

**The work-life conflicts and related coping strategies among managers with
global careers**

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Abstract

Due to the globalization of business, managerial careers are becoming more and more international within MNCs. The most international career types are called as global careers which typically include various international relocations across countries. Such global career context has been stated to be very challenging for managers and their families. However, no earlier studies which have focused on work-life balance or of managers with global careers or the coping strategies these managers and their families use to cope with these challenges were found. In order to increase our understanding of these issues 20 semi-structured interviews were carried out among global careerists who had long-term international career behind. The results of the study indicate that global careers include in particular, time-based, strain-based and mobility-based work-life conflicts. Also several individual, work-related, organizational, context-related and family-related antecedents for these conflicts were identified. The managers were found to use mainly active problem solving coping strategies beside family level coping strategies though also emotional coping strategies, avoidance strategies and reappraisal strategies appeared.

1. Introduction

The existing research on international work experiences has focused on studying international assignments within MNCs as 'once in a lifetime'- experience though more permanent global career tracks have become more and more common. For example, according to recent surveys among Finnish expatriates around 40% already has earlier experience on international assignments and around 15% of them have three or more such experiences behind (ref). Also in a study by Stahl & Cerdin (2004) 64 % of French expatriates and 41 % of German expatriates have previous international assignment experience. Due to such developments, the interest on global careers has increased (see e.g. Suutari, 2003; Cappellen & Janssens 2005; Dickman & Harris, 2005; Thomas et al., 2005; Stahl and Cerdin, 2004; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). The nature of a career in the age of globalization is argued to be very different from

that of only a few years ago, and this requires us to engage this emerging phenomenon in new and creative ways (Thomas et al., 2005). Given the pace of change in terms of careers in general, and of global careers in particular, the scarcity of theoretical insights and empirical evidence concerning these developments is not very surprising (Mayrhofer et al., 2004).

The global career term fits well also in with the recent discussion of global leaders and their development and careers within companies (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005, Jokinen 2006). There it is emphasized that managers who make global careers develop the understanding of global organizations and acquire globally applicable skills. For example, Roberts et al. (1998) state that the most in-depth learning takes place among those who go through a career involving frequent international relocations over the course of their working lives. It has been also widely discussed that corporates identify the lack of experienced global leaders as one of their major HR-challenges in future (Morrison, 2000). Such discussion point out the importance of the target group, but still the work-life balance issues are not much discussed in this literature since here the focus has been on competency requirements and development of global careerists.

At the same time, existing research on international assignments indicates that already single assignments are very challenging experiences for the persons concerned and at least as challenging for their families (e.g. Shaffer et al., 2001). The existing research also highlights the mediating role of partner and family in determining a positive or negative work-life balance outcome (Harris, 2004; Caligiuri et al, 1998) From that perspective it is not very surprising that among the key challenges related to global careers involving more frequent international relocations across countries include work-life balance concerns (Suutari, 2003). It has even been argued that such career type would be too challenging type of career to most individuals and their families (Forster 2000). Despite of this and increased globalization of careers, such challenges and related coping strategies have not been studied among global careerists.

Literature concerning work-life balancing (WLB) has focused on questions about people coping with two interconnected parts of their lives (see Eby et al, 2005; Frone, 2003). Interest within research has been on the direction of influence, i.e. whether and

how work affects family or vice versa. Work domain has been more strongly concerned in the present research than family domain. In general, work-life balance research has mainly focused on negative effects between these two life spheres. This literature has mainly focused on work–family conflict, defined as “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p.77). Later, also the positive side of the phenomenon has been approached from the perspective of work-life facilitation or enrichment (Frone, 2003; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Gutek & Gilliland, 2007). Empirical studies have usually been conducted in order to find antecedents or outcomes of conflicts (Eby et al., 2005) but there is scarcity of research on the ways how people manage these situation, i.e. what kind of coping strategies people use in these situations (e.g. Hyman, Scholarios & Baldry, 2005). It has also been suggested that there a shift from broad, general samples of working adults to more focused data collection, and that career perspectives should be utilized in combination with WLB-approaches (Gutek & Gilliland, 2007).

In the light this background the present study reports work-life balance experiences of 20 global careerists who have long-term global career behind them. The goals of the study are thus to analyze 1) what kind of work-life conflicts global careerists face, b) what kind of antecedents can be indentified behind such conflicts, and c) what kind of coping strategies global careerists and their families use in order to cope with or prevent such conflicts. Next, the existing literature on work-family conflicts and copying strategies is reviewed, and finally these issues are discussed within the global career context. After this theoretical discussion, research methods and empirical findings of the study are presented.

