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Women's Careers Internationally: a Qualitative Study of Female Western Knowledge Professionals Living in the South of France

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Stream: Work & Women track - by Doris Eikhof (email: d.r.eikhof@stir.ac.uk).

Paper Title (revised): *Women's Careers Internationally. A qualitative study of female Western knowledge professionals living in the South of France*

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Full paper

Abstract

This paper is founded on a qualitative PhD study researching the careers of individuals who live outside their home country on a potentially permanent basis in the South of France. It interprets the careers of the females in the sample, and the findings highlight both the personal nature of careers and the permeable career/life boundary with the females 'morphing' their careers over time, as circumstances dictate and opportunities facilitate. The phenomenon of 'morphing careers' is identified in the literature as the protean career. Specific elements from the work/life trajectory influence women's career choices at varying points in their life and career stage, with dual careers (trailing spouse) and children responsibilities most pertinent.

The specific contribution of the research study is in its contextual richness. The research was pseudo-ethnographical with the researcher living among the author-termed 'bounded transnational' community prior to, during, and immediately after the in-depth semi-structured interview process. The South of France is significant in its cosmopolitan and lifestyle appeal; thus the study is regarded a geographical case due to its contextual specificity.

The findings encourage debate on the content and potential of female international careers in an era where following a career internationally is less atypical.

Women's Careers Internationally. A qualitative study of female Western knowledge professionals living in the South of France

Marian Crowley-Henry, marian.crowleyhenry@dit.ie

Introduction

The challenges and advantages of female traditional expatriates have been explored in contemporary research (Adler 1999, 2002; Linehan 2002). However, it is acknowledged that other categories of international assignee exist beyond the traditional expatriate that is sent on secondment to a subsidiary of their parent organisation for a limited duration (Collings et al. 2007; Crowley-Henry 2007; Harry and Banai 2004; Mayerhofer et al. 2004; Suutari 2003; Suutari and Brewster 2000; Harvey et al. 1999; Inkson et al. 1997). This paper interprets the careers of females who have chosen to live outside their home country on a potentially permanent basis, and who currently reside in the South of France. These findings are part of a broader PhD study of the careers of 'bounded transnationals' as termed by the author. They are transnationals as described by Harry and Banai (2004) in that they have moved from one country to another to perform their work function. They have become geographically mobile. However they are 'bounded' by virtue of the limited countries with which they have in-depth ties and knowledge and by the permeable boundaries of the work/life trajectory which renders their stay in the host country to be for as long as it is the perceived superior choice for all stakeholders (partners, children, self).

Approach

The researcher's objective was to build up images of an under-researched category of international assignee, termed 'bounded transnational' in this study. An inductive, exploratory undertaking, the value of this study is in its contextual richness whereby the research was pseudo-ethnographical with the researcher living among the 'bounded transnational' community prior to, during, and immediately after the qualitative exploratory in-depth semi-structured interview process. The South of France is significant in its cosmopolitan and lifestyle appeal; thus the study is regarded a geographical case due to its contextual specificity. While research using location as the case study is very pertinent in

ethnography / cultural anthropology (Mead 2001; Clifford 1988; Foote Whyte 1993) and geography (Sassen 2001*;* Yaeger 1996; King 1996; Hall 1991), it has not received the same attention in Management studies. Saxenian (1999, 2002) however has researched the international make-up of the Silicon Valley on the West Coast of the United States of America, but her focus has been more on the political and economic effects, rather than on the social and human resource management implications.

A limitation of the case study method, in particular the single case (Stake 1994) is in the inability to generalise the findings to wider sections of the community. Generalisation was never an objective of this study, but rather an attempt to frame a further category of international assignee which would appear more relevant in the context of globalisation and free movement of labour. However, the author presumes that 'readers will be able … to generalize subjectively … from the case in question to their own personal experiences' (Denzin & Lincoln 1998: xv).

