

# **Do Global Careers Imply Construction of Global Identities?**

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This batch of papers has been presented at the Fifth Conference “Dynamics of diversity in the globalisation era”.

# **Do Global Careers Imply Construction of Global Identities?**

## **Summary**

Globalization is everywhere, new technological and organizational innovations have compressed time and space. National as well as organizational borders have become permeable in favor of regions and networks. A broad spectrum of interlinked global forces has created a dynamic and fluid present that, in many ways, has changed the contemporary organizational prerequisites. The transformation of the organizational conditions have also changed the previous understanding of careers and facilitated new types of relationships between employer and employee that are more transactional and global. However, the current knowledge regarding these kinds of relationships and the individual workers perception of his/her personal development and career in relation to the global context, is limited. To address this issue this paper focuses on international itinerants, i.e. professionals with global careers who have been employed by at least two independent companies in foreign countries and thus arguably at the core of this fluid global context. The aim of this paper is to explore the identity construction process of international itinerants and what they identify with in the global context of their careers. In order to do this, an identity construction perspective will be applied, including social aspects of what these individuals identify with. Through a structural narrative analysis, presented as aggregated narratives of interviews, this paper shows the process of how three Swedish international itinerants construct their identity. To explore if a global identity is constructed, and what that might entail, three dimensions of what the itinerants identify with are in focus; the organization and career, the communities and networks, and the country and culture.

**Keywords:** Identity Construction, Global Careers, Global Identity, Narratives, International Itinerants

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## **Do global careers imply construction of global identities?**

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### **Abstract**

Globalization is everywhere, new technological and organizational innovations have compressed time and space. National as well as organizational borders have become permeable in favor of regions and networks. A broad spectrum of interlinked global forces has created a dynamic and fluid present that, in many ways, have changed the contemporary organizational prerequisites. The transformation of the organizational conditions have also changed the previous understanding of careers and facilitated new types of relationships between employer and employee that are more transactional and global. However, the current knowledge regarding these kinds of relationships and the individual workers perception of his/hers personal development and career in relation to the global context, is limited. To address this issue this paper focuses on international itinerants, i.e. professionals with global careers who have been employed by at least two independent companies in foreign countries and thus arguably at the core of this fluid global context. The aim of this paper is to explore the identity construction process of international itinerants and what they identify with in the global context of their careers. In order to do this, an identity construction perspective will be applied, including social aspects of what these individuals identify with. Through a structural narrative analysis, presented as aggregated narratives of interviews, this paper shows the process of how three Swedish international itinerants construct their identity. To explore if a global identity is constructed, and what that might entail, three dimensions of what the itinerants identify with are in focus; the organization and career, the communities and networks, and the country and culture.

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## **Introduction**

Globalization is no longer a peripheral phenomenon, ongoing technological change and organizational innovations have compressed time and space. The process of globalization is simultaneously driven by, as well as resulting in, the integration of national economies into the global economy. A process that is dependent on and drives everything from increasing migration, cultural dissimilation, and international collaboration to foreign investments, capital flows, trade, and the spread of modern technology (Igbaria 1999, Bartelson 2000, Rodrik 1997, Schaeffer 2003). Regional economies, societies, and cultures are consequently being integrated through globe-spanning network of exchange, arguably creating a more homogeneous world (Schaeffer 2003). Due to these changing prerequisites, national and organizational borders also become permeable in favor of regions and networks (Urry 2003).

In terms of contemporary working life and organizations, the emergence of worldwide production markets and broader access to a range of foreign products for consumers and companies can be identified (Castells 2000). In line with this development companies also regularly move and function across both time zones and countries in order to be able to literally work around the clock. A combination of economic, technological, sociocultural, and political forces have consequently created a dynamic and fluid present that, in many ways, have changed the prerequisites for organizations, and the management as well as the individual workers (Castells 2000, Urry 2003).

This development has facilitated new types of relationships between employer and employee; relationships that for some are more transactional and global. That is, opening up for employees to have global careers. A global career can be defined as a series of experiences, events and actions, characterized by mutual dependency between an individual and an organization in global interaction (Holt Larsen 2004). However, the current knowledge regarding the individual workers perception of his/hers personal development and career, in relation to the global context, is limited. With a changing view of careers, as multidirectional, dynamic, and fluid, 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).