Work-family interface

The work-family interface has usually been studied from the perspective of the role stress theory, concerning the challenges caused by multiple roles which individuals in modern societies have (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, Bagger, Li & Gutek, 2008; for a review see Kinnunen & Mauno, 2008). Different, even though competing roles, such as being a spouse, a parent and a worker leads individuals to complex situations in which they have to priorities issues, make decisions and apply strategies for coping.

Interface of these different roles may cause conflicts in ones lives, but also enrichment has found to occur. Previous studies have typically considered antecedents to either conflicts or enrichment besides outcomes of these conflicts (see Eby et al. 2005). Conflicts between work and life are found to be bi-directional, work domain conflicting family (WFC), and on the other hand, family domain conflicting to work (FWC). Antecedents to work-family conflict can be classified to three main categories work-domain, family domain, and individual domain (Eby et al., 2005). Work domain related issues, such as job stress or low schedule flexibility, are found to stem more WFC than FWC, while family to work conflict is caused by family-related stressors and characteristics (Frone, 2003; Byron, 2005). Organizational aspect to work and life balancing is often considered by family supportive policies, but previous research has shown that more important is the informal work-family supportiveness (Behson, 2005; Kinnunen & Mauno, 2008).

Moreover, work-family conflict can be time-based, strain-based, or behavior based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Carlson, Kacmar and Williams, 2002). Time-based conflict occurs when role pressures originating from the two different domains compete for the individual's time, for instance, due to the long working hours. Strain-based conflict exists when the strain experienced in one role domain interferes with effective performance of role behaviors in the other domain. This kind of situation may occur for example if one have problems with his/her family, s/he is not able concentrate to the work. Behavior-based conflict is described as a conflict stemming from incompatible behaviors demanded by competing roles, that means for example, if the person has high position at work and is expected to behave very autonomously and aggressively in decision-making these same characteristics are not favorable in family life.

Next, two different groups of coping strategies, individual and family focused, are presented.

Coping strategies in achieving work-life balance

Coping has been described as an ability to deal with stressful organizational situations and is defined as the efforts an individual may exhibit at the cognitive, behavioral or

emotional level to meet internal or external challenges they deem themselves as not having the resources for meeting (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, Pienaar, 2008). Family adaptive strategies, concept that has suggested being comparable with coping strategies (Voydanoff, 1990; 2002), are defined as the actions families devise for coping the challenges of living and for achieving their goals in the face of structural barriers (Moen & Wethington, 1992).

Four different coping strategies in individual level have been presented: 1) active/problem-focused coping, 2) emotional coping, 3) avoidance coping and 4) reappraisal (Pienaar, 2008). Active, or problem-focused, coping is individual's active effort to solve problems, rethink situations and change the environment. Emotional coping refers to individual's tendency to manage emotional reactions and it has been suggested being suitable especially when an individual does not have opportunities to influence to assignments and her/his own job. In addition, social support has suggested being combination of these two strategies. Avoidance coping exists when one moves away from stressful situation either psychologically or physically: such coping can be temporary or permanent. Reappraisal as a coping strategy is further appraisal which is made on the basis of information of former experiences.

When coping has been studied in family level, three types of adaptive strategies have been found. Similar to individual coping strategies, the first, changing work and family roles, relates to active problem-solving (cf. problem-focused coping). Second adaptive strategy presented is obtaining support from spouses and the third is utilization of policies and programs provided by employer (Voydanoff, 2002). However, such policies are not always reported to reduce work-family conflict (Solomon, 1994). It has been suggested that there is a need for more specific knowledge about WLB related questions, and therefore more focused data collection based on, for instance, specific stages in career and family circumstances is needed (Gutek & Gilliland, 2007). Empirical studies have usually been conducted in order to find antecedents or outcomes of such conflicts (Eby et al., 2005), but there is overall scarcity of research on what kind of coping strategies people use in order to manage these situations (see e.g. Hyman, Scholarios & Baldry, 2005).

Work-family interface among global careerists

The challenges faced by global careerists during their international assignments are found to be fairly different compared to job changes in domestic settings. There are many reasons behind this. First, international assignments, typically including international relocation of the whole family, always have extensive impacts on the whole family - not only the assignee. Overall, the important role of the family concerns is emphasized in literature on expatriate adjustment, selection and training since family reasons are reported to be among the main reasons for expatriate failures. Thus, first challenge toward work-life balance comes from the changed life situation of the family: both a spouse and possible children have to adjust to a totally new living environment (e.g. accommodation, schools, daycare, climate, culture, social life, hobbies). Challenges in this area impact on the success of expatriate adjustment and naturally have reflections on the extent to which the assignee is able to focus fully on work.