While many researchers strive to fit their research neatly into a specific paradigm in order to achieve 'paradigm closure' (Watson 1997: 5), this researcher adopts Watson (1997)'s 'pragmatic pluralism' strategy which encourages the bringing together of different disciplines (or paradigms) providing that the theoretical coherence is upheld and the resulting framework of concepts and assumptions contribute to knowledge. Nonetheless, I am a qualitative researcher and place myself closest to the constructivist/interpretivist tradition, given Easterby-Smith et al. (1991)'s reasoning that the epistemological and ontological framework constructed by proponents of qualitative methodologies is socially contrived and determined by people's understanding and interpretations (ibid: 24). Given the contextualization element of this research undertaking (foreign residents, South of France destination), my research also aligns with the critical realism (Sayer 1999) position which argues that some objects can be isolated as objective reality (such as the South of France being a nice place to live) while others vary according to individual subjective perception, life experiences and knowledge.

The methodological approach followed is hermeneutic insofar as I attempt to '"interpret" these immediate events also in the light of previous events, private experience, and whatever else [researchers] find pertinent to the situation under investigation' (Gummesson 1991: 150), thus claiming the impossibility of the objectification of meaning and of separating the researcher/interpreter from the researched.

Small sample sizes are common in qualitative research undertakings where the aim is not to generalise findings but to highlight areas of concern in depth, which could then in further research be tested among a wider participation grouping. The sample represented in this paper consists of twenty Western women who have opted to pursue their careers (as foreign residents or permanent expatriates) in a particular area in the South of France, namely around the Sophia Antipolis science and technology park where there is a number of international organisations with a pool of international employees (http://www.sophia-antipolis.net/uk/). Particular details regarding the individuals in question can be seen in Table 1. The researcher collected the females' narratives (Crowley-Henry and Weir 2007; Czarniawska 2004; Czarniawska & Sevon 2005; Kohler Riessman 1993) regarding their international careers, and subsequently analysed and interpreted them in the context of following an international career as both a non-national and a woman in a host country environment. The emphasis is on the individuals' perspectives of their working lives within the international sphere.

Table 1 The Female Sample

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Marital Status	Children	Profession
Milly	34	American	Married (English husband)	son (2), daughter (7 months)	Project Manager, employee. Moved to France with husband (he is a French employee). Was able to move laterally in her organisation to a project position which she was able to do in France.
Angie	41	American	Married (French husband)	son (10), daughter (8)	Lead Program Manager, people responsibility, employee. Moved to France with French husband. No job on arrival.
Clare	62	American	Twice divorced	4 step-children	Senior Manager, Educational Systems & Services, people manager, employee. Moved to job on international hire for local contract with international organisation in area.
Catherine	40	Australian	Married (British husband)	no children	Marketing employee. Moved to France with her British husband. No job on arrival.
Sarah	46	British	Divorced (French ex-husband)	1 son (21)	Self employed, consultancy, own business, previous manager/people responsibility. Moved to France following her French husband. No job on arrival.
Diane	31	English	Engaged (British fiance)	no children	Nanny/child minder, then wine export trade, employee. Moved to France independently as nanny and remained as local employee.
Kate	38	English	Married (British husband)	son (6), daughter (4)	Site Manager, people responsibility, employee, starting own business consultancy. Was relocated to France with her organisation. Her husband followed as the trailing spouse.
Susan	39	English	Single	no children	Help Desk employee. Moved to France independently on offer of job with international organisation in area.
Elaine	45	English	Single	no children	Toxicology employee. Moved to France independently, firstly on traditional expatriate assignment, remained on local country contract
Tracy	54	English	Widow (prev husband American)	2 daughters (24, 21)	Senior Manager Marketing, people responsibility, employee. Moved to France independently with children on offer of job (local country contract)

