

## Developing career capital from an international assignment: Using a Multi-contextual perspective

**Christian Yao**, School of Management, Massey University (Albany), [c.d.yao@massey.ac.nz](mailto:c.d.yao@massey.ac.nz)  
**James Arrowsmith**, School of Management, Massey University (Albany), [j.arrowsmith@massey.ac.nz](mailto:j.arrowsmith@massey.ac.nz)  
And **Kaye Thorn**, School of Management, Massey University (Albany), [k.j.thorn@massey.ac.nz](mailto:k.j.thorn@massey.ac.nz)

Developing career capital from an international assignment

Page | 79

**Abstract:** In response to the changing global business environment and the notable increase in international assignments (IA), this study explores Chinese expatriates' career development using the theory of career capital. Extant IA literature confirms that while IAs are an essential tool for implementing international strategies and developing global managers, they are also comprised of complex individual experiences with different challenges and career issues. Studies on IAs often take a unilateral perspective (such as an individual or organisational perspective only), and while these studies offer valuable insights to IA issues, they lack theoretical integration to and understanding of the complexity of expatriation. This study therefore adopts a holistic approach utilising multi-contextual perspectives including individual, organisational and social domains. It uses a qualitative research methodology based on in-depth interviews with 28 Chinese international assignees, located within an interpretive paradigm in which individual meaning, action, social relationships and interactions are paramount. Findings suggest that while Chinese expatriates appreciate the experience of IA, they consider it has little impact on their future careers. Further, various contextual factors including individual, organisational and social elements become apparent affecting the development of career capital. From these results, a multi-dimensional model is proposed, emphasising the importance of understanding the IA context and developing an agenda for future research. This paper contributes to the literature by investigating the notion of career capital in an important but under-researched sample: Chinese expatriates. It helps to gain a better understanding of Chinese multinational companies and their employees.

**Keywords:** career capital; Chinese multinationals; context; international assignments; expatriates.

### INTRODUCTION

Career development from expatriations remains a major topic in the international career literature, not least because of the difficulties of managing expatriates effectively and the increasing demand for global managers who have cross-cultural experience and competencies. Major career issues are associated with adjustment (Kim & Slocum, 2008), skill transferability (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009), and repatriation job difficulties (Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, & Taniguchi, 2009). Career capital, a resource-based construct (Inkson & Arthur, 2001), is widely used investigating the impact of international assignment (IAs) on expatriates' career development. Despite the flourishing studies on the career effects of IAs such as increases or decreases in career capital, the understanding of the rationale for these changes is not sufficiently clear and there is a lack of attention to the contextual factors associated with the development of career capital during an IA. Further, within the limited studies, most focus on expatriates from developed countries such as the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and little research has sought to understand expatriates' careers from emerging economies such as China.

This paper therefore explores the notion of career capital and the associated contextual factors using a Chinese sample. It uses a qualitative approach interviewing 28 Chinese expatriates on their perceptions of career capital development from IAs. The paper compares findings with existing literature and develops propositions on the relationships between contextual factors and career capital. The complex nature of the links between IAs, individuals' career capital and the context gave rise to the following key research questions: What is the perceived impact of IAs on expatriates' career capital? What are the contextual factors influencing the perceived development of career capital from IAs?

## LITERATURE

### Career Capital

The resource-based perspective views career as 'a portfolio of capitals' (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003, p. 734) that an individual develops through work and personal life. Under this perspective, career capital is seen to consist of three ways of knowing (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001): Knowing how, knowing-why and knowing-whom. Knowing-how competencies reflect career-relevant skills, expertise, implicit and explicit knowledge which accrue over time (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). These capabilities not only involve skills and knowledge that are needed for performance, but also consist of soft skills such as communication and people skills, and hard skills such as technical expertise. Knowing-why competencies relate to career motivation, personal understandings and identification (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). It provides individuals with a sense of meaning regarding their careers and motivation to pursue career goals. Knowing-whom career capital, the third way of knowing, reflects 'the attachments, relationships, reputation, sources of information and mutual obligation that people gather as they pursue their careers' (Inkson & Arthur, 2001, p. 52), and includes internal contacts within organisations and external contacts such as business partners, or personal social connections such as friends (Parker & Arthur, 2000). Knowing-whom capital follows the social resource theory which postulates that individuals gain advantages through accessing or using their social networks to obtain salient resources such as career advancement (Lin, 1999).

### The impact of IAs on career capital

The current literature on expatriation, mainly based on expatriates from Western, developed countries, suggest a positive impact of IAs on career capital (for a summary, see Table 1). Despite adjustment difficulties and repatriation issues such as 'career wobbles', expatriates appreciate the value of international experiences and believe that IAs contribute to long-term career progression.