At the same time, international jobs have been found to be very challenging for managers due to several reasons (e.g. Suutari & Mäkelä 2007; Bossard and Peterson, 2005). First, the breadth of responsibilities of international assignees is typically broader than on domestic tasks, since expatriates often work in smaller foreign units, often in less developed contexts, and often in higher organizational level than before the assignment. Second, the nature of the international environment has been reported to be more challenging and risky than the domestic environment. These issues are typically combined with higher level of autonomy due to both the distance from headquarters and the smaller size of foreign affiliates. Fourth, cultural differences challenge the individual thinking and style, and cause adjustment pressures for assignees. Overall, the international jobs are thus perceived to be very challenging but at the same time very developmental (Bossard and Peterson, 2005; Gregersen et al., 1998; Kohonen, 2004; Roberts et al., 1998; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). This naturally puts assignees to a position in which they have to use all their resources and energy to deal with difficult job-related challenges.

The key question thus become how global careerists deal with work-family interface in particular, when challenges are faced both by managers and their families at the same time. Since already single assignments are found to be challenging experiences

(e.g. Harris, 2004), it can be expected that the situation is even more requiring for global careerists who relocate themselves and their families more regularly during their global career. The importance of family concerns is already raised up when careers of global careerists or global managers have been studied (e.g. Suutari 2003), but we still lack in-depth understanding of work-life conflicts (and their antecedent) and in particular coping strategies that global careerists and their families use to succeed in this requiring environment. Before providing new empirical evidence on these issues, the research methods are briefly described.

Method

We adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with 20 Finnish managers with a global career, empirically defined as having had three or more international assignments during the course of their working life. The sample was derived from a larger quantitative survey of Finnish business graduates currently on expatriate assignment. Twenty interviews were conducted during the April and May 2008. The respondents represented a variety of industries, and their assignment locations covered 13 countries and four continents. Not surprisingly, the majority of global careerists ($n=15$) were males though there were also females ($n=5$). 25 % of them had three international assignments behind, 30 % had four such assignments while 45 % had five or more international work experiences during their career.

The interviews lasted between 33 and 132 minutes, resulting in an extensive database of word-by-word interview transcripts for analysis. The interviews were all conducted in Finnish, and the verbatim quotations were translated into English by the authors. The interview data was content analyzed using replication logic. Semi-structured open-ended questions were used in order to bring out underlying patterns and relationships. First, the interviewees gave a detailed account of their previous career paths and current assignments. Second, we interviewed them about work-life conflicts they had faced during their recent assignment as well as during earlier stages of their global career. Third, coping strategies, which they had used in order to cope with these conflicts or to prevent such, were discussed. Here the division was made between individual coping strategies and family level coping strategies.

The validity and reliability of the study were attended to by a number of measures. During the analysis process the data was first carefully read and reflected on several times by both authors in order to allow deep familiarization with it. Secondly, construct validity was enhanced via researcher triangulation, i.e. both authors analyzed the raw data independently. Thirdly, we constantly cross-checked the data with previous research, as well as across the multiple interviews, thereby increasing the internal validity of the study. We then allocated it to pre-assigned categories reflecting the theory-based dimensions concerning work-life conflict and related coping strategies, and coded it according to observations and insights arising during the process. Furthermore, we systematically compared the different interviews in order to assess the regularities and differences in the data. In terms of external validity, our aim was towards theoretical rather than statistical generalization, based on the in-depth qualitative evidence. Finally, in order to achieve reliability we followed a pre-tested semi-structured interview guide and recorded all of the interviews, thereby creating a retrievable database that maintained a chain of evidence.

4. Findings

In this section we will focus on reporting the empirical findings concerning the work-life conflicts faced by global careerists (and their antecedents) as well as coping strategies which the global careerists and their families have used when trying to prevent or cope with the work-life conflicts involved in this kind of untypical career environment. The findings of the whole study are summarized in Figure I, and the results are discussed thereafter.