Natalie	56	English	Married (British husband)	1 daughter (17)	Self-employed/Consultant (Personal & Business Coaching, Marketing Rep), previous manager with people responsibility. Moved to France with husband who was relocated there on local country contract through his organisation
Geraldine	52	French (British)	Divorced (French ex-husband)	2 grown up children	Manager of 'Maison des Entreprises' (Chambre de Commerce/French Chamber of Commerce). Moved to France as wife of French husband. No job on arrival.
Katharina	37	German	Married (French husband)	2 daughters (12, 10)	Professor International Business, employee. She followed her husband to France and they have been moving internally in France depending on each's respective career
Hilda	41	German	Married (Spanish husband)	daughter (7)	Manager, people manager, employee. Moved to France as student and remained, met husband in France.
Lisa	33	German (East)	Married (Irish husband)	2 daughters (14, 12)	Self employed, consultancy. Moved to France because of her Irish husband's organisation relocating him there on a local country contract. No job on arrival.
Fiona	28	Irish	Single (long term relationship, French partner)	no children	Marketing Manager, employee. Moved to France because of her French boyfriend. No job on arrival.
Deirdre	42	Irish	Married (Irish husband)	2 daughters (11, 8)	Toxicologist. Moved with husband to area when he was relocated with his organisation there (on local country contract). No job on arrival.
Mary	34	Scottish	Married (Scottish husband)	no children	Pharmacist, employee. Moved with husband to area when he got job there. No job on arrival.
Alice	43	Scottish	Married (Scottish husband)	sons (13, 8)	Head of Recruitment, self-employed/consultant, people responsibility, currently unemployed. Moved when husband got offer of local contract in France. No job on arrival.
Ingrid	30	Swedish	Single	no children	Team Coordinator EMEA PreSales, employee. Geographical move with organisation.

Elicitations from the Research

Themes from the narratives highlight the personal nature of careers, with specific elements from the work/life trajectory influencing each of the interviewees' career choices at varying points in their life and career stage. Being a trailing spouse, having a dual career with a partner, juggling work and family commitments, and feeling discriminated against in a culture where there is a perceived glass ceiling for female managers (due to the old boy's network of grande école/old school management layers in organisations with French management teams) are all reflected in the findings, some being of more concern to individual women in the sample than to others (Crowley-Henry and Weir 2007). Examples of such experiences and stories are shared in the following paragraphs.

Dual Careers, Trailing Spouse

The majority of women in the sample (N=11) moved to France as the trailing spouse (De Cieri et al., 1991; Stone, 1991) with their careers *secondary* to that of their partners. Of those eleven, Milly (American, 34 years, British husband, 2 children: 2 years, 7 months) was the only trailing spouse to have a job on arrival; however even she acknowledges that in the relationship her husband's career is prioritised.

> I mean right now we're focusing on [my husband]'s job, since I would ideally like to change jobs… And I'm very fortunate that I have a partner that's always said: "ok, you came here for me, this was my move, the next one's yours." …So, while I'm the secondary following partner in this case …I don't feel placed in that position. …Although if things continue as they are, we are going to go in different directions and it is going to end up being following [husband's name] because obviously he's … increasing stature and professional experience and all of those things where I'm stagnating. … The thing is that, I mean if you'd asked me [if I would place my career secondary to my husband's] before the kids were born, then I would have said: "heck no", you know "no way" and "we could have made that work". But the kids came and the priorities just changed for me…

The complex choice of being a mother and being able to spend time with the children given the favourable parental leave offer in France has on the one hand enabled Milly to spend time with her

children. However her career has 'stagnated' as a result. The ability to 'have it all' is therefore questioned.

The remaining nine women in the sample moved independently to France, with only one (Kate) having the *primary* career in a dual career relationship; the other eight were single at the time and all moved to take up a job in France, having contracts of employment before their move. These could be considered less vulnerable in the move as they had the basics of a potential career in France on arrival.

Many of the women that moved internationally as trailing spouses had difficulty in finding work locally in the South of France that would reflect their educational qualifications and previous career paths in the domestic country. Networking and using contacts were exploited to the utmost in order to find suitable employment.

Catherine (Australian, 40 years, British husband, no children) gave up her career in Australia and moved with her husband back to Europe so he could be nearer his aging parents. Her story of finding work in France follows:

> When I came over here I thought "well I've done HR, but I'm open to do anything". … And I tried getting professional work but the trouble was because I hadn't been in French HR, it was really very hard. I didn't speak French. ... And then I thought that I'd do anything and I was out trying to get secretarial… jobs, but because the French are so focused on a career they wouldn't accept me when I said I'm happy to do these jobs even though I'm not using all my skills. So I couldn't get any of those kind of jobs either. And then I basically started as a sort of a computer programmer, I did that for a year. I basically kind of re-wrote myself … as a technical writer and then used the old technical skills. …It was a great change, but then I did eventually find some kind of work.

