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## Personal or Organisational Control? A Critical Perspective from the Multinational's International Assignees


Marian Crowley-Henry

*Technological University Dublin, marian.crowleyhenry@tudublin.ie*

David Weir

*Liverpool Hope University, dweir@runbox.com*

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Marian Crowley-Henry

*Dublin Institute of Technology*, [marian.crowleyhenry@dit.ie](mailto:marian.crowleyhenry@dit.ie)

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*Liverpool Hope University*, [dweir@runbox.com](mailto:dweir@runbox.com)

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**CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES WORKSHOP  
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Authors: Marian Crowley-Henry  
Management School, Lancaster University, UK  
[m.crowley@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.crowley@lancaster.ac.uk)

AND

David Weir  
Ceram Sophia Antipolis  
Rue Dostoievski BP 085, 06902 Sophia Antipolis, France  
[David.WEIR@cote-azur.cci.fr](mailto:David.WEIR@cote-azur.cci.fr)  
Tel.: +33 4 9395 4576  
Fax: +33 4 9395 4429

# ***Personal or organisational control? A critical perspective from the multinational's international assignees***

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of non-national employees of multinational organisations based in Sophia Antipolis (South of France). Here twenty-three in-depth interviews with non-nationals employed by a multinational in the area, together with contextual data regarding the particular case of Sophia Antipolis contribute to the discussion on power and control in an international, organisational context. Irrespective of the initial motivations to follow on an international career, this study highlights the tensions individuals encounter in their desire to retain their international status while seeking out a more individual, balanced, protean career, potentially beyond their current employing organisations. Extracts from the stories told by international assignees are shared in this paper, underlining the importance of control (in mastering one's own destiny) and the affinity of international assignees to their own career (be that what it may) as opposed to their affinity to a particular organisation. The subjectivity of the international employee's career focus suggests issues for organisational control, here particularly for multinationals that have to cater more and more to the individual needs of their employees due to their cultural diversity. In particular this paper focuses on the employee's individual struggle for control of his/her international career and the complexity of different elements influencing decisions over the life stage of the interviewees. The findings collaborate with contemporary career literature on the boundaryless career, noting the tension between the desire to follow an individual career path and the more negative aspects (lack of choice, control and power) of this career path given today's unstable job market. Indeed, this paper attempts to show the inherent complexity relating to career, suggesting a more systems approach to career need be studied, such as is initiated here in this study under the framework of the protean career.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Academic literature and research regarding the international career has long focused on the traditional expatriate experience (e.g.s (Adler 1986); (Feldman and Tompson 1993); (Boyacigiller 1995); (Mendenhall and Oddou 2000); (Dowling and Welch 2004). Here the tendency has been to adopt a more managerialist approach in outlining the benefits and issues to be considered for organisations and individuals embarking on an international assignment. This study, in contrast, focuses on permanent expatriates<sup>1</sup> who remain in the host country indefinitely (i.e. without a pre-determined organisational option of repatriation to their initial home country), and takes a more critical approach in exploring the international career of such individuals. The focus in this paper is on analysing the extent of organisational and individual power and control with regard to an individual's career in an international context.

## **POWER & CONTROL – A CRITICAL OVERVIEW**

### **Power**

In this paper we examine issues of power and control over career in an international context from a critical perspective. Foucault “stresses the fact that social research is a socio-historical phenomenon, one which functions as part of the process of surveillance and control, which he sees as the central feature of modern society” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995): 14). He notes that “[t]he relations of power are perhaps among the best hidden things

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<sup>1</sup> Where expatriate is broadly defined as “the process of an individual moving to live in a different country”  
Brewster, C. (2002). Expatriation. The Informed Student Guide to Human Resource Management. A. Wilkinson. London, Thomson Learning.

in the social body” (Foucault 1990): 169). “Who exercises power? How? Who makes decisions for me? Who is preventing me from doing this and telling me to do that? I don’t believe that this question of “who exercises power?” can be resolved unless that other question “how does it happen?” is resolved at the same time” (Foucault, 1990: 103). His theory of power concerns the covertly imposed power of the state on individuals in capitalist societies. This power stems from and contributes to the norms which the state has set upon society, imposing on individuals in that state to comply to such norms. However, such power is complex and unstable, open to change, and requires the adherence of individuals (i.e. is not absolute power): “No matter how much power one appears to accumulate, it is always necessary to obtain it from the others who are doing the action” (Latour 1986): 276). Thus resistance and change is possible via “the constant reconfiguration of power relations” (Deetz 1998): 153). This study looks at the power relations between non national employees and their multinational organisations. Here resistance to organisational control over one’s career is examined, and the extent to which individuals can truly master their own career in a socially constructed and norm imposed world.