More specifically, an expatriate may develop technical skills related to different operational and general business context (Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Makela & Suutari, 2007; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002) as well as international competencies such as cross-cultural skills (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Kraimer, Shaffer, & Bolino, 2009), local knowledge (Li & Scullion, 2010) and social skills (Jokinen, 2010). This knowing-how capital is often considered essential for global management development and is highly valued by expatriates and their organisations. However, studies also indicate that some of these skills may not be transferable to the home context and therefore have limited influence on expatriates' career progression (Harris, Brewster, & Sparrow, 2003).

Research on knowing-whom capital shows a diverse picture. Expatriates may develop new networks at subsidiaries from work-related activities (Makela & Suutari, 2007) as well as personal social interactions (Jokinen, 2010); they may face difficulties developing new local connections due to language and cultural issues (Dickmann & Harris, 2005), and challenges to maintaining their existing networks in home country (Stahl & Cerdin, 2004). While expatriates acknowledge the importance of maintaining and developing knowing-whom career capital because it provides career benefits such as access to information and resources, it is unclear in the current research on the developmental patterns of these resources and the utilisation across different cultural boundaries.

Knowing-why career capital is often addressed by investigating IA motivations and research finds that internal factors such as career goals and desire for change are important components for accepting an IA (Makela & Suutari, 2007). Expatriates also experience change such as questioning personal norms and values (Dickmann & Harris, 2005), becoming more self-aware

Developing career capital from an international assignment  
Page | 80

(Jokinen, 2010), rethinking their relationship with the company (Dickmann & Harris, 2005) and developing global career mindsets (Kohonen, 2008). Although these changes are anticipated during an IA, especially considering the difficulties experienced during the adjustment process, there is still a lack of knowledge of how knowing-why career capital develops, or of the drivers behind such development. There is also little known about how these changes impact on individual career decisions.

**Table 1. Major Themes on the Development of Expatriates' Career Capital**

<i>Career Capital</i>	<i>Impact of IAs</i>	<i>References</i>
Knowing-how	Increase in operational and general business understanding	Suutari & Taka, 2004; Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Makela & Suutari, 2007; Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008
	Development of local competencies such as language	Li & Scullion, 2010
	Development of social skills	Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Suutari & Makela, 2007; Jokinen, Brewster & Suutari, 2008; Jokinen, 2010
	Inter-cultural competences	Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Makela & Suutari, 2007; Kraimer, 2009
	Self confidence	Makela & Suutari, 2007; Jokinen, 2010
Knowing-whom	Develop new networks from subsidiaries (both within the organisations and from external partners)	Makela & Suutari, 2007; Jokinen, 2010
	Existing networks decrease due to absence ('out of sight, out of mind syndrome')	Stahl & Cerdin 2004; Dickmann & Harris, 2005
Knowing-why	Personal changes (e.g. openness, flexibility, extroversion)	Jokinen, 2010
	Increases in self-awareness (e.g., one's strengths and weaknesses, future career directions, and questioning personal norms and value)	Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Makela & Suutari, 2007; Jokinen, 2010
	Develop global career identity (e.g., want to retain the international aspect in their future careers)	Kohonen, 2005; Makela, & Suutari, 2007; Jokinen, 2010
	Initial motivation of accepting IAs has not changed (e.g., not for economic reasons, more on experiences/career advancement	Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Jokinen, 2010

Overall, the current literature on career capital confirms the impact of IAs and changes in expatriates' career capital, but these findings are based on expatriates from Western countries

and there is limited knowledge on Chinese expatriates' experience and how the development of their career capital is compared to the findings from the current literature.

### **The contextual approaches in the career literature**

While the current career research studies confirm that individuals are now having more freedom regarding career decisions and the notion of the 'boundaryless career' is becoming more evident (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2005), the contextual influences on individual careers are still significant, especially for expatriates whose careers involve motilities across cultural contexts. Context is essential for meaning making because it provides background information that explains experiences and actions (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). Broadly, career capital development can be seen as a complex and dynamic interaction between the person and the environment (Chen, 2003). Individuals' perceptions of their career activities and outcomes are subject to influences from conditions and situations surrounding the very experiences of individuals.

The person-environment interrelationships and the significance of context in an individual's career development have both been addressed by different constructivist approaches and contextual perspectives. Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg's (1986) developmental-contextual perspectives emphasise the use of contextual views to analyse the context of career development and comprehensively study the relationships between multi-environments. Bronfenbrenner (1979) classifies these environments to different systems composing a micro-system (personal and family factors), meso-system (interactions between roles of work and families), exo-system (organisational factors) and macro-system (social factors such as culture, sub-cultures), arguing that these systems directly and indirectly affect career development. Similarly and more recently, Briscoe, Hall, and Mayrhofer (2012) propose that individuals develop their careers across personal, organisational and social domains and the career development depends upon how career value is functioned within different contexts. This paper, taking theories from extant literature, adopts a multi-dimensional contextual approach analysing expatriates' career experiences on personal, organisational and social levels.