Globalization could consequently be said to influence individuals' careers and potentially also the way they construct their identities. Shokef and Erez (2006) have used the term "global identity" to refer to individuals' sense of belonging to and identification with groups operating in the global work environment. In order to increase the understanding of individuals with global careers and what such a global identity might entail, an identity construction perspective will be applied, involving social aspects of what these individuals identify with in their context. To study identity construction in the search for global identities this paper focuses on international itinerants. International itinerants can be defined as professionals with global careers who have been employed by at least two independent companies in foreign countries (definition adapted from Banai and Harry 2004:97). Such international itinerants with global careers, crossing organizational, as

well as national boundaries are people engaged in, enacting, and central to the described fluid global context.

The aim of this paper is therefore to explore the identity construction process of international itinerants and what they identify with in the global context of their careers. This will be done through a narrative analysis of interviews with Swedish international itinerants currently working abroad. Based on construction, structuring and, analysis of narratives an aggregated narrative will be presented, illustrating the identity processes throughout a global career.

To start with the identity construction perspective in this paper will be outlined. The paper continues with a discussion of previous research on individuals with global careers; global competencies, global careers and the concept of global identity. Then the methodology used is outlined, introducing the how the interviews were conducted and the principles for constructing and structuring the narratives. Our analysis is presented in an aggregated narrative. Thereafter the paper ends with a discussion of the results and our conclusions.

### **An identity construction perspective**

In our everyday lives we refer to ourselves, project ourselves, and use identity to differentiate ourselves from others or to show our belonging to different groups. Identity construction can be perceived as a process of self-reflection, taking place as an individual moves through time and space, in interaction between the self and its social context (Lindgren and Wåhlin 2001). In a way we are always in a process of becoming, and as we adjust to new conditions and when meeting new environments reflection is triggered and we can consider ourselves, our lives, and our way of understanding things from a new perspective (Wåhlin 2006). Previous research has shown that in the construction of one's identity both individual, private sources, such as personal values, and more public or social sources are important (Kohonen 2005). 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 and Turner 1979). Thus identity construction can be seen as bridging conceptions of social identity and self-identity as a process where individuals continuously construct identity in the interaction between the self and the social context.

Occasions to reflect on who we are arise when we make a transition from our everyday social contexts (Lindgren and Wåhlin 2001). Kohonen (2004) showed that even a single international work experience is a shift in cultural environment and career transition that gives opportunities for learning, development, and self-reflection and that identity construction processes are engaged as the social ties to the home culture and organization are weakened. For individuals with global careers, encompassing numerous transitions, into new organizational and cultural contexts the process of identity construction is engaged and may evolve additionally. For individuals frequently making transitions in their social context, moving between jobs and locations, networks beyond organizational boundaries may become more important as stable group identifications are less available

(Lindgren and Wåhlin 2001). Hence, individuals in this fluid context need other fixed points or groups to relate to in their identity construction.

### **Global competencies, global careers, global identity**

Looking at previous research on individuals working within the global context a lot of research has focused on international assignments from the perspective of the company sending out the individual. When considering entire careers, the competencies or characteristics of global leaders or managers have often been in focus. Osland et al. (2006), concluded after a literature review that global leadership is a multidimensional construct involving six core dimensions of competencies: cross-cultural relationship skills; traits and values such as integrity, emotional intelligence and stable personal life; global business expertise; global organizing expertise; cognitive orientation, including open-minded, global mindset and cognitive complexity; and visioning. Adler and Bartholomew (1992) defined a transnationally, or globally, competent manager as having a global perspective, being able to learn, interact and work with people from many cultures and able to adapt to living in many cultures. Capellen and Janssens (2005) suggested that future research could focus on the global career paths as a sequence of moves within its context, influenced by factors within individual, organizational, and global environment domains, to understand the different types of experiences of global managers.

