were conducted in an open fashion where the itinerants first were asked to tell about themselves and their career. This resulted in long narratives and the interviews continued with open questions aimed at getting a more detailed story of their experiences. These questions were partially based on what had come up in the initial narratives and partially came from a list of themes that I found relevant to cover for the circumstances for international itinerants. All interviews were recorded and ranged between one to two and a half hours in length. With a narrative analysis of these interviews, recurring patterns in their identity construction processes can be identified (Kohonen 2004; Lindgren/Wählin 2001). The first step in the analysis of the interviews was to retell their stories as I interpret them. I remained close to the itinerants own words to capture the significance they placed on their experiences. Through interpretive reading, notes taken during the interviews and emplotment of the itinerants' narratives, I used an approach which Czarniawska (2004) describes as the researcher putting together his/her own story. Emplotment is how events are connected and made sense of and how a structure of meaningful passage from one state to another is introduced (Czarniawska 2004). The purpose of this first part of the analysis was to capture the main plot in each itinerant's narrative which is presented in the next section. The next step in the analysis of the interviews was to identify recurring themes common to the individuals' narratives. By comparing and contrasting recurring themes, the narratives were grouped into emplotted categories that brought



together illustrate the various meanings an international career can have from an individual's perspective. This type of thematic analysis of similarities and differences to identify categories of narratives has been used to examine identity construction, for example by Garcia and Hardy (2007). In the following section the categories of narratives brought up by all the itinerants as important are presented.

### **Narratives of international itinerants**

The international itinerants interviewed have all made the decision to move abroad independently and have worked for several different, mostly non-Swedish, companies in one or several countries. Neither of them has worked more than a couple of years in Sweden throughout their entire careers. Their work is international and includes a lot of travel and longer and shorter projects in different countries.

The first itinerant, Alex, feels that he is settled in his new country and wants to achieve a balance with his wife's international career after spending time working for different companies in three different countries. The second itinerant, Ben, has had a lot of international experience, international relations and an interest in languages, before working for three companies in different countries. He highlights the importance of communication and the mix of cultures in his family. The third itinerant, Clark, has wanted to broaden himself and work in an expanding industry and while he has remained in the same country throughout much of his career and is settled there with his family, he highlights the importance of the company culture and has worked for numerous employers in different areas before becoming an entrepreneur to get his freedom. The fourth itinerant, Dan, started his own international company after working in two countries for a number of different employers. With his wife having an international career as well, they have made the decision to prioritize having a career over having a family and he thinks he has left Sweden for good.

For the itinerants the decision to move abroad was to some extent based on the career opportunities available and for the most part self-initiated. Only Clark started his career abroad working for a Swedish company. He felt limited within the company and says that he did not know much about life outside it. All the itinerants stated that they had an interest early on in working abroad, or that the interest in languages and cultures or in a specific country has always been there. Most of them have had some previous international experience such as studies and internships, or relations with foreigners.

### ***Narratives of family concerns***

For the itinerants the family concerns have an impact on the career choices. All of them were married to someone with another nationality, either someone they met locally or another foreigner working abroad. This meant additional concerns with children as they were raised bilingually, or in some cases not even learning Swedish. Those of the itinerants that were parents tell about their strive to maintain part of their children's Swedish heritage. The itinerants also questioned the possibilities of having a global job and balancing career and a family. Dan described making the choice of career before family and he and his wife have no children. With dual careers, and the wife working internationally too, it is a challenge to manage the balance. Hav-

ing a job which includes a lot of traveling is more difficult with children and some itinerants wanted to cut down on the time abroad as they felt they missed out on too much. It is also difficult to continuously move around with a family, and the itinerants with children had concerns about giving their children a stable upbringing and belonging somewhere and decided to settle down as the children were in school.

### ***Narratives of being Swedish***

All of the itinerants still consider themselves Swedish, and are proud to be Swedish and of Swedish accomplishments. "It doesn't wash out" as Ben expressed it. He says that he perhaps has become more European than Swedish, but he is particularly fond of things that are Swedish. Clark describes how very Swedish he was initially, in terms of his values and beliefs, and how those values have changed over time as he became less defensive of the Swedish way of doing things and started to assimilate and appreciate the values in their new society.