Alice (Scottish, 43 years, Scottish husband, 2 children – 13yrs, 8 yrs) recalls how she, similar to Catherine (above) found it very difficult to find work locally after moving with her husband:

> It was settling in and vaguely looking around and trying to get to know people and see what was happening. And to be honest reaching pretty quickly the conclusion that it was going to be pretty difficult for me to continue what I had been doing. Because HR

> in France is a very different structure and approach compared to the HR I had been doing… Then you start looking around at the obvious alternatives that might be and I didn't want to go down the route of teaching English as a foreign language and stuff like that. … Or interpreting or translating or anything like that.

Alice didn't want to completely change her professional identity and re-construct herself based on her English native language competency (i.e. to become an English teacher or interpreter). She reflects that moving from the UK to France meant changing her role in the relationship as in the UK her career (and that of her husband's) had been on a par:

> Until then … our approach to choices in terms of where we were living, what careers we were doing was totally and utterly even. There wasn't one that had any … great importance than the other.

Both Sarah (46, British, divorced (French ex-husband), 1 grown up son) and Geraldine (52, divorced (French ex-husband), 2 grown up sons) however did move down the route of English language teacher initially. They had both moved to France immediately after graduating and married French husbands. They did not have any professional career behind them in the UK before leaving.

To some of the females in dual career relationships, continuing to be on par career-wise with their partner is very important to them. For instance Katharina (37, German, married (French husband), 2 daughters 12, 10):

> It's good that I've done my PhD. It's probably one of my best ideas (laugh) - for the career and for my personal satisfaction as well. … I like being equal to my husband in the work. …And I also earn almost as much as he does. And I mean that's just wonderful. … And probably I could live without it but I'm very satisfied by it.

However most of the women that moved with their partners in the sample were the secondary careerists as regards they positioned their career secondary to that of their partner, and many began their career in France at a lower level to that which they were qualified. For instance Mary (Scottish, 34 years, Scottish husband) admits her jobs in France have been *'a lot less interesting than what I was*

doing in Scotland', more assistant type work but she took the work because *'I didn't have much choice.'*

The females in the sample that are in dual couples do tend to sacrifice their own career ambitions, putting their partner's first. Mary (34, Scottish, married (Scottish husband), no children) confides that

> I'd quite like to go freelance actually (laugh). Because I realise now that there's a huge market in France for a native English speaker in scientific medical writing. ... So it's the way I'd like things to go. … [But] at the moment [my husband]'s freelance so we need the stability of a salary.

The traditional organisational career (Cohen and Mallon 1999) is still perceived as being more stable, with a guaranteed monthly income, and it is a primary factor in individuals choosing traditional career paths. In the dual career couples in this sample, the majority are split with at least one partner following the traditional organisational career path.

Deirdre (42 years, Irish, married (Irish husband), 2 children 11, 8 years)'s husband's careers renders him literally away from France Monday through Thursday. This forces her to be the prime child-carer during the week, which impacts on her career development as she has to put the children first. She acknowledges the stress of having to bring a minder in to stay with the children when she needs to travel for work to Germany for a day or more every month.

> For me it's balls in the air all the time. …I think I have the more difficult role in that respect in that, you know, [husband's name] goes away, he can just concentrate on work all week. Whereas I have to leave at such and such a time because I have to collect the girls here and then I have to bring them there and back. So for me it's yeah I find the balancing act quite difficult some times. Also because … maybe once or twice a month I have to do an overnight to Germany and so that adds to the equation as well. So for me it's very very busy. The week is very very busy because I'm constantly between work and the girls and work and the girls. And I may have something to finish at work, so it would be handy if [husband's name] were there during the week and I had something to finish that would take me maybe half an hour, three quarters of an hour and I could phone him and say: "can you pick up the girls because I need to finish something". But I can never do that because he's not there. Now I have a very good network of friends if I'm really stuck…

It is apparent from the findings that those women in relationships that have moved to France as trailing spouses continue to have their careers secondary to their partners'. Even for Kate who moved with the primary career in the relationship persists in ensuring the children and home life run smoothly with the help of a minder/cleaner. While most of the male partners (apart from Deirdre's husband above) in the dual career relationships play a hands-on role in childcare, the bulk of the responsibilities remain with the females. It remains to be explored whether that is for cultural, historical or biological gender role divide reasons. However it is obvious from the findings that there are notable gender differences with regards to role division and the positioning of careers in the family unit.