Suutari and Mäkelä (2007) used the career competencies framework when studying managers with global careers and found extensive developmental effects on career capital. The competency-based view focuses on three ways of knowing: knowing-how reflects career or job related skills and knowledge, knowing-whom relates to social capital and career relevant networks, and knowing-why competencies relate to career motivation, personal meaning and identification (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994). It was found that knowing-why competencies increased in global careers, with reported increased self-awareness, self-analysis and personal growth and clearer career interests and values. The knowing-how development consisted of both general management skills and cross-cultural competencies and an increased importance was found of knowing-whom competencies, with developments of both stronger and weaker ties (Suutari and Mäkelä 2007). The competencies developed can be seen as the “what” while with the broader identity construction perspective in this paper the focus is more on the process; “how”.

Suutari and Mäkelä (2007) also examined the identity related outcomes of global careers with a focus on career identity. They found that their respondents developed a “global career identity” including aspects as a high level of career capital with confidence and self-reliance, a trust in employability on a broader global job market, internal career motivations and staying in charge of one’s own career while seeking new challenges and retaining the international aspects in their careers. The results of Suutari and Mäkelä (2007) also highlighted the importance of networks and a strong, clear sense of identity and place in working life. Shokef and Erez (2006) have used the term global identity to refer to individuals’ sense of belonging to and identification with groups operating in the

global work environment. While this broader concept is useful other aspects in the global context or sources may be drawn on by the individuals with global careers in their identity construction. To include the social identity aspects of identity construction relates the international itinerants to their frequently changing environment and the sources and contexts they draw on in their identity construction.

Referring to social identity theory, Hogg and Terry (2000) claimed that the organizations and workgroups an individual belongs to plays a more or less important part in his/her sense of self and identity. Richardson and McKenna (2006) expanding on Black and Gregersens (1992) model of expatriates' dual allegiance to the home organization or the host company examined the relationship of self-directed expatriates with their home and host countries showing the dynamics in this relationship. Sanchez, Spector and Cooper (2000) more directly focused on the dual identification expatriates experience between the home and host cultures and describe successful adjustment as a process, undergoing an identity transformation, ideally landing in identification midway between the cultures. For international itinerants moving between organizations as well as between several different countries and cultures these identifications might become more blurred. Therefore, in this paper the focus in the analysis is on three dimensions of identification; the organization and career, the communities and networks, and the country and culture.

## **Method**

In order to understand their own and others lives individuals can put them into narrative form, in a way positioning themselves which in interaction with others is reconstructed as it is accepted, rejected or improved upon (Czarniawska 2004). Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001) argue that the narrative nature of identity construction requires a narrative methodological approach. A coherent narrative encompassing more or less articulated life experiences is a way of clarifying how the individual relates to his/her context that can fill a sense-making function. "Narratives can be seen as a process whereby individuals construct their identities in interaction with the researcher/s and the situation" (Lindgren and Wåhlin 2001; 363). Interviews with international itinerants are treated as a narrative co-constructed with the researcher. To illustrate the identity construction processes throughout a global career a framework based on the structure of narratives is applied to the interviews. The method of analysis was selected in order to keep the focus on what was told in the interviews and to be able to analyze and compare the international itinerants' entire career paths. With a more thematic analysis the stories told would become more fragmented and we would lose the context and coherence of narratives. The structured narratives are compared and used to construct an aggregated narrative.

### ***The interviews***

International itinerants as being engaged in the global context, having global careers and having been employed by several companies in foreign countries, are selected as the most pertinent type of individuals for the purpose of the study. A large number of unstructured interviews with international itinerants have been conducted. All the international itinerants interviewed are Swedes currently living and working abroad. This paper is an initial attempt to develop methods and preliminary understanding for further studies in

relation to global careers and identity construction. As this paper is exploratory a sample of three interviews was selected to illustrate the approach. Out of the interviews that had been conducted with international itinerants the three interviews that appeared to be most dissimilar were selected to illustrate that even though international itinerants can be considered a homogenous group, with very different experiences, their global career transitions could translate into similarities in the identity processes. One of the international itinerants (in this paper called Alex) were located and contacted through a community on the internet dedicated to Swedes working abroad where an announcement was posted, looking for Swedes working abroad for interviews and describing the research. This interview was conducted over the phone. The other two itinerants in this paper, referred to as Frank and Henry, were interviewed in Taiwan, where they are currently living. They were contacted through a representative of the Swedish Trade Council who agreed to pass on an e-mail to Swedes in the area.