None of the itinerants have any plans on repatriating to Sweden again, and have not been back to work in Sweden between the different jobs abroad. The itinerants all have family in Sweden and have visited them almost every year. Ben has work related trips between Sweden and his current location regularly and describes these trips as: "it feels like going home both ways". Though most still would call Sweden home, for some the new country is more home and Alex permanently wants to become a citizen there. Clark describes himself as almost emigrated, as having nothing left for him in Sweden and says that he is "written out of the system". Several of them feel that they are not part of the Swedish society and do not know what it is like there anymore. Clark does not know if he could ever return. It would be like moving to a new country to move home, an adjustment period all over again. Although he has learned to appreciate the uniqueness of Sweden though he feels that the country has a limited world view. Dan even says that he does not like the mentality in Sweden and therefore would not want to return. Yet all of the itinerants want to maintain the Swedish holidays and traditions, and in one way or another keep the connection to Sweden alive. For Clark, whose children has not even learnt to speak Swedish, the ties, the history and family feels very important. IKEA is mentioned in several of their stories as feeling like home, "a Swedish paradise", and Dan emphasizes that his residence is still a Swedish home.

### ***Narratives of networks***

The itinerants have been in some contact with clubs for Swedish people abroad, although to a limited extent. Swedes abroad have things in common; however, being in the same place in life is more important than nationality. Alex says that he is "not like expatriates who have Sweden abroad". This remark shows that some itinerants consider expatriates as mostly socializing with other Swedes and not really entering into the host country. The itinerants have been the only Swede in most of their workplaces. Dan says that he would even like to avoid areas with a lot of Swedes.

Getting to know people and build up a new social network locally is difficult as a newcomer. People have established lives and the itinerants all express that it is hard to enter as you do not know how to approach them and have difficulties with the lan-

guage. It depends on the person being outgoing and they have experienced some loneliness in the beginning. However, stereotypes break down quickly: "There may be a lot more differences between two Swedes than between a Swede and an Englishman for example, so you try to find other things you have in common". Ben emphasizes communication and says that if you learn the language, friends will come. A lot of their contacts were established through other contacts, through work, colleagues, with the wife and children and with neighbors. Mainly the itinerants do not have much contact with expatriates, but they do enjoy friendships with people of different nationalities. Alex stresses that he is different from expatriates and that he does not live "an expat life". However, other expatriates, or foreigners or people that have lived abroad make it easier to get to know people. Only Clark that relocated with a Swedish company the first time describes spending a lot of time with expatriates which meant good support and having a lot in common.

All of the itinerants highlight the importance of social networks throughout their stories. "You have to think about it from day one." It takes time, but otherwise you will be lonely, as Alex says. They all have spread-out contact nets with classmates, old colleagues and contacts from where they have lived previously. A lot of the people they know are spread out over the world and the itinerants claim that it has become easier to keep in touch and not be so isolated with today's communication. They keep in touch with e-mails and phone, they have friends that travel a lot too and come by to visit. Clark describes a clique of people that moves around from country to country and do not want to return, they get stuck in traveling around and having that lifestyle. "It is seducing".

### ***Narratives of personal development***

All the itinerants tell of developing a lot personally and learning about themselves through their experiences. "Probably the most important is learning about yourself in different situations, not just in different countries and practical things, more subtle." They describe their journeys as challenging, going outside their comfort zones. Ben describes taking the hits in the beginning, feeling stupid and uneducated many times, but consistently developing his courage. They all describe developing a new perspective, realizing that there is not only one right way of doing things, and learning to think first and judge less quickly according to stereotypes: "It is hard to explain, it is built in to you." Clark went through a process of reeducating himself from a more technical line of work into management as he had a vision of himself as businessman and he explains how it was a painful, but good, developing experience.

When it comes to handling cultural differences, the itinerants express some difficulties in adjusting to the new setting. It is a long process where they have had to give up on some Swedish values. Clark explains that without doing so you will just be a guest in the country. Alex says that the first time he moved out, he was expecting it to be like Sweden. It is tough to get used to, and the change is painful. There are other rules that apply and the itinerants claim you have to live in the country to really get a feel for it. "You live the differences, it becomes part of you, you change your behavior subconsciously". Throughout the interview Ben stresses the need to learn the language to really understand the intrinsic differences. Clark rather highlights the impor-

tance of organizational culture which he has experienced as very distinct with different companies. He has even left a company because he felt he did not fit in the company culture. All of the itinerants describe what it is like working in the different countries that they have lived in and the differences in management styles. They tell of having to adjust to the way of working in each new country, and in each organization.