This study also looks at concertive power (Barker 1993), which can be described as explicit peer pressure in reaction to the disciplinary power imposed by the continuous covert but subconsciously felt gaze of Bentham’s Panopticon whose aim is to produce social order and conformity (Foucault 1977). Here the extent of the strength of the concertive power that individuals encounter in attempting to ‘break the mould’ or resist organisationally-imposed constraints is analysed.

### **Career**

(Larsen and Ellehave 2000)) have penned a very comprehensive (working) definition of career as follows: “*Career is the overall pattern of a continuous development process, by which an individual, via an interactive and interdependent relationship with an organizational environment, experiences and makes sense out of a sequence of critical events, activities and situations, through which competence is acquired, meaning is created, and projections for the future are made. The gradually unfolding career contains changes visible to others (the objective career) and changes in the individual’s perception of her/his activities and identity (the subjective career). The two aspects form a duality, becoming inseparable.*” (ibid: 104; italics in original). They stress the interdependency of the objective and subjective career, both needing attention when researching careers. The external or objective career is “what can be seen and measured about an individual’s working life” (Mallon 1995): 12), whereas the internal or subjective career is concerned with reaching objectives, fulfilment, self-conception, identity, work attitudes, personal choice and responsibility, and autonomy ((Weick and Berlinger 1989): 320-321; see also (Van Maanen and Schein 1977)). (Weick 1996) argues that given the shift in recent decades toward more transactional rather than relational psychological contracts (see also (Rousseau 1995); (Gratton and Hope-Hailey 1999), future careers will be more concerned with “internal, self-generated guides, such as growth, learning, and integration” (Weick, 1996: 40). As Larsen & Ellehave (2000) note: “... the situation has changed, and the organization may not be there tomorrow. The individuals themselves probably will not be there tomorrow, even if the organization is: and even if they are, and a long-term relationship is maintained, flexibility will have to be embedded in the psychological contract” (ibid: 99). They continue that “[c]hanges in education, value systems and norms, more emphasis on knowledge work in organizations and less emphasis on corporate loyalty all influence employee career expectations. This situation leads to employees becoming more conscious about the fulfillment of *personal* career goals” (Larsen & Ellehave, 2000: 99, italics added). Gratton & Hope Hailey echo that there is “a move towards a more individualistic notion of careers” (1999: 79). This move away from careers being organisationally managed (Kahn 1996) to employees managing their own careers has been critiqued by (Hesketh 2003). This paper looks at the extent to which this is relevant for non national employees on local country contracts with multinational organisations.

### **Boundaryless Career**

In contrast to traditional career theory which “discounted the role of the person” and stressed “the presumption of employee dependence on the employer firm” (Arthur and Rousseau 1996): 7), (Rosenbaum and Miller 1996) termed the phrase “boundaryless career” to describe a new development in career theory. They explain this further as follows: “While the old company man moved up the company ladder, mobile workers move up any ladder onto which they can get a foot. They rise in their careers by hopping from firm to firm, with an eye toward ever-better positions, and the firms which employ them often benefit by gaining ambitious employees who bring new ideas, creativity, and the enthusiasm of new blood” (ibid: 350). This study regards the concept of the boundaryless career given the context of job insecurity and fewer hierarchical opportunities for the sample of internationally mobile interviewees that participated in the research undertaking.

### **Protean Career**

(Hall and Harrington 2004) distinguish between the boundaryless career and the protean career (Hall 1976) as follows: “the boundaryless career refers to the objective moves that a person makes as he or she moves across organizational boundaries... The protean career ... represents the subjective perspective of the individual careerist who faces the external career realities of the boundaryless career”. Hall describes it as follows: “The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing. It consists of all the person’s varied experiences in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc. The protean person’s own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external” (1976: 201; also cited in Hall & Harrington, 2004). Here the emphasis is on internal or subjective success rather than objective success (position, salary). The reason for this being, because “professional identity may no longer play as dominant a role for such individuals, they are free to focus on other subidentities, such as family, community, or other personal interests” (Hall & Harrington, 2004). People following the protean career concept “are less concerned with ... organizational rewards and are more motivated by autonomy, personal values and psychological success” (ibid). This study takes a broader, systems approach to career as advocated by protean career theorists. The power of individuals to embark on a protean career and the ability of organisations to manage employees’ protean careers is discussed in the findings section of this paper.