Traditional (intra-organisational) Career Progression

Some females in the sample feel that by virtue of their being in a French masculine organisational culture (even within an international organisation), their promotional opportunities are limited. These interviewees were of the opinion that the education ethos which embodies the French managerial hierarchy within all organisational forms in France continues to prevail, whereby non-attendance of the French 'grande école' restricts promotion opportunities. Schneider & Barsoux (1997: 142) suggest that 'cultural biases may be responsible for the "glass ceilings" experienced by foreigners in many international companies'. For women international employees this barrier, added to the potential gender glass ceiling, renders progress in an organisation much more difficult to achieve. Tracy's (British, 54 years, widow (American husband), two grown up daughters) complaint about her stagnation in the vertical career progression in the organisation shows her perceptions concerning this bias.

> I've been at [current level] for 3 years now and I asked if there'd be consideration for promotion this [year] …and I didn't get it. But you never know why. I mean I got a fabulous evaluation. … My career would have progressed much more if I had stayed in the States. [I]n France they look at your personal situation too much. When I was first hired by [private sector IT Travel organisation] in the US, no one knew or asked about my personal situation. They didn't know I was a single mother, widowed with 2 very young [children]. That was private. I don't think I'd have been hired in France in the same situation. Because here they want to know your personal situation; they see it as relevant. [But I think] if you are able to do the job and want to do the job, then your

> personal situation should not matter. … Men in France that went to the same grande école [elite French third level education school] and mixed in the same social circles... That is **the** barrier for non-French here.

Angie (American, 41 years, French husband, 2 children: 8 and 10 years) concurs

> It's very French… Here they're only impressed by – there's the grande école and there's everything else.

Nonetheless Hilda, within the same organisation as Tracy and Angie praises it for promoting her on her return from maternity leave.

> On the day that I came back from maternity leave I was promoted... Which I think is quite a good move for [private sector IT Travel organisation]. … I got more functionality in the group and more people. And now since April I've been promoted to senior manager and I have expanded further and further the group and the responsibilities. *(Hilda, German, 41, Spanish husband, 1 daughter: 7 years)*

This would suggest that the role an individual plays in the organisation as valued by her superiors is paramount in her accessing the upper echelons within organisational life. Hilda works in a technical role, while Tracy is in Marketing, which would suggest that the harder technical knowledge is valued above the softer marketing skills within the French organisational culture.

The perception from the sample is thus that women's promotional opportunities are potentially constrained by virtue of their gender, their specialism (as Tracy and Angie's stories depict above) and contextually in France, their educational background.

Work/life Balance

The prioritisation trajectory of career and personal life changes for the women in the sample depending on life stage and circumstances. Alice (Scottish, 43 years, Scottish husband, 2 children: 13 and 8 years) accepts that she made the decision to put her family before her career and has no regrets about that:

> I have made personal decisions which suited me, which meant that I wasn't going to go up a corporate ladder… If I look at [ex-company] in France, 2 years ago they voted their first female partner. It [gender discrimination] clearly exists. To what extent it exists because women made the decision themselves to opt out, I don't know. That was the decision I took and I'm perfectly happy with it. … For me it's the great luck of being a woman. It's a plus rather than a negative to be honest. I think that I've been much freer in choices than my husband has at the end of the day. The minute …the first decision was made that we would move to come here, he became the prime breadwinner inevitably, which released me hugely...