### ***Narratives of careers***

When telling the stories of their careers, many of the itinerants emphasize the role of coincidences and circumstances, rather than planning and conscious choices. As Ben describes his career he had completely different goals from the beginning; “I had a plan, but that changes as you go along, 5-year plans do not hold, 2-year plans do”. There are different needs in different phases that you had not counted on. Most of them have not stated a clear goal, but have had to change jobs to get forward. Dan has worked for different companies in the same industry and is very involved in that industry, which makes it hard to get away from. For Clark, it is the excitement of being in an expanding industry that has driven him to move forward and motivated his career choices.

Alex, Ben and Clark work in high technology industries and they can all be considered experts within their fields. Throughout their careers their work seems to have moved from a technical direction towards involving more managerial work. The itinerants stress that it is important to keep your contacts, as with changing circumstances and reorganizations they have to have somewhere to go and to find a new career move when it is needed. They recommend planning your jobs to get where you want and to consider the type of contract and employment as you might have nothing to come home to in Sweden. Dan has applied for jobs himself every time, while Clark has gotten his positions through his contact net and has been recommended and headhunted. He decided to start his own company to get the independence that he wanted. People in the industry move around in different positions and give each other contacts that can lead to new career opportunities.

For the itinerants it is a question of job vs. location. However, it also depends a lot on getting a “nice price”, i.e. a good salary and job offer. There is the family situation and there might also be some cultural difficulties to consider. It is important to consider the company culture and its origins. For Ben it would not matter where he was located, as his job is global and involves a lot of travel. Dan feels that there were no opportunities in Sweden for him, and Alex has rejected offers in Sweden. Clark has been given offers to move to other countries but has wanted to stay where he is and is not interested in another country.

When asked about their future the itinerants mostly planned to stay put for some years although there is always the possibility to move to yet another country. For Ben it is “time to settle down a bit”, even though he has enjoyed moving around six or seven times per year. Dan hopes he will be able to stay and would not like to change again while Clark wants to do something completely different. For some it is about the country you like best, but also where there are career opportunities. When asked specifically, Ben and Clark could even consider moving back. Sweden would be logical

for their family, but they both consider that it might be a problem financially, with taxes and pensions, the economy is important when running your own career.

### Analysis

The narratives of international itinerants contribute to our knowledge of them and paint a portrait of commonalities in their international careers, while at the same time highlighting that this image is fragmented with individual differences, unique experiences and involving inherent ambiguities and paradoxes. The idea by Osland and Osland (2005) of developing through learning to deal with ambiguities and paradoxes provides a language to better understand the experiences of expatriates. These types of experiences are frequently brought up in the narratives told by these itinerants (see the table below) and can be used to illustrate the ambiguities and paradoxes experienced concerning their identity construction.

**Table 1: Expressed ambiguities and paradoxes in the narrative categories**

<i>Narrative category</i>	<i>Ambiguities and paradoxes experienced</i>
<b>Narratives of family concerns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- multinational family yet maintaining Swedish heritage</li> <li>- international career drive yet pull to settle down</li> </ul>
<b>Narratives of being Swedish</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- still Swedish, but left society and is more immersed in current location</li> <li>- changed values and conflicting views of Sweden yet want to preserve ties for children</li> </ul>
<b>Narratives of networks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- not associating with Swedes or expatriates yet easier with foreigners</li> <li>- creating networks imperative, socially and as contacts give work opportunities</li> <li>- network spread across nations and organizations</li> </ul>
<b>Narratives of personal development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- experienced difficulties and insecurity leads to a process of increased self-knowledge and confidence</li> <li>- tolerance beyond stereotypes</li> <li>- developing new perspectives and getting immersed in ways of working and cultural differences</li> </ul>
<b>Narratives of careers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- more dependent on coincidence and circumstances yet need to plan to change jobs to get forward</li> <li>- more invested locally yet dependent on availability of job offers as contacts give safety net</li> <li>- commitment towards career and network yet constraints of family etc.</li> </ul>

Due to their circumstances the itinerants have formed relationships while abroad and ascribed themselves as having a multicultural family, with a wife of another nationality. They are triggered by the challenges of working abroad, as said; it can be a seducing lifestyle. However, they have become rooted in their present situations. With a family, there is a pull to settle down and travel less and leading a less disruptive life in order to manage the work-family balance. Rather than letting their drive for an international career dominate the need for stability, as was suggested by Banai and Harry (2004), the paradoxical situation has almost driven them into making a choice, in the stage of life that they are in, between this kind of career and having a family.