### **Power & Career**

Control in the context of the protean career is tied then to realising one’s true identity – the “authentic self” (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993): 97), or the “core of self” (Hochschild 1983): 206). (Sampson 1990) notes the tie between identity and cultural history in that “[t]he preferred western form emphasizes firm self-other boundaries and argues for a relation of personal mastery and control over self and the environment” (1990: 117). (Turner 1976) differentiates between the self “anchored in *institutions* and self as anchored in *impulse*” (1976: 991). Here the institutional and impulsive selves come about from the human reflexive process and are consequential of the existing social structure at the time. Turner sees that “institutional motivations are external, artificial constraints and superimpositions that bridle manifestations of the real self. One plays the institutional game when he must, but only at the expense of the true self. The true self consists of deep, unsocialised, inner impulses. Mad desire and errant fancy are exquisite expressions of self” (1976: 993, opening citation). He notes that there has been a move toward the impulsive self in recent decades due to the nowadays lack of “dependability of that framework [making] the world predictable (1976: 1005, opening citation). The reduced dependence on the institutional framework is apparent in the marked shift to transactional psychological contracts as opposed to the previously predominant relational contract that existed between employer and employee.

(Starkey and McKinlay 1998)) advocate Foucault's later work where he sees individuals' and communities' own desires being paramount in the creation of their self identities, rather than being oppressed by the discipline of the technologies of domination (Foucault 1977). This individual control based on one's own desires connects with protean career theory where the individual focuses more on the subjective elements of career and the overall picture. Perceptions from the interviewees regarding the power they have to exercise their desired career are shared in the findings of this study. Before that however, the following section outlines the methodology followed for the study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The empirical material shared in this paper was derived from in-depth interviews with non-nationals working in the Sophia Antipolis area. For the purpose of this paper, the interview transcripts of those respondents *employed by a multinational organisation* are taken. The following paragraphs outline the methodological choices of this particular study.

### **Ethnography**

The research approach taken here has ties to ethnographic studies (Hammersley 1992; Denzin 1997; Clifford 1998) in the sense that culture (non-nationals in France) plays a major part and that the authors are both members of the international community in question (participant observation, see (McCracken 1988); (Atkinson and Hammersley 1998)). In this respect the "insider" knowledge provides a contextual setting and general "descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about" ((Denzin 1997): xi). With participant observation the researcher is "a participant in the culture or context being observed" ((Trochim 2000)) and is "accepted as a natural part of the culture" (ibid; see also (Flick 2002): 139-146). Here the personal contextual knowledge of the location in question and of the non-national community enables a deeper, more reflexive (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000) interpretation of the qualitative interviews. (Denzin and S. 1998a) note that "[ethnographic] methods are characterized by the collection of relatively unstructured empirical materials, a small number of cases, and a writing and style of analysis that are primarily interpretive, involving descriptions of phenomena" (ibid: xvi). This study, however, falls short of being truly ethnographical in the traditional sense (for instance as part of anthropological studies such as conducted by Mead (1928; 2001)) insofar as the fieldwork conducted here was "in some part of an otherwise already familiar cultural milieu" (Junker 1960): 70), as opposed to being conducted in an exotic location (Hughes 1960), and total extensive immersion in the daily lives of the set of respondents (taking extensive fieldnotes) was not a matter of course. Rather, the fact of being a member of the non national community in the area facilitated insider knowledge which presented additional contextual information to go hand in hand with the interview data, and which aided in interpreting and analysing the material.

### **Hermeneutics**

Needless to say, the role of the researcher is of paramount importance in such a study, and it is acknowledged that the interpretation of the data presented here is based on our individual world-view/epistemology (Adler & Adler, 1987; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Mason, 2002). In this case, the hermeneutic researcher "'interpret[s]' ... immediate events ... in the light of previous events, private experience, and whatever else [he or she] find[s] pertinent to the situation under investigation" (Gummesson, 1991: 150). No doubt other researchers using the same transcripts could interpret the material differently, picking out different quotes or stories, in keeping with their own oftentimes subconscious interests and historical make up. Idiographic methodologies (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 6) are characterised by the subjectivism of the research, whereby the investigator empathises with the research subjects and takes account of the environment, of "subjects' meaning and interpretational systems in order to gain explanation by understanding" (Gill & Johnson, 1991: 37).

### **Case Study**

This study takes Sophia Antipolis as a case study for exploring the international career. Sophia Antipolis, an international science and technology park located in the French Riviera, not far from Nice is particular. Not only does it house over 1260 organisations (many of which have an international presence) and employ over 25,000<sup>2</sup> people, it is situated on the Côte D'Azur, a popular tourist destination spot because of its sunny climate and Mediterranean/Alpine landscape. Because of its specificity and the difficulty in generalising the environment to others (except perhaps California on the West Coast of the United States, but even there the national culture is substantially different to the French culture), we take the approach here that *the location* metaphors *the organisation*. Thus the *single* case study approach is adopted (Stake, 1998), with all respondents living and working within the same specific location, albeit for different organisations. This work then takes an emic approach in investigating specifically and in depth the educated, knowledgeable, non-nationals' career in a particular location.