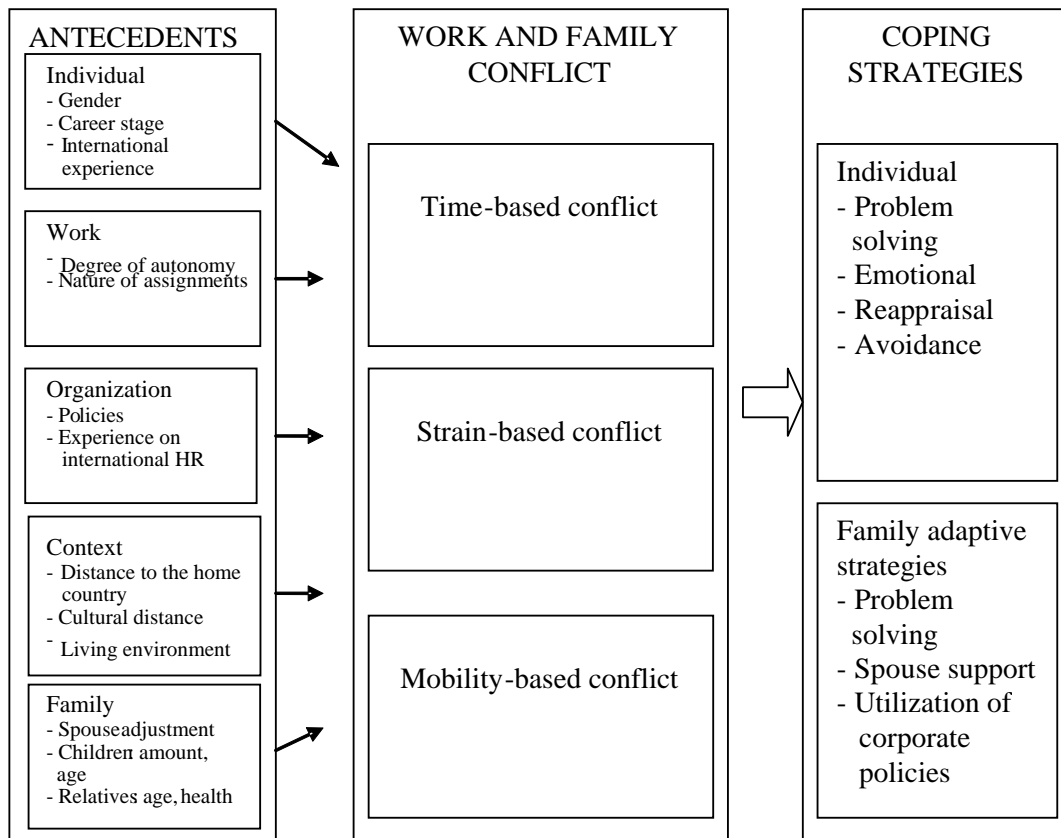


Figure 1. *Work-life conflicts and related coping strategies among global careerists*

Conflicts between work and family life

Starting from the work-life conflicts, it was found that global careerists are experiencing different kinds of conflicts between their work and family life. Typically, the respondents pointed out that global career is really requiring from work-life balance perspective and active efforts are necessary to stay in balance. Conflicts, which global careerists had faced, were first classified into time-based and strain-based conflicts since behavior-based conflicts did not appear in our data. Instead, it was seen as necessary to include new conflict category, i.e. mobility-based conflict, in order to be able to describe the reality faced by global careerists. In most cases, conflict between two life spheres occurred to be more common from work to family domain than family to work - though both directions appeared to be important. These findings are discussed next.

The time-based conflicts were found to be very typical among global careerists and it related to long working hours, lots of travelling and 24/7 availability. As one of our interviewees stated: “*My working days are extremely long, it is very unusual if I am at home before 8 pm. And in addition, it involves lot of travelling*”. Another said “*so many years went in a way that practically you were working the whole year. Every weekend and all, just working*”. They told that this has affected a lot to their family lives: “*And family says ‘we thought we are going to circus or theatre and now you are not able to come anywhere’ [...] in my case, 90-95 % of your time is work*”. On the other hand, in few cases international assignments have helped them to reduce time-based conflict “*When you are travelling from Finland, you are not back at home for a night always. Now I am travelling significantly less than earlier, and those travels you are doing in the Central Europe from Frankfurt, and I don’t need to stay a night.*”

Strain-based conflicts reflected the high level of responsibility and challenging nature of assignments: “*very much you give everything to your work. Most of your energy, day, your time, everything, goes to work*”. One interviewee told about the situation where she considered part-time working due to family reasons, but did not found such family oriented decisions impossible in this kind of work: “*my work has it’s own demands, it is not possible to do part-time*”. Sometimes, even though a person physically is at home, work follows him/ her there: “*You are there, at home, hanging around with your family, but your family is doing something else*”.

In addition to previous forms of conflicts that work and family (private life) studies have presented, we suggest that global careerists are experiencing also *mobility-based conflict* between their life spheres. This covers work- family conflicts which reflect the mobility requirement involved in this kind of jobs. First, in contrast to domestic jobs, international assignments require both the assignee and the whole family to move from one general living environment to a different and often distant context. This creates adjustment challenges when dealing, for example, with a new living and working environment, culture, climate, education systems and daycare systems.

