Negotiating within and across different walks of life: Identity work among expatriate academics

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Alexei Koveshnikov (alexei.koveshnikov@aalto.fi)

Seonyoung Hwang (seonyoung.hwang@aalto.fi)

Perttu Kähäri (perttu.kahari@aalto.fi)

All from Aalto University School of Business

Espoo, Finland

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Expatriation in its different forms continues to grow globally as more and more people choose to relocate for various reasons. An interesting development is the increasing number of self-initiated, highly skilled professionals or knowledge workers who actively pursue employment opportunities abroad. Yet, relocation is a challenging process characterized by stressful situations and experiences that are likely to influence how expatriates perceive themselves (Zikic & Richardson, 2015). Upon relocation, expatriates are likely to reflect on their past, present, and future, as well as their personal and professional qualities, and the qualities of others around them (Hoyer & Steyaert, 2015; Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2017).

The extant research has mainly focused on organizational and individual antecedents that are likely to impact expatriates' adjustment to their new host environment (Black & Gregersen, 1991). However, the research has to date largely ignored the inner psychological and cognitive changes and developments that take place in expatriates' psyche and mind as they go through the relocation experience (Belhoste & Monin, 2013). Experiences that disrupt the usual order of things in one's life may function as identity threats and consequently trigger psychological processes and changes in the person's self-perceptions and self-opinions. In the same way, the process of relocation is likely to trigger similar alterations in the psychology of expatriates (see also Mao & Shen, 2015).

This paper examines the identity work among academic expatriates in the aftermath of their relocation to a foreign country. It argues that such relocation can be seen as an identity threat dealing with which expatriates need to renegotiate their

identity in terms of 'who they are' or 'who they become'. To do that, expatriates engage in identity work in three core domains, namely, *career*, *family*, and *culture*. Drawing on a narrative analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 35 foreign academics living and working in Finland, our analysis elucidates discursive strategies employed by expatriate academics to (re)construct their identity within the three domains of *career*, *family*, and *culture*, and across the domains.

Concretely, in the *career domain*, we identify and explore the strategies of *identity enrichment* (a reconstruction of identity by adding new professional skills, competences, other valuable attributes, etc.), *identity suppression* (a reconstruction of identity by suppressing some attributes as irrelevant in the new environment), and *identity globalization* (a reconstruction of identity having global attributes e.g., global networks, aspirations, etc.). In the *family domain*, we detail the strategies of *identity othering* (a reconstruction of identity as the other, the out-group, in the new environment), *identity customization* (a reconstruction of identity by fusing multiple identities into a distinct new whole), and *identity marginalization* (a reconstruction of identity by deliberately marginalizing some attributes). Finally, in the *cultural domain*, we elucidate the strategies of *identity problematization* (a reconstruction of identity by problematizing some of its attributes), *identity distancing* (a reconstruction of identity by deliberately taking distance from a specific identity attribute), and *identity differentiation* (a reconstruction of identity as being distinct or superior in some ways).

In addition, we examine how the expatriate academics - through their identity work - discursively reconcile the conflicts between identities in the different domains by engaging in *inter-identity work* (Bataille & Vough, 2022), for instance, by making some identities more salient and dominant than others or constructing different

identities as synergetic and/or complementary. In this way, we identify three types of identity reconciliations taking place at the intersections of the domains: *professionalization* (career) vs. *acculturation* (culture), *domestication* (family) vs. *professionalization* (career), and *domestication* (family) vs. *acculturation* (culture). We also argue and show empirically that the different types of identity reconciliation employed by expatriates may have significant implications for their expatriation experiences and outcomes in terms of overall adjustment, wellbeing, and performance.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, the study adds to the literature on expatriates (Mao & Shen, 2015; Reiche et al., 2021) by highlighting the multiple contexts - as manifested in the three domains of career, family, and culture - in which expatriate knowledge workers operate and which they engage with through identity work. Second, it reveals the diverse ways in which relocating individuals engage with and respond to the identity threat that they experience upon relocation. It does so by identifying and detailing an array of identity work strategies that expatriate academics employ to reconstruct and renegotiate their identity within each of the three domains. Third, the study also highlights the roles of identity conflicts across different domains and the strategies that expatriates employ to reconcile such conflicts (inter-identity work). In addition, it explores various expatriation experiences and outcomes that such reconciliation leads to. All in all, our analysis adds to the literature on identity work in complex environments (Zikic & Richardson, 2015; Brown, 2022; Chen & Reay, 2021) by examining the complex interaction between context, identity work, and outcomes.

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