### Sampling

In keeping with “[m]any postpositivist, constructionist, and critical theory qualitative researchers”, this study “employ[s] theoretical or purposive, and not random, sampling models (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 62-65)” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a: xiv). Here “groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur” were intentionally sought out (ibid). And, “[a]t the same time, a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 101-115) among groups, concepts, and observations is necessary, as the researcher seeks to develop an understanding that encompasses all instances of the process, or case, under investigation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a: xiv). In this study “[n]o systematic sampling procedure was used. Participants were chosen according to their availability using a “snowball” method” (Shamir & Melnik, 2002: 3). Thus the core sample is linked to the case location - the Sophia Antipolis science and technology park in the South of France, and originated from the researchers' personal contacts<sup>3</sup>. A limitation of the snowball sampling technique is that it can be “an open invitation for sampling bias” (McQueen & Knussen, 2002: 74). This study, however includes employees (from senior manager to employee to currently unemployed), as well as males and females; single and married candidates; those with children and those without; with the ages ranging from the late twenties to early sixties. The criteria for inclusion in the sample were to be non-French, to be educated to third level, to be living/working in the area on a fixed term basis, and to be fluent English speakers (though not necessarily to have English as their native language). Refer to Table 1 for a breakdown of the sample included in this paper.

**Table 1. Overview of Interview Sample**

"Name"	Gender	Nationality	Age	Family Status	Organisation	Role
Angie	female	American	41	Married, 2 children (10, 8)	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Lead Program Manager, people responsibility
Clare	female	American	62	Divorced twice; single	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Senior Manager, people manager
Milly	female	American	34	Married, 2 children (2, 6 months)	IT & Networking industry; corporate HQ USA	Project Manager

<sup>2</sup> The information regarding companies and employees in the Sophia Antipolis park was taken from the official Sophia Antipolis website: <http://www.sophia-antipolis.org/Sophia%20Antipolis/lesite/lesite.htm>, 8 November 2004.

<sup>3</sup> The use of personal contacts in gaining access to research candidates has been advocated in research literature (Bresnen, 1988: 38-39; Buchanan et al., 1988: 56; Crompton & Jones, 1988: 68-70; Beynon, 1988: 21-33).



Louise	female	Australian	40	Married	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Employee
John	male	Belge	29	Single	IT industry, corporate HQ USA	Technology Consultant
Kate	female	English	38	Married, 2 children (6,3)	IT/Accountancy consultancy, corporate HQ USA	Site Manager, people responsibility, <i>currently unemployed</i>
Susan	female	English	39	Single	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Help Desk employee
Tracy	female	English	54	Widow, 2 children (24, 21)	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Senior Manager Marketing, people responsibility
Pat	male	English	34	Married	IT industry, corporate HQ USA	Technology Consultant, employee
Rick	male	English	44	Engaged	IT industry, corporate HQ USA	Industry Business Manager
Shaun	male	English	39	Married, 2 children (2, 6 months)	Chemical industry, corporate HQ Germany	Manager, people responsibility
Steve	male	English	34	Married	IT/Financial industry, corporate HQ Sweden	Manager
Hilda	female	German	41	Married, 1 child (7)	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Manager, people manager
Fiona	female	Irish	28	Co-habiting	Pharmaceutical industry, corporate HQ France	Marketing Manager
David	male	Irish	32	Single	IT & Networking industry; corporate HQ USA	Networking Consultant, <i>currently unemployed</i>
Donal	male	Irish	36	Married, 2 step-children (14, 12)	IT industry, corporate HQ USA	Manager, people responsibility
Francis	male	Irish	33	Co-habiting	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Internet Developer Technology
Ronald	male	Italian	40	Married, 1 child (6)	IT industry, corporate HQ USA	Manager, people responsibility
Peter	male	Norwegian	34	Married	Travel industry; corporate HQ Spain, some corporate functions in France	Manager
Alice	female	Scottish	43	Married, 2 children (13, 8)	Management & technology consultancy, corporate HQ USA	Head of Recruitment, people responsibility, <i>currently unemployed</i>
Mary	female	Scottish	34	Married	Pharmaceutical industry, corporate HQ Switzerland, some corporate functions in France	Pharmacist
Ingrid	female	Swedish	31	Single	IT industry, corporate HQ USA	Team Coordinator
Billy	male	Welsh (British)	52	Divorced, 3 children (19, 14, 11)	IT industry, corporate HQ USA	Pre-sales consultant

Note to table:

This table has been sorted firstly by nationality, then by gender, and finally by pseudo-name

Each member of the sample was interviewed and tape-recorded, with the interviews taking on average between 1 and 1.5 hours. The format of the interview was very informal, with the respondents simply being asked to tell the interviewer about their life following an international career – the issues and advantages they perceive. While an interview guide was used to ensure that the interviews covered the same main areas, there was inherent flexibility and open-ness in the interview to allow the participants to raise and develop other issues of relevance to them personally. For ethical reasons, the identities of all interviewees in this paper are masked by using pseudo-names and not mentioning their organisation's name. The interview transcripts in this paper were coded and analysed with the aid of the NVivo qualitative research analysis .