The freedom Alice believes she has is reversed for Tracy (British, 54 years, widow, 2 grown up children) who initially as a single mother to two young children felt that:

> I just felt I had no choice. And I had to work

Angie (American, 41 years, French husband, 2 children: 10 and 8 years) is clear that her career progression has matched her ambitions, which has made her ultimately satisfied in her professional career and being able to juggle her work and home life:

> I wasn't one that was really looking …to climb in the hierarchy. I was more than happy to have … responsibility for … a certain project. …I think that I'm probably somewhat at my limit or at least at a certain plateau for a certain… time (laugh), for probably a long time (laugh). And for a couple of reasons: one is that I don't really want to go much further. I also feel like I've gotten here and I've gotten here fairly easily. … I haven't made a big sacrifice or a big effort to really get where I am. But there's a certain limit relative to my personal life that I'm ... willing to take. And then at least for the moment I have the choice…, if the company were in a critical situation and they really were pushing me to do something else I might revisit that decision. But … I don't want to compromise my whole … personal life. Just to give an example, the director I work for as of Friday last week did not know if he was going to the States for these meetings with this company, and … I don't want them calling me … one day before the trip has to take place and running around… And secondly, I think that financially at [company name] and in France in general, I think the salaries are not extraordinary. … I can't [afford to] have a full time live in nanny where I could just get up and travel. And even … my own director … doesn't have a full time nanny [his wife stays at home]. So it's a constant compromise and in my case my husband has a profitable business and [my career comes secondary to his as he earns more than me…]…

Angie's interpretation of what is required to move to a higher managerial level illustrates the dilemma for working mothers – affording to pay for flexible child care support (a live-in nanny being desirable), needing to travel at short notice; versus balancing work and family life, not aiming to reach

senior management. This suggests the need for organisational support if women are to be successful in their careers.

Many of the females in the sample appear happy in their professional roles, admitting they may not have their professional career at the top of their priorities, but have done so purposely. Mary (34 yrs, Scottish, married (Scottish husband), no children) says:

> I'm not particularly career-driven person and I don't want to end up … head of the department or director of R&D or anything like that. But I do need to have an interesting job and earn an appropriate salary for it. I don't like being over used. I don't like becoming bored out of my skull either.

The women admit to having to make choices with regards to their careers, and proactively choose courses of action that facilitate their life priorities at different stages of their lives. Hilda (German, 41, Spanish husband, 1 child: 7 years) notes

> I'm not so sure whether right now at this very moment I want to be a director. It's quite a lot of work and I need to keep a bit of a place for my family

On interpretation of the findings it is apparent that gender is a career element where there are notable differences in motivations and career formations. The empirical research conducted for this study shows that the female multi-roles continue: that of mother, wife and professional.

Lifestyle Anchor: Life in France

The positive work/life balance that this area in the South of France appears to offer is emphasised by the sample, as Kate's quotes show.

> [T]he fact that you have this sort of weather and you can spend so much more time outdoors. I mean it kind of doubles your life, your living capacity, your living space, because you're outside so much of the time. And psychologically I think [laugh] it makes you happier when as soon as the sun shine comes out this time of year [April], it's just a wonderful feeling. You're so close to the Alps. You know, you can go into the mountains, you can go into the hills, and you can go to the sea – the variety… *(Kate, British, 38 years, British husband, 2 children: 6 and 4 years)*

The lifestyle on offer is very important to the sample, arguably as important as their careers. In choosing between location and career, the sample would consider carefully the options before making a decision; with most opting to remain in the South of France provided they would have the financial capacity to do so; only moving elsewhere if no alternative were available.

While the respondents perceive their careers in France to be potentially of a lower level to that which they would be following in their home countries, they are still happy in their decision to remain, prioritising the quality of life in the area. Ingrid's and Angie's comments reflect this.

> For me right now I can't say that it helped my career. I would say I would have even done better in Sweden perhaps. *(Ingrid, Swedish, 30 years, single, no children)*

> I think in [company name] and in France they pay us with the sunshine and the beautiful Cote D'Azur and the 6 weeks of vacation, but there's still just [laugh] a money limit on salaries. That can be very annoying. I think financially it would have progressed [had I remained in the States]. *(Angie, American, 41 years, French husband, 2 children: 8 and 10 years)*

All of the women in the sample stress that they do not position their professional careers at the pinnacle of their priority list; that they put their personal life (including family, children) first. Susan's and Kate's narratives below explain this.