All the interviews were started with the very open question “could you tell me about yourself and your career” in order to encourage the international itinerants to talk freely about their experiences. No definition of the concept of career was given to allow the interviewee to bring up what he/she felt was relevant. This led to longer and shorter narratives with some of the respondents going in to great details of their lives while others gave shorter accounts of where they had worked. The interviews then continued with follow up questions to encourage more detailed accounts. An interview guide had been developed used as a memory guide in order to cover relevant themes. The aim was to allow the interviewees to expand on things, and bring up topics that seemed important to them. The interviews ranged between one and two hours in time.

### ***Constructing and structuring narratives***

The term narrative is used in many different ways. A narrative can be understood as a spoken or written account of events and actions that are chronologically connected (Czarniawska 2004). It can be used to mean a clearly bounded narrative told or written, an entire life story, or narratively organized compositions from interviews, documents or observations; constructed stories from data (Riessman 2008). This study focuses on the latter of these. The first step taken in the analysis was to write out each interview into a coherent story or constructing a researcher’s own narrative out of them (Czarniawska 2004). By putting the longer interview transcripts into a narrative form a better understanding of each interview could be reached. Based on the recordings, transcriptions and notes taken during the interviews or while transcribing or listening to the interviews the interview material was put into a more chronological sequence and important elements throughout each of the interviews were identified. In the words of Polkinghorne (1995) this narrative analysis is organizing or configuration of elements of the data into a coherent developmental account; that is to say the interviews (in this case) are integrated and interpreted in an emplotted narrative.

An approach in narrative methods is through an interest in narrative structure and there are various types of structural analyses of narratives within different fields. Structural analyses of narratives are most often focused on *how* a story is told, rather than *what* is told, often down to the level of clauses (Riessman 2008). However, in this study the

content is in focus and the structure of narratives is used more as an analytical tool. Socio-linguists Labov and Waletzky (1967), who are often cited as a point of departure, outlined the overall structure of narratives in functional elements:

- 1) Orientation: a section introducing the listener to the person, place, time, behavioral situation
  - 2) Complication/complicating action - a series of events that regularly end in a result (This is the event sequence often referred to as the plot. A more complex narrative may consist of several cycles)
  - 3) Evaluation - delineates the complication from the result and indicates the relative importance of these events
  - 4) Resolution - may follow or coincide with the evaluation.
- In addition narratives may also include a final section: 5) Coda - with the function of returning to the present.

The plot, how the events are connected, is central in narratives. As Bruner (2002) explains it; a narrative has its narrator and characters, there is an ordinary state of the world, then something happens and the story is then concerned with dealing with this breach and its consequences and then there is an outcome, with the final feature the coda evaluating what it might mean. The narratives of the international itinerants show several such cycles of what Labov and Waletzky referred to as complicating actions. On the basis of this, the principles for the structuring of the narratives, the first step in the analysis, can be illustrated by the following table.

**Table 1- Principles for structuring the narratives**

<b>Orientation</b>	<i>introducing the international itinerant and background</i>
<b>Complicating action</b>	<i>what happened (for example to make them go abroad) and what actions were taken</i>
<b>Result</b>	<i>what new state was reached</i>
<b>Complicating action - Result</b> May be repeated for a number of cycles	
<b>Evaluation, Resolution and (if applicable) Coda</b>	<i>evaluation of the events, result and current situation</i>

The constructed narratives from the interviews were analyzed on the basis of this framework. Each narrative was put into this developed structure, in a similar way to the construction of life stories done by Siljanen (2007) in her analysis of expatriates in the Middle East to enable the search for similarities, differences, and special features among the stories. The different elements in the structured narrative for each individual were compared and contrasted, with the emphasis on the plot and simultaneously analyzed through the theoretical perspective of identity construction and social identity; what the

international itinerants identify with, based on the three previously mentioned dimensions. The analysis of the structured narratives is then brought together in an aggregated structured narrative which is presented in this paper.

### **An aggregated narrative**

In this section the results of our analysis will be presented in the form of an aggregated narrative following the structure presented previously. This narrative is based on the three international itinerants, Alex, Henry, and Frank, and throughout the narrative our analysis is exemplified with their experiences and reflections told in the interviews. While the three stories illustrated here are very different, some commonalities become visible in the structure.