We acknowledge the limitations of the methodology adopted in this study (such as the specificity of the location and the snowball sampling technique) which renders that the study cannot be generalised across other categories of assignees and other countries (a prime limitation of the case study approach), however we feel that the *content* of the study raises interesting questions for comparison with other locations and / or types of international assignees. While it outlines the lived experiences of particular non nationals in a specific location in a foreign country, it is hoped that “readers will be able ... to generalize subjectively ... from the case in question to their own personal experiences” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a: xv).

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### Disciplinary Control

Taking a Foucauldian perspective on disciplinary control in an organisational context where the employees are in an unfamiliar culture as is the case in this study, it is apparent that tension exists between individuals wishing to pursue an individual career, and the structural restrictions imposed on them by virtue of the context they are in. (Giddens 1979; Giddens 1993) work on structuration theory is relevant here insofar as the interdependence between human agency and social structure is emphasised. The individual as master of his/her own destiny is examined, but wider macro conditions also have a part to play - from economic to cultural (language) to wider family. Here, the complex nature of an individual's career within a social context is contingent on a number of elements, not least of which being the current market employment situation, which may tie an employee to an employer simply due to lack of alternative options and the need to have a regular income. Some interviewees in the sample in this paper have noted the difficult current market situation and its limiting of alternative choices: “...because in today's economic environment..., it's just not that easy – you could easily find yourself, you know, without a job. So you don't have that luxury anymore ...to just go like OK, ...I'll get a job anywhere. ... [Not] like 2 years ago...” (John, Belgian, 29).

Barry (English, 39) also notices the structural shift in the area where unemployment is rife: “I think the career choice has always been mainly because of Sophia, there's always been a steady stream of people who come here to work. But I think that has actually got less because, again for economic reasons - the jobs aren't around in Sophia like they used to be. So I think people are now choosing to come down here for life style reasons ...rather than career reasons”

Given this current situation, the power in the employment relationship would appear to rest with the employing organisation, in this case the multinational. However, taking Foucault's perspective that power is only maintained as long as it is adhered to by social actors, it can be assumed that should structural market conditions improve to create a more booming employment period that such control would shift back to the employee, who then would not be as tied to the organisation for work (and financial security).

### Concertive Power

In this context, concertive power, the power of peers, was also noted by the interviewees: “Then you sort of hear: ‘well unemployment is so high. You should be happy that you have a job’. If you complain about the stress, then ... you hear ‘people who are unemployed ... would like to have the stress that you're saying you've got” (Tracy, English, 54). Here the concertive pressure to be happy with your lot and remain where you are career-wise (at least for the time being, until the economic situation improves) is obvious. That however creates tension for the employee who is unhappy in their current position. It again implies that once market conditions improve, loyalty to the current organisation would not be strong enough to

resist temptation to jump ship and follow a more boundaryless career, moving to an organisation offering a perceived improved position.

### **Objective & Subjective Career**

While elements on the objective career side may not be optimal, subjective elements beyond financial or visible benefits play a role here in an individual's career related decisions. Angie (American, 41) notes a negative objective career element which being in the area brings: *"Because yeah 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 [I] would have progressed [had I remained in the States]"*. This sentiment was echoed by Rick (English, 44): *"[U]nless I was completely stupid, I'd be far better off financially and up [had I remained in England]. I think here you're trading location for career advancement and money. If you're not in Paris in France, then you're not in the right place"*.

On the other hand, in this case it appears that subjective elements supercede the objective career focus. Milly (American, 34) notices that free time has become a major issue for her: *"Sundays, taking vacations... They sound like little things but it's a completely different culture outlook for me, from being American. ... I mean even ... on vacation ... you'd still be expected to carry your mobile and take your [laptop], you know – "you're not checking your emails everyday?!" kind of thing. And here [France] I mean you're on vacation you know. And that's a big difference"*

Similarly, Francis (Irish, 34) actually turned down a promotional position in order to work in an area that was particularly exciting to him, where he could learn innovative skills that would be easily transferable in a buoyant employment market: *"I got the possibility in [department name]... [T]hey said: "... would...making you a team lead change your mind?"... I said "no" and that was true, because I was more interested in what work I was doing on a day to day basis and being team lead wouldn't change that. ... [C]hanging job horizontally set me back probably ... in terms of the hierarchy. It helped me out in terms of the CV, because I got to do stuff that... looks really good on a CV, so I'm very happy about that..."* Here, learning and self-development were prioritised over organisational advancement. This example also underlines the recognition by the interviewees' of the importance of having transferable skills in an open job market, suggesting the transactional nature of the current employment contract.