In the narratives of being Swedish, the itinerants express pride of being Swedish, thereby illustrating the identification they still feel towards the Swedish nationality. Yet they no longer see themselves as a part of the Swedish society. Although they want to keep their ties to Sweden and are attracted to, and somewhat feel at home with, things that are Swedish, they maintain the sense of separation, want to avoid other Swedes to some extent and have doubts of ever returning. They are self-assured in their new positions and maintain ties to communities as Swedes abroad, while immersing themselves and finding their place in the local community. The paradox of relinquishing some cultural values and identification with their country of origin, while strengthening some of the ties has been referred to for expatriates (Osland/Osland 2005). For these itinerants this is supported and it appears important to distinguish themselves from their Swedish identities simultaneously to maintaining parts thereof. This ambiguity, or deconstruction, of their nationalities in their identity construction is characterized by interplay or an in-between position that could be related to transnationalization.

Still foreigners in their current countries of residence, the itinerants have learnt to appreciate values in the societies they live in and have taken on aspects to have a sense of belonging. They have entered into new cultures and gone through a process of adjustment and of giving up values. They stress this in distinction from expatriates “who have Sweden abroad” and do not identify themselves as expatriates. However, living abroad as a foreigner, they have a lot in common with others in the same situation, which makes it easier to establish contacts. As they no longer identify with Swedes or expatriates they have developed a social identity through their networks as foreigners abroad to create a sense of continuity and reduce uncertainty throughout the transitions. All the itinerants stress the importance of developing networks, both personally and professionally, and describe how the contacts lead to other contacts, which not only give a sense of belonging, but also give opportunities for furthering their careers.

In the narratives of personal development it appears that when going through transitions the itinerants experience ambiguities and paradoxes and reflect on their place in their new context. In the process, their self-knowledge is increased and they become more confident. Learning about oneself is expressed by the itinerants as one of the most important things. They describe developing a new, broader, perspective and being less bound by stereotypes as they encounter the individuals present behind the preconceived images. The itinerants not only express the different ways of working in the cultures that they have encountered, but also within the different companies that they have worked for. There are cultural differences that impact the experiences and make the transition more or less difficult. Rather than maintaining their preconceptions of how things should be done, or the Swedish way of working, they have entered into their new social settings and showed the ability to adapt to other ways of working. Suutari and Brewster's (2000) finding, that those with self initiated work experiences abroad tended to work for foreign companies, is supported here. This could help account for the fact that they consider themselves as becoming more absorbed in the local circumstances than those sent out by companies.

Regarding their careers, the itinerants speak of an interest in the international and experiences abroad as driving them, yet the work opportunities seems to be predomi-

nant in the end. The itinerants are self directed in their career approaches, which is in line with the protean career orientation (Hall 1996), described as values driven and the individual taking an active part in his career management. However, in contrast to their protean career approach, the itinerants have become more dependent of local circumstances and experience insecurities with reorganizations, developments they had not counted on and coincidences. Individual agency is stressed in the protean and boundaryless careers literatures but as Arnold et al. (2008) suggest it may be a response to pressures in the context of careers such as globalization, competition and restructuring of organizations. The itinerants have mainly remained within the boundaries of their industries where their competencies are marketable, three of them within high technology fields. Currie et al. (2006) suggest that for some individuals, with highly specialized skills, and in some industries the boundaryless career environment may be more prominent. These itinerants identified themselves to some extent by the industry they were in and as experts, which is in line with Suutari and Mäkeläs (2007) results of those with multiple international work experiences finding their place in working life and a career identity in what they do. As the hired-guns described by Black and Gregersen (1992), they are more committed to their careers than identification with the organization. In contrast to Suutari and Mäkeläs findings (2007), these results indicate that there may be differences in the commitment to the organization between those employed by a single organization and those moving between several organizations as, for these, other identifications were more salient. The itinerants value their freedom and take initiatives to reach their next move forward to what would fit their lives, taking charge of their own careers in a way which shows their protean approach. They are to some extent dependent on their networks to find their next opportunity, but emphasize their self reliance and abilities. As described within the framework of boundaryless careers (Arthur/Rousseau 1996), the importance of networks is an essential part of maintaining their employability. For these international itinerants as suggested by Gunz et al. (2000) and Currie et al. (2006) other boundaries become more salient in their careers. It is a key factor to be able to sell their skills to find a new position and to earn enough money for the future. It is often a question of job against location as even though they are boundaryless in their orientations, the itinerants are bound by where the work opportunities are and to follow them while at the same time they are bound by their aspirations for a balanced family life and stability.