Second, the mobility-requirement, and discontinuity and cyclical nature of life it creates to work and private lives, creates uncertainty based stress. Job-related concerns may also be in conflict with family concerns (e.g. very interesting job in a

very challenging general living environment for the family). International assignments last typically few years and thus global careerists and their families need to brake down their living arrangements and social connections frequently: *“So this, this three to four year time period when everyone changes. It is very hard in a way that one has to re-create these social contacts and networks and so on. That is because those old ones regularly disappear”*. In many cases, decision concerning the next assignment has to be made very quickly among the alternatives which are available, and this causes work-life conflicts when you don't know where they are living, for example, next year: *“It takes quite a lot if you leave your stuff and systems and friends. Take your family and go again and then put up somewhere. And everybody has to, husband and son, have to restart with work and schools and friends.”* When the length of the international assignment was not clearly agreed beforehand, it created additional uncertainty to expatriate family.

Third, the mobility requirement, and included distance to home country (e.g. to friends, parent and relatives) as an outcome, create new kinds of work-life conflicts both to the global careerists themselves and to the whole family as well: *“You saw your relatives ones a year or even more sparsely, you came quite distant. And when you noticed that those relatively short periods in host countries did not able same kind of friend or family relations as in Finland [...] that was a bit scary”*. The situation of older parents came also up as a problem due to distance to home country: *“ You loose lot of issues. When my mother died, I didn't live in Finland then. But my father at the moment - he is amputated and partly paralysed and he can't move from the bad at all. This kind of things bothers me, I'd like to go and see father but now you can't go [due to distance]”*.

After this brief description of work-life conflicts, we turn next into antecedents and then to the coping strategies that the global careerists and their families have used when trying to prevent or cope with the work-life conflicts involved in this kind of untypical career environment.

Antecedents of work-family conflict

Our preliminary results indicate five different antecedent categories which may either cause conflicts or prevent such conflicts between family and work life: individual factors, work-related factors, organizational factors, context-related factors and family-related factors.

Three individual level antecedents were identified: gender, career stage and international experience. First, the gender seemed to be a relevant factor since global career put a lot of stress on flexibility of the spouse and his/her career. As will be discussed later, female spouses had often left their own career and stayed at home while supporting the global career of the assignee. Such life situations are typically seen to more natural for male assignees and their female spouses than the other way round. The career stage was also discussed as an important factor, i.e. in early career stages the respondents typically had put all their efforts on succeeding at work and on building career while in later stages they saw themselves as being more able to better look after WLB-issues as well. Third, through international experience both the managers and their families had got used to frequent relocations and had found out ways on achieving better work-life balance.

Work related factors included issues such as degree of autonomy and nature of an assignment. When the level of autonomy at the job was higher, the assignees were able to be more flexible with their work and working times, and overall could impact more on the level of requirements at work. Second, the type of job (i.e. level in the organizational hierarchy and related broadness of responsibilities) was seen to impact on possibilities to achieve WLB.

Two organizational level factors were raised up: the organizational policies of the company and the organizational experience on international HR. The existence of organizational policies concerning organizational support and training during relocations was clearly an important factor - less was discussed about general policies concerning work-life balance. Behind this was also another related factor, i.e. how long experience the corporation had on international HR and international mobility in particular.

Fourth main category was the context which included three main factors. First, physical distance to home country impacted on possibilities in visiting home country,

staying in touch with friends and elder family at home country, and overall staying in touch with the home country. Cultural distance between the home country and the host country was found to be an important factor as well since in more challenging cultures it was more difficult to create social connections and thus to get integrated with the local society both at the work place as well as outside of it. General living environment (e.g. schools, health care, living environment) impacted on the extent of challenges faced by these assignees and their families, and thus caused different levels of stressors for work-life balance.

Family related factors were the most often referred source for conflict (or balance). Family was here seen to include spouse, children, and other close relatives, but in some cases close friends as well. The adjustment of the spouse was clearly impacting on work-life balance of the whole family, i.e. the case where the spouse had adjustment problems to the local context, clearly more time and effort was required from the assignee to support the family to achieve better WLB. Similarly the family factors such as the amount of children and the age of those children were found to impact on possibilities in achieving WLB - younger ones were found to face less challenge during moves than those starting their schools or being already teenagers. Thus less effort was needed from the assignee and less reflections such issues had to work of an assignee. Finally the age and health situation of parents at home country impacted on the amount of WLB since the respondents found it very difficult to support their elder parents when being abroad.

Coping strategies

The findings concerning coping strategies indicate that the global careerists mainly adopt active (problem solving) strategies though also emotional coping strategies and avoidance strategies appeared. Besides, the role of family adaptive strategies was found to be in a very central role among aims toward achieving work-life balance in this kind of challenging, international job environment.