### **Shift to managing your own career**

While some individuals acknowledge their special treatment with the organisation managing their career for them: *"I mean only last week I was on an assessment centre for 3 days.... And that's part of career development programme I think for me personally. But I'm one of the exceptions. I know not everyone's being treated like this"* (Shaun, English, 39), the majority realise that they have to be proactive in taking care of their own career. The following quote from Billy (Welsh, 52) outlines this: *"...it's been very much a question of me looking after it myself... I do get training but it's always down to myself ...to initiate the steps to move forward. ...It was very clear to me ... up until ... early 90s when the company was going very strongly that there was well an initiative to go to training, to be trained, to move forward, there were opportunities to move forward ... and ... there were opportunities opening all the time. Since the mid 90s it's been very difficult because the company's been shrunk, opportunities are less and less. .... It's a question of you wanting to go out and get it rather than the company forcing it down your neck. So it's very much left to the individual."* This would suggest individual control over their own careers, mainly without the assistance and guidance of the organisation. While this could be seen as individual power over organisational control, the slackening of organisational control over their employees' career renders the psychological contract more transactional in nature. There is also an issue here for those employees needing organisational guidance to further their career and their lack of

control given they are not offered opportunities for career progression, but have to proactively fight for it. Thus, the personal character of the employee plays a major part in determining whether or not they get to advance in the organisation; i.e. whether or not they are vocal and visible enough. This would suggest a lack of diversity (in character, personality) of individuals within organisations that are following an organisational career, which would potentially have repercussions on the organisation in the future, particularly for multinational organisations which need to cater to diverse cultural groupings and vast numbers of employees.

### **Boundaryless career**

Having transferable skills was judged to be important by the interviewees in order to avail of opportunities and re-market oneself externally. Mary noted that having a pharmacy degree opened up opportunities to her internationally, even though she may not have been happiest at some of the work alternatives available: *"And ... because I'm a pharmacist, I can find locum work in pharmacies quite easily, the next day even. Even though it's not the line that really interests me"* (Mary, Scottish, 34). In contrast Tracy found that: *"...the big problem I have was that 10 years in [company name], then 6 years of Executive Briefing Centre Manager in [another company name]..., every one said: [her name] is a Customer Centre Manager. And everyone thought, well you know how many customer centres are there in Sophia? I mean that, that, my biggest challenge was people seeing me differently as a customer centre manager. Because I was sort of stuck in that role. And I kept on saying to them: 'But I don't want to be a customer centre manager. I've done that'"* (Diane, English, 46). Being pigeon-holed in a particular role then increased tension in trying to attain alternative external opportunities since many doors were closed, the perception being in society that if you work for so long in one particular area that that is all you are good at. This confirms the literature relating to the shift toward transactional psychological contracts within organisations since transferable skills are paramount in trading key skills in the employment market. Similarly, a move toward the boundaryless career path is evident, at least in the interviewees' thoughts, while perhaps not so evident in action due to the weak employment market in the area, rendering options to current employment in the area to be very limited.

### **Protean Career**

The strong weighting of elements in the subjective career over the objective career is noted above. Wider factors in individuals' lives - life stage, marital/parental status - all play a part in building up their respective protean career, which by definition, is unfixed and ever-changing, with significant life occurrences changing career priorities. This is evident from Shaun (English, 39)'s comments: *"I mean to be honest if I was on my own here then I wouldn't think twice about going to [corporate headquarters location on assignment for a few years]... But I don't think I'd survive away from my family"*.

Susan (English, 39) also gives a significant life occurrence (in her case the death of a close family member) as the catalyst in her reassessing her career priorities and taking a wider view of what are the most important things in her life: *"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..... [I]t 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 ... 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 say "hang on, am I enjoying this?". And so now I tend to really live my life where ... money isn't, obviously you need enough to survive but it's not the be all and end all"*.

Kate (English, 38) also experienced a significant life occurrence when she was made redundant, which has changed her career outlook: *“Before we were closed I wanted to be the next level up: I was senior manager and the next level up was ... partner and I was ... 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”*.