## Conclusions

This study of international itinerants confirms and expands on earlier results that show that individuals engage in self-reflection and that identity construction processes are engaged when moving to a new social setting (Kohonen 2004; Lindgren/Wählin 2001). However, when complementing identity construction with a social identity perspective, we can get additional insights into the ambiguous allegiances and identifications international itinerants experience. The study highlights important categories of narratives as well as aspects of their experiences they relate to which include paradoxes and ambiguities. With the recurrent transitions there is an experienced insecur-

rity and dealing with the paradoxes and ambiguities encountered triggers the identity construction processes as they reflect on who they are.

These itinerants, that repeatedly make transitions in their social settings, find other ways of defining their place than their organizational belonging and Swedish nationality which are found to be ambiguous and paradoxical. By defining what they are not identifying themselves with, they emphasize their uniqueness and self reliance in their identity construction. However, at the same time, they are constrained by other boundaries and commitments that simultaneously limit their freedom and enable them to define who they are. As encountering new social and cultural settings, without having the organizational support that traditional expatriates have, these itinerants become more immersed in the local operations and ways of working and living. The itinerants rely on commitments, such as to their own careers, in order to maintain and reconstruct their identities throughout the transitions, and the identification with their networks, across national and organizational boundaries, plays an important part in their social identities.

Additional research has been called for, treating different types of international assignments and more permanent global careers. The in-depth analysis of few cases applied in this study increases the understanding of this under-researched group. A limitation is that the international itinerants interviewed were all males; further studies could allow for more diversity, as it may be a fairly heterogeneous group. In further studies possible gender differences in the identity construction or cultural variations could for example be examined. The difficulties of locating international itinerants made phone interviews the most suitable option for this study and although this can be considered a limitation the interview situation did not seem to impede the itinerants who seemed relaxed and openhearted. To better understand the developmental aspects of international experience research can benefit from focusing on the individual in his/her context, rather than an organizational perspective, and this paper has illustrated a narrative approach as a way to accomplish this. Moreover, further studies, taking into consideration expatriates with multiple international assignments for the same company, could develop an interesting comparison which for example might show the potential importance of a home-based company in the identity construction process.

The international itinerants represent a type of employees able to work in various organizations and countries and an alternative to traditional expatriates. For the itinerants and their families there are challenges encountered, for example in maintaining a sense of belonging. Their identity construction processes in dealing with the ambiguities and paradoxes experienced, as suggested in this study, can lead to a broader international mindset and identification with their networks, profession and the industries they work in. As the competition for talented internationally transferable staff increases, organizations need to understand these international itinerants, their more temporary views on employment, their networks and their identifications, in order to benefit from these individuals and be able to attract them. This represents a challenge for human resource departments and may require a reconsideration of human resource practices. This type of employee, devoted to his or her own careers and professional development, rather than to the employer may mean that the organization loses



valuable competencies but it may also mean being able to attain the skills and competencies needed at the right time and place without developing them internally, for example instead of sending out an expatriate. As suggested by Currie et al. (2006) the changing career boundaries may have different consequences for, and shape, the industries for example in terms of the development of knowledge and occupational specialization.