In individual level, *active coping strategies* (i.e. problem solving) were commonly used. First, the respondents often pointed out that they had tried to be flexible with their working time, even though usually they were doing very long days and were travelling a lot : "*usually you can plan your timetable in a way that if needed, you can*

drive or pick up children from ballet, swimming, tennis or what hobbies they have. It is possible to organize it". They have also actively limited their working hours or travelling, and made distinction between work and family life (both time and role): "I try to keep rather regular working time. However, the working week is here a bit longer than in Finland, but anyway, I don't work during weekends [...] or late at nights if there are not any meetings or so. I try to manage my own time so that there is clearly leisure time and working time. And during the leisure time, work issues are not bothering me". Sometimes work and family conflicts have been solved by changing employer, assignments or even becoming an entrepreneur: "[starting own business] gave me an opportunity to do remote work and now I can, for instance, go for a few weeks to Europe. Or I have more flexibility to meet my boyfriend."

Among global careerists, the active coping refers also to the choices made about the host country of the next assignment in order to allow easier travelling and contacts or easier adaptation to less distant host country culture. Global careerists have also coped with conflicts by seeking different kinds of help, advises and also creating social networks. Such contact person were people like earlier expatriates, present home country nationals in the host country or corporate experts on international mobility: *"I had an ability to seek help by myself and create such a social network. [...] I went to talk with somebody that 'hey, this issue really annoys me.' It helped me over it. And I did it all by myself, nobody did not say me to do it".* With practical matters, they had, for example, used legal counselors, pension specialists, insurance advisors, and investment and tax consultants for planning and advice to guarantee economical welfare: *"these questions about taxes, how you go on with these [...] And investments, then it is good to have this kind of investment adviser. [...] All kind of contracts, those are better to do with local lawyers"*.

The results also indicate that global careerists often tried actively to keep contact to the relatives and friends in home country or abroad but also to their own family when travelling due to work: *"I use time for it and keep contact by phone and e-mail and also always when I visit [Finland], I try to be active and take contacts"*.

Emotional coping strategies did not emerge as often as active problem solving strategies. Such coping strategy was reflected in global careerists' comments on how they or their families are *"used to the situation"* and thus had accepted certain

difficulties as facts involved with global careers. These situations included issues such as extensive job-related travelling, longer working days, constant adjustment challenges or additional relationship building efforts in every new location: *"We are so used to live like this, in two addresses and travelling between [them], it is so ordinary for us."* This emotional acceptance emerged also sometimes when interviewee talked about issues (here being non-married and without children) which they have not experienced or been able to do due to their international career. Emotional coping occurred also in a way that interviewees justified their dedication to the work by its importance and through that, families also perceived to be more positive or approving in attitudes towards that. In some cases, interviewees told that they have had bad conscience about being so far from the relatives from home country, but perceived that relatives have been proud about their careers abroad and that have helped them in emotional level to accept the outcomes of their career choices.

The reappraisal strategy did not appear very commonly during the interviews but it was still reflected in several comments. First, the assignees interpreted that though the difficulties were sometimes found to be painful and complex at the time they appeared, they can now afterwards see how useful such challenging experiences are from the perspective of personal growth and professional development. In that way negative experiences are reappraised as positive learning experiences which make the individual stronger and more self-confident. Similarly, some negative experiences such as being worried on how frequent moves involving change of schools and living environments have affected their development, were reversed positive by telling about other positive affects that international career have had to children. Thus possible negative outcomes were interpreted to be compensated by other positive impacts: *"In this kind of life one often thinks the situation from the perspective of children, i.e. how good or bad thing it is for them ... On the other hand they become multicultural and international who have used to live in different kind of environments"*.

Similarly, the fact that the spouse has abandoned her career due to the mobility was seen to offer a possibility for the spouse to stay at home with children. The global careerists also perceived that through this kind of challenging experiences during their international career the relationships between spouses and other family members had

tightened: *“You have a spouse and a family, they create sort of strong bastion that goes around the world. [...] the solidarity, really strong front, you are sort of... it is the family.”*

When global careerists were using *avoidance strategies*, the conflicts were reduced by avoiding certain international assignments due to the nature of the job or the country context which were seen to be too challenging for achieving good WLB: *“I had have to say no against some interesting assignment opportunities also, for example to Peking [...] Family has been totally against it [...] they feel slightly uncomfortable with the culture and on the other hand, pollution in Peking is what it is.”*. Sometimes this concerned also decisions to repatriate or not to repatriate to home country in certain family stage: *“our life situation at the moment, also in the family, is such that there is no hurry to do any changes to the present situation”*. Overall such avoidance strategies were mainly adopted during the decision-making process concerning new assignments while avoidance strategies while being in a certain job abroad did not much appear. Few example still appeared: *“here, the business culture is certain that first you have some meetings, then go to get drunk in very masculine way and then go for singing some karaoke. I don’t have to do that (i.e. interpreted as possible to withdraw from such events as an expatriate woman).”* The reason why avoidance strategies did not appear commonly while abroad may reflect the work type of expatriates, i.e. very often they work in top level in foreign affiliates and thus it is difficult to avoid responsibility taking or active involvement despite of challenges involved in situations.