#### *Orientation*

Alex and Frank both had an interest in living or working abroad, Alex with a foreign girlfriend and Frank growing up in two countries with a dual citizenship. While Frank was a musician who identified more with his musical career Henry was a high performer quickly advancing in his career; running his own company he saw himself as successful.

#### *Complicating action*

Alex applied abroad, partly to be with his foreign girlfriend. However, she ended up getting a job in Sweden and the relationship ended. Even though the relationship ended, he moved abroad to pursue his goal of living abroad. For Frank continuing to live abroad after his studies was due to an offer to continue with his music career. However, it became taxing and as he started identifying more with his career he applied at another company; which led to him being sent to handle a troublesome unit, since he was familiar with Scandinavia. For Henry it was a professional and personal crisis that made him move abroad, when his business bankrupted and he divorced with his wife of many years. He blamed Sweden and the Swedish system for “killing his company” and using contacts he asked for a job to get away from Sweden.

Although for different reasons, the move abroad was connected with personal or professional changes for the international itinerants, for some the transitions were very drastic.

#### *Result*

The first move abroad was challenging for all three of the itinerants, the transition into a new cultural environment, as well as a new work, family and social situation led to self-reflection and reevaluation of what was important to them and who they really were.

Alex found the transition painful and feels that he made some beginners mistakes. When he moved he expected everything to work as in Sweden but he had to realize that there were other rules that applied. Since Frank moved to a country in Scandinavia, he was expected to know the language and culture. However, the transition was harder than expected. The work assignment was very challenging as well, with a troublesome acquisition, which made him reflect on his own (in-)experience and youth. Without his

family in a new country, Henry was very angry, run down, deeply in debt and focused completely on working and making money. Both Alex and Henry worked on short term contracts without any real job security.

Alex's contract was prolonged. He stresses the importance of networks and thinking about it from the first day so as to not get lonely. He says that after the first job people have established their lives it is hard to come in and get to know people when everyone already has a complete life. Although he mostly socialized with locals it is easier to get to know those who have lived abroad or other foreigners. He also found a comfort in meeting with local Swedish clubs in the area every now and then. Through work Frank met his wife of another nationality and while still working abroad, they decided to live in Sweden, in his old family home. He managed to sort out the challenging work situation, overcame the cultural issue, and was made general manager. Henry performed very well on his contract and was offered another contract with the company in another country. As he continued to get more experience and restore his confidence he was never worried about what to do next, he says that something always comes up through his network. Although he left Sweden due to aggression he learned to appreciate the work climate. He also met his second wife of another nationality.

With the transition, the international itinerants have to adjust and find their place in their new environment. In a new situation and social context their sense of self is questioned and stable identifications are lost, for example Henry was no longer a husband and successful owner of a company. This uncertainty results in reflection and processes of identity reconstruction are engaged as the itinerants reestablish themselves in their new context. Simultaneously they maintain aspects of established identifications, for example in their networks. For instance, for Alex the Swedish identification becomes more salient.

#### Complicating action

Alex did not feel that he had the right profile for the job he was doing and the project was not right for him. He wanted to find something else; again he applied abroad, and got a job in another country. Through his network Frank got the opportunity to try working as their agent in Scandinavia. He landed a big order and was able to leave his job and start up his own company. The family also decided to move to another of the Scandinavian countries. The company Henry worked for wanted to send him back to work in Sweden. He refused and left the company due to this conflict. He got a contract with another company in another country.

A variety of circumstances change the conditions for the international itinerants; new opportunities or external pressures result in additional relocations between countries as well as in their careers. Even with changing circumstances they all confirm their choice of a career working in the global environment.

#### Result

This time Alex was more equipped to deal with the adjustment since he had learnt from his previous experience and blunders. Even though he really felt at home in his new country he still considered himself Swedish, maintained Swedish traditions, and

continued to meet with Swedish clubs. However, he points out that he did not turn to being Swedish in the extreme as he claims that some do when abroad. Alex's new working situation also involved a lot of traveling. For Frank the transition to the new country was smooth and he quickly acclimatized and learned the language. His company continued to go well and grow, and he developed long-term customer relationships. He enjoys the freedom of running things on his own, planning his own time, and says that he would not be able to work for someone else now. As his wife also has a flexible work situation they can travel together. Since Henry did not like the new country he did not prolong the contract but continued on with the company to yet another country. His personal financial situation was finally resolved. His focus was still on his career, working hard and long hours. He performed very well and was recruited to work for another company, moving again to handle a project and yet again switching location. His confidence grew and he was able to show his preferences and choose locations.