## References

- Arnold, J./Cohen, L. (2008): The psychology of careers in industrial and organizational settings: a critical but appreciative analysis. In: Hodgkinson G.P./Ford, J.K. (Eds.): *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 23. Chichester, England: Wiley: 1-44.
- Arthur, M.B./Rousseau, D.M. (Eds.) (1996): *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ashforth, B.E./Mael, F. (1989): Social Identity Theory and the Organization. In: *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1): 20-39.
- Banai, M./Harry, W. (2004): Boundaryless Global Careers – The International Itinerants. In: *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 34(3): 96-120.
- Barley, S.R./Kunda, G. (2004): *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies: Itinerant Experts in a Knowledge Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Baruch, Y. (2004): Transforming careers: from linear to multidirectional career paths – Organizational and individual perspectives. In: *Career Development International*, 9(1): 58-73.
- Black, J.S./Gregersen, H.B. (1992): Serving Two Masters: Managing the Dual Allegiance of Expatriate Employees. In: *Sloan Management Review*, summer: 61-71.
- Briscoe, J.P./Hall, D.T. (2006): The interplay of boundaryless and protean careers: Combinations and implications. In: *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 69: 4-18.
- Currie, G./Tempest, S./Starkey, K. (2006): New careers for old? Organizational and individual responses to changing boundaries. In: *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17:4, 755-774.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004): *Narratives in Social Science Research*. London: Sage Publication.
- DeFillippi, R.J./Arthur, M.B. (1996): Boundaryless Contexts and Careers: A Competency-Based Perspective. In: Arthur, M.B./Rousseau, D.M. (Eds.): *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press: 116-131.
- Forster, N. (2000): The myth of the 'international manager'. In: *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 11(1): 126-142.
- Garcia, P./Hardy, C. (2007): Positioning, similarity and difference: Narratives of individual and organizational identities in an Australian university. In: *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 23: 363-383.
- Gunz, H.P./Evans, M.G./Jalland, M. (2000): Career boundaries in a 'boundaryless' world. In: Peiperl, M.A./Arthur, J.B./Goffee, R./Morris, T. (Eds.): *Career Frontiers: New Conceptions of Working Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 24-53.
- Hall, D.T. (1996): Protean Careers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In: *Academy of Management Executive*, 10(4): 8-16.
- Hearn, J. (2004): Tracking 'the Transnational': Studying Transnational Organizations and Managements, and the Management of Cohesion. In: *Culture and Organization*, 10(4): 273-290.
- Hogg, M.A./Terry, D.J. (2000): Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts. In: *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1): 121-140.
- Jenkins, R. (2004): *Social Identity – second edition*. London: Routledge.
- Kohonen, E. (2004): Learning Through Narratives About the Impact of International Assignments on Identity. In: *International Studies of Management and Organizations*, 34(3): 27-45.
- Kohonen, E. (2005): Developing global leaders through international assignments: An identity construction perspective. In: *Personnel Review*, 34(1): 22-36.

- Lindgren, M./Wählin, N. (2001): Identity construction among boundary-crossing individuals. In: *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 17: 357-377
- McKenna, S./Richardson, J. (2007): The increasing complexity of the internationally mobile professional: Issues for research and practice. In: *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, 14(4): 307-320.
- Osland, J./Osland, A. (2005): Expatriate Paradoxes and Cultural Involvement. In: *International Studies of Management and Organizations*, 35(4): 93-116.
- Richardson, J./McKenna, S. (2000): Metaphorical 'types' and human resource management: self-selecting expatriates. In: *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 32(6): 209-218.
- Richardson, J./McKenna, S. (2006): Exploring relationships with home and host countries – A study of self directed expatriates. In: *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, 13(1): 6-22.
- Riusala, K./Suutari, V. (2000): Expatriation and careers: perspectives of expatriates and spouses. In: *Career Development International*, 5(2): 81-90.
- Sanchez, J.I./Spector, P.E./ Cooper, G.L. (2000): Adapting to a boundaryless world: A developmental model. In: *Academy of Management Executive*, 14(2): 96-106.
- Selmer, J. (1999): Career issues and international adjustment of business expatriates. In: *Career Development International*, 4(2): 77-87.
- Selmer, J. (2002): Practice Makes Perfect? International Experience and Expatriate Adjustment. In: *Management International Review*, 42(1): 71-87.
- Suutari, V./Brewster, C. (2000): Making Their Own Way: International Experience Through Self-Initiated Foreign Assignments. In: *Journal of World Business*, 35(4): 417-436.
- Suutari, V./Brewster, C. (2003): Repatriation: empirical evidence from a longitudinal study of careers and expectations among Finnish expatriates. In: *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 14(7): 1132-1151.
- Suutari, V./Mäkelä, K. (2007): The career capital of managers with global careers. In: *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(7): 628-648.
- Tajfel, H./Turner, J. (1979): An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. In: Austin, W.G./Worchel, S. (Eds.): *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole: 38-43.
- Thomas, D.C./Lazarova, M.B./Inkson, K. (2005): Global careers: New phenomenon or new perspectives? In: *Journal of World Business*, 40: 340-347.