In private life, avoidance exists also in one’s attitudes toward building close relationships with locals or other expatriates: *“in general, when you are getting closer contact with new people, then you consider, or everybody does, that there is no idea to get friends with the ones who are anyway leaving soon”*. Sometimes strategy to decrease WF-conflicts has been to minimize the time used to own hobbies or friends and concentrate on the family when not at work.

In family level, *family adaptive strategies* occurred commonly. Several activities which can be seen as *active coping in family level* appeared from the interview data. First, decisions about leaving for the international assignment were usually made together with the spouse and family, and careful joint planning of the move abroad

was seen to be a part of the successful assignment. Second, sometimes families did not move to new location together, but, for instance, global careerist themselves went beforehand and family followed later on when preparations were carried out by the expatriate. Such approach was called as *“soft landing”* by one respondent. In order to get the best out from each assignment, it was also stressed that it is important to maximize the living standards for the family in order to support the adjustment process, e.g. instead of trying to live very cheaply in order to maximize the savings. WF-conflicts were also reduced by utilizing external help with housework: *“when children were small, especially in Philippines, there it was easy to get a domestic worker, and we thus had two workers who lived in a house. That helped our situation a lot since my wife did not have to take care of everything herself”*. Also au pairs from home country were used - also in order to maintain children’s language skills.

Also pre-departure consideration of living and schooling arrangements were in an important role of the work and family balancing during the assignments. Interviewees highlighted *“how important it was to find and choose the pleasant home for the family and find good schools for children”*. In addition, families also made decisions which helped them to cope with international movements during the periods they stayed at the home country, like children going to an international school also at the home country.

Work and family life conflicts concerning extended family in a home land, but also relatives and friends, was balanced by regular visits to the home country, for example during vacations. In order to make this easy, the assignees usually had apartments, cottages or houses at the home country. Similarly, relatives and friends often visited interviewees’ homes. In order to make such visits easy, the respondents had taken into account the availability of extra guest rooms in houses or apartments in their housing arrangements abroad, and extra help with housekeeping and cleaning was used during the visits: *“we have rather good facilities for our guests, guest rooms. And when we bought a car, we thought that it has to be so big that there is capacity for our guests also [...] we have a car for seven persons now”*.

One really important source for coping with family and work life for global careerists was the *spouse support*. It was very usual that interviewee’s spouse has left their jobs, sometimes several times, when family had moved to a new location. Very common

coping strategy has then been spouses' staying at home or working part time or only as a voluntary worker: *"my wife was in Finland, almost eight to ten years at work. When we moved abroad she has been at home. She has not been working but has taken children to school, hobbies. That has enabled me to work long days and travel if needed. Otherwise, that has not been possible."* The interviewees typically saw that the fact that their spouses had abandoned their own careers has made it possible for them to select a global career track, but it has also seen as a sacrifice that their spouses had made. On the other hand, sometimes the possibility to stay at home and still maintain good standard of living, for example, when children were small, was seen as a possibility that was made possible by the global career of the assignee. Typically the spouses were in turn taking care of most family issues related to children and housing, and even monetary affairs and affairs with public authorities. In addition, sometimes support from friends was utilized in these affairs.

Spouse support as a coping strategy included also an affective perspective. Then the spouse was seen as a *"backup"* or *"best friend"*. Psychological support and family stability was perceived as extremely important and global careerists told that it was very helpful to have something 'stable' within all these changes: *"it is sort of foundation stone... It could have been rather hard, this kind of life, if you haven't had a family, supporting you in the background"*.

As international assignments are very specific situations to individuals and their families, those are also exceptional to organizations. There aren't many other situations in work life when organizations really have to think about the whole family unit, not only the individual they are employing. Here, *active utilization of corporate policies* had very important role on how the global careerists had coped with the challenges. In particular, the help and support offered by companies with preparations and move were in an important role. For example, organizations typically offered the family a possibility to visit the host country in advance in order to look for the apartment and to get a view of the living environment. Also school and daycare arrangement were often challenging and support from organizations was appreciated. Some organizations have also helped global careerists with very practical arrangements such as issues with immigration offices, garbage removal contracts, health care systems, banking and every day shopping. Often organizations had offered

language and / or cultural training in a home country before leaving or after move to the host country to the interviewees and their spouses, sometimes also to the children: *“family is trained in a way that they know where it is going and that it survives with language”*. If global careerist had to live in another country temporary, or they moved to the next country in advance, organization paid travelling between these countries.