The transitions have become easier to handle for the international itinerants, building on their previous experience they have become more secure in who they are. While the transitions signify a period of increased self-reflection, and identity construction processes are engaged, they have started to establish themselves in their global career, positioning themselves in relation to their context.

#### Complicating action

Alex was sent on a short assignment to another country. During the few months he was there he met his future wife. He requested to be relocated there more permanently. The company agreed but it took some time and a lot of hassle to arrange the transition. Frank's wife wanted to return to her home country and as business for Frank's company was going down they decided to move. He could expand his company in Asia constituted a more extensive transition as the new environment was less familiar. The cultural differences were both exiting and challenging for him and with the language difficulties he has to rely more on his wife. Henry contractual employment made his private life suffer as he never knew in what country he would work from one year to another. It was very tough for his wife, in a strange environment, not being able to work. "Life as a world citizen, or as a nomad that I have been, works as long as you are single, but if you have a family and other... responsibilities, it's not that easy", he says. They divorced and he was recruited to be a CEO in yet another country. He was very happy to accept the offer since he wanted to stay in Asia.

Again there are circumstances influencing the choice of career path and location. After having lived in several different locations the step of moving to yet a new country or making a new career move is not seen equally as drastic as before. The international itinerants are more confident in their ability to handle transitions when new possibilities open up.

#### Evaluation, Resolution and Coda

Alex likes it in his new country and he even wants to become a citizen. He has not had a goal to make a career, he likes the work role he has now and do not know where he will go from here, he says it has been coincidences that have brought him to where he is. His

wife also has an international career and they both travel a lot. Although they are trying to balance a dual international career they are thinking about starting a family. That means that they are planning to stay in one place for the next few years. Settling down with a family has led Alex to reflect on his career choices and priorities. They have however thought about moving to other countries, and even had some offers. Alex is adamant about not returning to Sweden. He thinks the most important is that it is the country you like best and where there are opportunities; the career options in Sweden are quite limited for him. Alex shows a lot of reflection regarding his national and cultural belonging and the differences between the countries, cultures, societies, ways of working, and traditions that he has encountered. He thinks that he has quite a Swedish way of working and sees himself as Swedish. Yet he does not socialize a lot with Swedes, not like “expatriates who have Sweden abroad, you loose a lot when you do”. He emphasizes that he is different from traditional expatriates; “I do not have an expat life”. He thinks that being in the same place in life is more important than the nationality, but finds it easier to socialize with either expatriates (employees sent out by an organization on an international assignment) or local people that have lived abroad.

Reflecting on his experiences, Alex describes that living abroad in different places you learn a lot, for example that there is not one right way of doing things and that the differences are not that big. You also learn about yourself and develop a lot as a person going outside your own comfort zone. It is tougher abroad, challenging and you grow. As Alex has been abroad he thinks that he has developed a greater understanding of problems and solutions, to handle cultural differences and adjusting to new situations.

Frank enjoys living in his new country, even though he still has not learnt the language and there are only a few foreigners around who speak English. It is so different there and people see him as a foreigner, as he explains it; “because, of course everybody looks different, so you feel completely out of place straight away. You know you’re in a different country”. The family plan on staying there for the next least four or five years for the younger children to finish school. Home to him is mostly where he is at the time, where his family is. He would not mind moving somewhere else, if something happens or something comes up, but his first choice would be Sweden or Finland. Now he would like to have a comfortable life without risk, so somewhere civilized anyway.

Frank continues to run his company in Scandinavia as well as expanding it into other parts of the world. Now he wants to wind down a bit and maybe concentrate more on the music again. He wants to relax, spend time with his children, travel with his wife and just let business trickle along and see what happens. Reflecting on his career, Frank sees it as quite accidental and has not had any clear plans, things have happened by chance and he has met people along the way. The music has opened a lot of doors as well. For Frank his music career has continued parallel to his work, it is what he enjoys so he tries to work as little as possible. Music is a common interest that has been one way of getting to know people and networking for Frank. He has mostly gotten to know locals or socialized with work or music, and he is very close with his family and friends he met in other countries. He says that he has not met a lot of business people that he would choose as friends really. As he reflects on how work influences individuals; “...because everybody who is

working in the same type of job around them is a certain type and behaves in a certain way so they become formed in that certain way also”, it becomes clear that he does not foremost see himself as a businessman.