Billy (Welsh, 52) also consciously chose to prioritise his family over an ambitious career, here exercising his individual control over his protean career: *“I think you have to take a choice at some time in your career - either you want to stay around your family or you decide to, you want to make a career. And .... so my choice was to stay around my family, to avoid travelling if I could, so that limited my career path... I mean the social and the family life is essential. And that over-rides my professional life, any kind of career move...”*

These examples describe the three key elements in a protean career – autonomy (e.g. having control over one’s working life), personal value (e.g. prioritising personal goals to organisational goals), and psychological success (e.g. feeling content in oneself). We noted previously that Starkey & McKinlay (1998) found Foucault’s later work to emphasise more the individual power to actualise desires beyond broad scale covert power in capitalist societies subjecting individuals to norms of behaviour. In this section on the protean career, the individuals’ desires and personal priorities take precedence to organisational roles or objective career elements. This suggests the ultimate power over one’s career rests with the individuals in question, and the priorities here are subject to continuously change over time, as new experiences and significant life occurrences impact on individuals’ lives.

Nonetheless, there is an obvious tension between choosing personal, social life fulfilment over objective career success. If there is a shortcoming in one area which is not compensated on the other side, it manifests in frustration, and action, in order to improve one’s lot. This can be seen from John (Belgian, 29)’s comments: *“But ... sometimes you need some more fulfillment there, ...to fill up something, you know, that’s missing on the other side. And if something’s lacking ...on both sides, you just end up ... [leaving]”*.

However, a significant occurrence is oftentimes the catalyst in action on the agent’s side. In John’s particular case he opted to avail of the generous voluntary redundancy package that was on offer in the company and chose to take a job elsewhere. With regard to loyalty to the company, it is interesting to note the transactional relationship in the psychological contract between employee and organisation here: *“I don’t feel the ... company owed me anything or, you know, I owed the company anything, it was just that I happened to be in the right place ...at the right time, in the right country and everything, where they have ... social plans that are very ... beneficial to the actual employee, ...that I could take ... that opportunity”*.

Here the structural environment of being employed in France where there are very employee-favourable social laws (such as relating to redundancy protection and working hours) actually acts as a concrete force in determining career changes. In John’s case (young, single male), with no family ties to the area, the financial package on offer by opting to leave the organisation was too good to turn down, given his lack of social ties to the area.

It is more complicated for those with ties to the area (partner being French, children in French system, home ownership etc). Billy (Welsh, 52) is an example here: *“Because I’m used to the living conditions here, plus the fact that my children ... were born here ... in France. And I consider myself close to my children. I don’t want to be a long way away from them”*.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper focuses on individuals' perceptions of power, choice and control in pursuit of an international career as locally hired foreigners. The material shared here is part of a PhD research undertaking on the international career (a move from the expatriate experience to the protean career). For the purpose of this paper the findings were limited to such relating to power and control over one's career and where one lives.

This paper offers a critical perspective to contemporary literature on the international career, taking findings from an in-depth qualitative study of an under-examined category of international assignee - the self-initiated, permanent international assignee. Here, both agency and structure are found to be of utmost relevance concerning the choice (or lack of choice) that an individual following an international career path has. The shared perceptions of the interviewees in this study regarding power and control of their career in an international context are analysed from a critical theory (Foucault) and critical realism (Giddens) outlook.

While individualism in seeking to follow a career over which one has control has been proclaimed in the findings of this study, the relevance of structural forces influencing international movement (such as the respective labour market economies/employment; restrictions to migration or promotion of migration) cannot be ignored. The impact of such structural elements on individuals' agency is dependent on the individual's characteristics (age, ties to an area...). A major obstacle to the grasping of control over one's career and life is economically-based. Financial security plays a large part, potentially limiting the freedom of a totally subjective career, while in turn binding the individual to an organisation for 'financial protection'. This is particularly noticeable at different life stages, across gender, and within the economic climate of employment insecurity (redundancies and closures).

The findings here show that a transactional psychological contract is evident between the interviewees and their employing multinational organisations. Loyalty to the organisation is for as long as it offers the best alternative, or potentially the only current alternative, as in the current negative economic climate present in the location in question here. This is in keeping with boundaryless career literature. However, over and above the transactional contract, the control over which is tied to structural market and economic conditions, currently resting in the organisations' hands for this study; this research has taken a broader look at elements of control over individuals' careers. In particular the protean career concept has been explored. Here a more systems approach to careers is emphasised, taking in more subjective career elements, as opposed to purely objective ones. It is evident from the sample in this research that the individuals here choose to follow an international career so that they can benefit from quality of life for themselves and their family, self development and self-learning, oftentimes more than having a very successful career as judged from the objective career perspective. The attitudes of colleagues and friends to such individuals and their "foreign" or "exotic" nature (by virtue of not originating from the area in question) and the socially constructed perception of having a great lifestyle with great weather and outdoor pursuit opportunities appears to take precedence over executive career success, such as traditionally moving vertically up the organisation ladder. If both objective and subjective career success can be achieved, even better. However the structural forces of living in France where social policy is such that working hours are restricted and workers are heavily protected seems to render the career-focused mentality found in other societies to second place. The individuals that participated in this study appear to be striving to achieve professional success, but not at any cost, and particularly not as a replacement to and personal (family, social life) fulfilment.