Usually costs caused of removals from country to country, storing of families things in home country and also residential costs and children’s schools were paid, totally or partly by the company. Someone also mentioned that the part of the salary was related to the size of the family. Organizations typically paid regularly travels to home country, usually once a year. Other compensations mentioned which helped global careerists and their families to cope with international removals and living abroad were memberships to sport clubs, payments to cover the loss of salary income of the spouse and self-development money for spouse each year.

Additional coping strategy related to corporate policy was related to the utilization of flexibility with work arrangements and working hours, and a possibility to do distant work occasionally. In addition, some corporations organized “family days” or paid holiday travels for the family. Like in any other organizational context, positive attitude from organization toward work-life balance was mentioned as an important issue. Also a possibility to take parental leave or days off to take care for sick child, were mentioned by global careerists.

Conclusion and implications

The present study aimed to increase our understanding of the work-life conflicts faced by global careerists. The main focus of the present paper was on reporting the coping strategies used by these global careerists in order to cope with or prevent such conflicts. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews of 20 global careerists who had long-term international career behind.

In line with the comments presented in literature (e.g. Forster, 2000; Shaffer et al., 2001; Suutari, 2003), the results of the study indicate that work-life balance was

considered to be a very challenging issue among global careerists due to the frequent relocations and related adjustment challenges they and their families face, and due to the nature of international jobs they had. The conflict appeared mainly as time-based conflicts (e.g. long working hours, 7/24 availability, and a lot of travelling) and strain-based conflicts (e.g. high level of responsibility, challenge and autonomy involved to expatriate jobs impacted on the level of work-load and stress) while behavior-based conflicts did not appear from the data. In order to fully capture the work-life conflicts it was also seen as necessary to add a new conflict category which was named and 'mobility-based conflict' (e.g. WLB-conflicts caused from moving across borders which created on-going adjustment challenges to the whole family; cyclical nature of life due to frequent moves; distance to extended family, relatives and friends).

Concerning the antecedents of work-life conflict (see e.g. Eby et al., 2005; Byron, 2005;), five different antecedent domains were raised up. In line with earlier research among domestic employees, individual domain, family domain and work domain appeared as relevant also among global careerists though the factors within these domains were here reflecting issues important among this group of respondents, i.e. global careerists. In addition, new 'context domain' was raised up in the light of the important role it appeared to have among global careerists, and organization domain was separated into a separate domain while some organizational aspects have been included under work-domain in earlier research. This reflected the increased importance of organizational support among global careerists and their families. On the other hand, when supervisor role has been stressed in earlier research (see Eby et al, 2005), it did not appear in our data - probably due to the high level, autonomous positions in host countries the respondents had, and related distance to supervisors who often locate in another countries

With regard to the coping strategies (see e.g. Pienaar 2008; Voydanoff, 2002; Hyman et al., 2005) these global careerists adopted, several key observations can be raised up. First, the assignees clearly used problem-solving strategies very actively. It could be clearly seen from this that as this respondent group has recognized WLB as a major challenge, they had also learned actively to deal with these challenges during their global career. Also emotional coping and re-appraisal strategies appeared though not as commonly as problem-based strategies. Avoidance strategies were adopted during

the decision-making process concerning new assignments, host contexts and employer organizations while those did not commonly appear anymore after such choices were made. In that way, after accepting the assignment, the focus was turned to active, problem-solving strategies in order to succeed in selected job and living environment. Furthermore, the central role of family adaptive strategies appeared clearly, i.e. among global careerists the flexibility and adaptability of the spouse and whole family was in a very important to support the career of the assignee, and the WLB of the whole family. In line with this, active utilization of corporate policies which supported the family during relocations and flexibility offered during the assignment appeared as very important. Overall, it became clear that from WLB-balance perspective, the global career is not a choice made by global careerists themselves but it has to be family decision, and the support of corporate policies is also required in order to succeed.

Overall, our findings provide new evidence on work-life challenges and related coping strategies among managers with global careers. There are still several limitations which need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the small sample size and related qualitative approach should be taken into account in order to avoid generalizations. Clearly more large-scale research is needed to validate our findings. Second, all the global careerists were Finns coming from a small but increasingly internationally oriented economy - partly due to the small size of the home market. This may be reflected in the results and thus future research is needed with more international samples. Third, the data collection took place among global careerists, as typically has been the case in international context, spouses and other family members are not interviewed. In future studies, it would be beneficial to include also such views in order to get a more balance view. This is needed, in particular, since the important role of the whole family units is raised up in literature on international assignments.

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