Reflecting on his experiences Frank thinks one of the nice things has been meeting so many different people from different places and that it gives you a broader view of what is going on in the world. He thinks his experiences has made him less conservative; he has learnt to be more self-conscious, patient, open-minded and ready to adapt and appreciate some values from the culture he is in. Frank has learnt to respect different cultures, accept things as they are, and find his own way to make himself comfortable. He tries to be open to new ideas and does not have any problems settling down anywhere. He has always enjoyed trying new thing and has never been the type to sit still; he thinks perhaps he would find it boring to stay in one place for too long.

Henry finds his new country to be a modern, very easy country to live in. This is the first time he is employed locally and not sent out as expatriate and he is the only non-Asian on his type of position. Henry has advanced within the company and “got a fancier office and more headache”. The company has grown a lot during the years he has been there; through his work he has gained a lot of trust from the main owner/chairman. He is proud of his accomplishments and position. However, for him it is the possibility to realize his ideas and see the results which is interesting. Henry says “I still have so much Swedish, Swedish genes in me that power and face is not all that important”. He also explains that it is very tough to be a top manager of a company listed on the stock exchange and compares it to being a top athlete; it wears you out very quickly.

He has decided that the Philippines is his home and has bought a house there where he plans to retire. He was planning on retiring last year and only work halftime, but his chairman didn’t want him to and convinced him to stay for another 5 years. He feels a lot of loyalty to the chairman, and does not want to abandon him as he has a lot of trust in Henry and is generous towards him. He reflects on that this shows how he has been influenced by Asian culture where they have a different loyalty and dedication to the company. He considers himself an entrepreneur and feels that he can get an outlet for it in Asia where the work climate is dynamic and decision making is fast. He has always put work first and let other things come in second, so he wanted enjoy and live life a little “but everything has its price”. However, after working 12 hours a day his entire adult life he also feels very nervous about shifting lifestyle. When he has lived in a country he rarely has had the time to look around, so he has returned to see the countries more but he has an interest and is curious about how things work and why things are as they are in different countries.

Reflecting on his experiences, the only thing Henry regrets is not moving out sooner. He was a bit afraid moving out, but he had left everything, his family and everything he had and had nothing to loose. He has learned that the world is a very big place and you should not think you can know it all: have respect and understanding for different people, cultures, and systems. He says that the first thing you learn is humility and that you have to have the will to understand and adjust. He has not rooted himself anywhere and has

friends from all over the world, particularly in Asia. When he visits Sweden it doesn't feel like home anymore, but he has two adult children from his first marriage which provide a bond. They both currently live in Sweden but have been out with him a lot and stayed with him in periods in all countries where he has lived. He hopes to have opened their eyes, from being blue-eyed Swedes, and it is a heritage he is proud to give them. He says they do not have his aggression towards Sweden but have adopted his view of being a citizen of the world.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

In order to increase the understanding of individuals with global careers an identity construction perspective is applied in this paper, involving social aspects of what these individuals identify with in their context. A narrative approach was used in the analysis as we see narratives as a way for individuals to express and reflect on their lives.

The aggregated narrative presented in this paper illustrates the identity construction process of these Swedish international itinerants. As shown by Kohonen (2004) a single international work experience leads to reflection on oneself and identity construction processes are engaged. This is confirmed in the narratives as the respondents describe and reflect on their experiences throughout their global careers. Personal or professional changes, in some cases drastic, led to the decision to move abroad. In a new cultural environment, as well as a new work, family, and social situation the international itinerants had to reflect and reevaluate what was important to them and who they really are. That this type of transition from the everyday social context engages identity construction processes is also in line with Lindgren and Wåhlin's (2001) view, and shows that stable identifications are less available. The international itinerants had to handle this insecurity, adjust and find their place and reestablish themselves in their new context while maintaining aspects of established identifications. As new opportunities or external pressures result in additional career moves and relocations between countries the itinerants confirm their choice of a career working in the global environment. With changing circumstances, resulting in additional moves, the international itinerants become more confident in their ability to handle transitions even though the transitions still signify a period of increased self-reflection, and identity construction processes are engaged. The international itinerants, able to adapt to living in many cultures, resemble what Adler and Bartholomew (1992) defined as globally competent managers. Building on their previous experience they have started to establish themselves in their global career, become more secure in who they are, and positioned themselves in relation to their continuously changing context. Reflecting on their experiences, the international itinerants describe developing a broader perspective, self-awareness, and personal growth, as also seen by Suutari and Mäkelä (2007) in their study of individuals with global careers.