This study then suggests the potential "spiritual" emancipation of employees from their employing organisations, who choose a protean or more subjective career over a perceived commuter-, power/control-, lack-of-personal-life -based organisational career. It is acknowledged that the findings are particular for the area depicted in this study (South of

France) and may not be mirrored elsewhere. Nonetheless, it raises the question as to whether members of our internationally mobile workforce are taking more control of their lives, careers and futures.

The subjectivity of the international worker's career focus is bound to effect organisational control over their career. This paper suggests that organisations may need to adopt a more systems approach to careers, so that at different life stages different career options are open to employees. The alternative is that those employees will seek out different employment (such as moving organisation, becoming self-employed) which will enable them to fulfil the elements in their protean career most important at that particular life stage. However, due to structural forces (poor employment market currently in the research area) the impact of this strong preference for maintaining quality of life without 'selling your soul to the organisation' is not visible to organisations. While certain organisations offer a protean career to employees at a certain stage, the ongoing care in catering for changing priorities within the protean career over time is not apparent. It is this ongoing joint- organisation/individual focus on maintaining a balanced protean career which underlines the extent to which the psychological work contract remains purely transactional (prompting employees to follow a boundaryless career) or returns to a more relational bond, ensuring a flexible but committed future working relationship between the employee and the multinational. Such questions and issues require further research and analysis.

Contemporary career theory notes the "need to tailor psychological contractual conditions to the specific needs of the individual" (Larsen & Ellehave, 2004: 114). This mirrors (Swart and Kinnie 2004) that organisations adopting a uniform, one size fits all approach to career management is not sufficient. (Bailyn and Schein 1980) believe that organisations need to "think more creatively about the various kinds of people carrying on careers within them, with the goal of providing the possibility of career satisfaction for all and thus increasing the effectiveness of the technical, professional, and managerial workforce" (ibid: 70-71). This underlines the requirement for different individual career alternatives to be discussed in career management sessions. Orthodox career theory has assumed that "most people are interested in a managerial career, and want vertical progressions" (Larsen & Ellehave, 2004:114), however this has not been empirically tested. Indeed the empirical study here has testified that objective career aims (financial advancement, promotion) are often not the prime career motivation, but rather more subjective (learning, work/life balance, quality of life) elements take precedence. This would imply that organisations need to adopt a broader approach to career management in collaboration with their employees. That is, if the organisations wish to retain those employees, an issue not discussed here.

Arthur & Rousseau (1996)'s analysis of 150 empirical articles regarding career issues from five of the leading US journals between 1980 and 1994 found that more than three-quarters of the articles on careers presumed "an intrafirm focus with this focus in turn subordinating the subjective perspective on careers to the objective perspective" (ibid: 8). Hall & Harrington (2004) call on career research to "incorporate other, non-work related elements of a person's life: A protean view of careers would see work in the context of the person's life as a whole – more of a "systems" view of looking at work and career. This would suggest that researchers consider the "whole person" when discussing one's career and not simply focus on what is happening in the individual's work life. How work is impacting issues such as personal feelings, the pursuit of personal interests, spousal relations, parenting, and community involvement should all be of interest to career researchers and may therefore bring career research and work/life research more closely in line with each other". They also note the need to look at career stage theory and "to investigate how stages of family development intersect with career stage theory. This may be particularly relevant since women's (and increasingly men's) career choices are influenced by a desire to better integrate their family and work responsibilities". This paper has attempted to address some of these concerns by

looking at elements of power, control and the protean career for the sample of interviewees based in the south of France.

In the traditional career theory approach (linear, vertical, organisation career path) careers have been generally considered as dependent on the organisation, rather than the independent variable in the organisation/career relationship. There is a lack of literature on careers as the independent variable, for instance considering career patterns' implications for the organisation (Arthur et al., 1989; Weick, 1996; Larsen & Ellehave, 2000). This paper has, in contrast, attempted to position the protean career and its potential implications for organisations.

A further critique of the orthodox career theory is its micro-level definition (Larsen & Ellehave, 2000: 94). The "whole, rather than ... the experiences of individual employees within the labor market" ((Barney and Lawrence 1989): 425) has been the focus. This research study, in contrast, examines in-depth "the experiences of individual employees within the labor market" (ibid). However, further research is welcome here.

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