> I'm not particularly interested in middle management or rising up a ladder in a corporation, purely because in my [name travel agency] job I was a middle manager and you get the worst from both ends – the directors are pulling you one way and then all the staff are pulling you another. And I really found that the job could get very very stressful … It got to the point where I … started to not like it. … And plus the fact I have a very different attitude now because my father died when I was 25 and before he died my mentality was go it alone, you don't think of anything else outside of just getting into, getting a job and proving… Now a death in the family of a very close loved one really completely changes your outlook of how you should be living your life and it makes you wake up to hang on, to say "hang on, am I enjoying this?". And so now I tend to really live my life where … money isn't… the be all and end all. *(Susan, British, 39 years, single)*

> Before we were closed I wanted to be the next level up: I was senior manager and the next level up was kind of partner and I was kind of keen to do that. But looking back that would have been selling your soul really, the amount of work you have to put in. Now I'm not quite

> so keen. I want to be able to do my job and enjoy it, but also have some time for myself which I'd never had before, and enjoy the kids. *(Kate, British, 38 years, British husband, 2 children: 6 and 4 years)*

This sample have all chosen to live in the South of France for lifestyle reasons, despite some perceiving their professional careers would have progressed more had they remained in their home countries. The lifestyle anchor (Schein 1978) is emphasised here.

Morphing Careers – the Protean Career

In career theory, the protean career concept (Hall and Harrington 2004) refers to the ability to morph and alter one's career path depending on life stage and circumstance. Due to external circumstances (such as redundancy), some respondents in the sample were pushed to morphing their career path from organisational employee to portfolio consultant (N=3). Others were pulled into a portfolio career direction because of the flexibility it offers (N=2). Moreover the protean career concept considers the usage of all of one's competences in morphing to a new or different career stage, from educational background to previous work experience to personal interests. For instance, Sarah (British, 40, divorced, one grown up child) reflects on how her current profession makes use of many of her competences:

> A lot of people… say to me "how come you did a French degree and now you're in Management Consulting?" … And I think I just found opportunities that built on each stage of my career and today I'd say I'm using everything. I have to do quite a lot of research - so studying at university and now I have to do quite a lot of studying in research for these companies. I have to write reports which reminds me of when I had to write essays in university so all that's useful. I have to facilitate which is my teaching background. I have to communicate a lot, there again teaching has been important and helping people see the pros and cons of different situations, all that is coming from the teaching experience. All my customer and sales knowledge has come from working in the customer centre. I really am using everything. I think I've sort of managed to intelligently move from one thing to another.

The ability to transform over time depending on the life focus from career to children to changing career direction is noticeable in the narratives.

Recommendations for further research

This study is restricted in that it is a geographical case study of a small sample of Western professionals living in the South of France on a potentially permanent basis. Elements that have emerged from the findings such as the pertinence of the protean career concept could be explored in more depth in a wider survey of such individuals across countries in order to build up a fuller profile of this category of international assignee which has not received much attention in academic literature to date.

Conclusions, Implications of the Research

This paper has presented extracts from career stories of a sample of twenty Western women working as knowledge professionals in the South of France. The sample consists of single, married, divorced and widowed females; with and without children responsibilities. All females had in common that they had moved to the area for a potentially permanent duration. The author has termed the sample 'bounded transnationals.'

There is much variation among the sample and their respective careers since moving on a permanent basis to France. However the concept of the protean career (Hall 1976, Hall and Harrington 2004) unites all interviewees. At different life stages life priorities and responsibilities change which affect the choices made. There is an evident movement to including personal life needs into the career equation among the sample interviewed. The relational and family context is critical here as it defines career priorities and how they alter over time. Such trends lead to individuals 'morphing' their careers over time, as circumstance dictates. The implication of this for organisations is the necessity to individualise and personalise career development planning for employees: individuals are unique, with goals and motivations changing over life cycle and significant life occurrences.

The findings presented here open up questions for government policy planners and organisations striving to maintain and increase female participation at all levels in the labour force, particularly in an era where following a career internationally is more typical.

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