To study identity construction in the search for global identities and what such a global identity might entail we decided to focus on three dimensions of what they identify with in the global context of their careers; the organization and career, the communities and networks, and the country and culture. This is a further development of Shokef and

Erez's (2006) definition of a global identity, as an individuals' sense of belonging to and identification with groups operating in the global work environment.

Suutari and Mäkelä (2007) used the concept of global career identity to describe the identity related outcomes of global careers, the traits developed. However, these characteristics give little insight into what they identify with, what is important to them and where their commitments and allegiances lie. As work and organizational belonging is one of the aspects individuals draw on in their identity construction (Baruch 2004), and the relationships between organizations and their employees become more transactional, this otherwise established source of identification is in the globalized context less stable. As shown by Black and Gregersen (1992) in a study of expatriates; the more time spent away from the home office, the less they identified with the organization and might first and foremost be committed to their own careers. For the international itinerants who frequently undertake the transitions in their careers the identification with their workgroup or organization shifts towards a focus on their own career and professional networks. For example, working on contractual bases, Alex and Henry prioritize the choice of location over staying with the company. Sanchez et al. (2000) saw the identity reconstruction in the adjustment to a new culture ideally landing in an identification midway between the old and new cultures. For the international itinerants who encounter numerous countries and cultures this process becomes more complex. While they respect and appreciate the cultural differences, adjust and take in values from their host countries, rather than a dual identification it becomes a process of taking on and bringing some aspects from the cultures encountered with them in a type of amalgamation. While still considering themselves Swedish to some extent, the national identification in some aspects becoming even more salient when faced with a new cultural context, simultaneously they clearly distance themselves and emphasize that they are not like other Swedes. As shown for example in the interview with Alex the identification is stronger with others who have lived abroad, those leading similar lives, and other foreigners. However, he is also clear in stating that he is not like other expatriates either, and sees their situation as more sheltered. The three itinerants all have questioned their citizenship and national belonging, Henry expressly claiming to be a citizen of the world. The itinerants all stress the importance of networks and all of them have built up quite extensive personal networks across the world. The networks do not only constitute a basis for career opportunities and social interaction, but also is a way of maintaining a sense of continuity in an otherwise frequently shifting context. They provide a link to the previous countries and cultures encountered and a means to sustain a sense of belonging even though frequently being immersed in new and unfamiliar contexts.

These individuals, engaged in, enacting and central to the global context in could in a way be argued as personifying the fluid and global context and its complexities. As in Shokef and Erez's (2006) definition, belonging to and identification with groups operating in the global work environment is central to the international itinerants. Moreover, their identity construction processes are characterized by a dynamic interplay between the dimensions of organization and career, country and culture, and communities and networks. The ambiguities and paradoxes encountered in these previously fairly stable sources of identification, and the contradictory demands of adjusting to the new

context while maintaining continuity in their sense of self mirrors the forces of globalization. In their experiences they manage to find a balance, it is not a question of either or, rather they land in an in-between position where the frequent transitions and boundary crossing experiences in themselves become part of who they are. Although this may not constitute a clear definition or perfect example of a global identity this understanding of the identity construction processes of individuals with global careers is a development of the understanding of global identities and the implications of globalization for individuals.

The method and principles for constructing and structuring narratives used in this paper will be the basis for additional studies in relation to global careers and identity construction. This framework will be the starting point in a search for possible categories of narratives or narrative profiles that will be conducted in further studies, comparing the structure and the processes in several narratives. The identity construction perspective, using a narrative approach, contributes to the understanding of individuals working in the global context, their own perception of their careers, and the implications of globalization for them.

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