In the Chinese context, some research explores the effect of context on career development. Wong, Horng, Cheng, and Killman (2011) provide a summary of contextual factors including individual differences, job characteristics, and organisational practices, which they believe to have an effect on employees' career development. With a specific focus on the organisational context of careers, Chen, Wakabayashi and Takeuchi (2004) find several organisational factors, including the quality of the environment for career progress, performance-based promotion practices and in-house training opportunities, have influences on career progression. Further, in a specific Chinese social setting, Wong's (2005) findings indicate how cultural specificity and political dynamics affect managers' career experience, and how government and economic policies, and family expectations act as significant factors determining Chinese career choices. There is no doubt these studies offer some insight into Chinese organisations and their employees, and improve the understanding of the differences between the Chinese and Western contexts. However, they provide little evidence on how Chinese expatriates develop their careers. Further, most of these studies focus on a single perspective of the context such as the individual, organisational or social view. There is no research investigating the overall contextual environment incorporating various domains. Developing careers from IAs involves not only physical movements to different organisational and cultural locations but also mobility across personal, family and psychological domains. This paper therefore takes an overall approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of expatriates' careers. With the growth of Chinese multinational companies (MNCs), the role of expatriates is becoming more important and understanding how these members of Chinese elite develop their careers becomes a critical topic.

### METHOD

The extant literature fails to make the connection between career capital and the contextual domains within which that capital develops. An exploratory and interpretive approach is therefore required to understand the complexity of expatriates' career development. Tarique and Schuler (2010) suggest that because the field of global career is relatively young, qualitative methodologies are useful to provide rich information to facilitate theory building. Further, qualitative methods, such as interviews, have been highlighted by many researchers as the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a complex contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context such as expatriation (Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998; Robson, 1993; Yin, 1994).

We utilised semi-structured interviews, which offered an iterative approach to probe underlying explanations and provided opportunities to conceptualise and explain matters of interest through a process of articulation that they might not have been previously conducted (Yin, 1994). Semi-structured interviews aim to maintain a balance between focus and flexibility (Yin, 1994). While a list of question themes were generated from the literature based on the research questions, open-ended questions allowed new themes to emerge and develop from interviewees' responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The interviews, ranging in length from 40-65 minutes with an average of 45 minutes, were recorded with permission. Although many interviewees had a reasonable understanding of English, communication in Mandarin helped build trust and removed the problem of losing the important cultural characteristics of language.

### *Sampling*

One of the reasons for the lack of research in this field might be because of the difficulties of accessing Chinese expatriates, and building trust in the Chinese context (Cooke, 2009), so for this reason, snowball sampling was considered appropriate. Initial participants were recruited using researchers' personal networks and they were subsequently asked to help identify additional participants. A total of 28 expatriates were located using this sampling technique. Although a key limitation of snowball sampling can be a lack of representativeness, the sample obtained covered a wide range of demographic, geographic and occupational variables (Table 2).

### *Analysis*

We followed template analysis approach (King, 1998), which lies between content analysis where there is a predetermined list of codes, and grounded theory where there are no predetermined codes. The process allowed new themes to surface and develop from the data and therefore to form new ideas. A list of nodes was generated from the literature and was used to code the transcriptions while new nodes were developed where they are not available in the literature. Nodes were then compared and categorised into themes. NVivo 9 was used to facilitate the process of classifying, sorting and arranging information, examining relationships in the data, and linking themes to form theories.

### *Findings*

This paper explores the impact of IAs on the three ways of knowing and expatriates' perceived contextual factors for their career development. First, we outline major findings under the three main career competency categories: knowing-how, knowing-whom and knowing why. Second, we present major themes from expatriates' explanations on the effect of IAs.

Among the 28 interviewed Chinese expatriates, seventy-five per cent are male which is corresponding to male-dominated nature of expatriation (Brookfield, 2012). The average age is 27 with a majority of being unmarried. Interviewees are from seven MNCs ranging from

telecommunications, IT, and banking to construction. Their IA destinations are Western developed countries such as New Zealand and their IA duties are ranged from administration, technical roles and management. Most of the IAs have been between one to six months and more than half of respondents have previous IA experience.

Developing career capital from an international assignment

Page | 84

**Table 2. Interview Sample Demographics**

Sample demographics	N	Expatriates	%
Number of interviews	28		100
Age			
Average (SD)	27.32 (1.59), range 25-32		
Gender			
Male	21		75.0
Female	7		25.0
Marital Status			
Married without children	4		14.3
In relationship	10		25.7
Single	14		50.0
IA destination			
Australia	2		7.1
Europe	6		21.4
UK	7		25.0
US	4		14.3
New Zealand	5		17.9
Others	4		14.3
Length of current IA (in months)			
Average (SD)	11.04 (7.79), range 2-28		
Previous IA experience			
Yes	15		53.6
No	13		46.4
Company classification			
Bank1	4		14.3
Bank2	2		7.1
Construction1	4		14.3
IT1	3		10.8
IT2	2		7.1
Telco1	6		21.4
Telco2	7		25.0
Job position			
Engineering	3		10.7
IT	8		28.6
Management	5		17.9
Marketing	3		10.7
Project management	4		14.2
Software development/ support	5		17.9

## Career capital development from IAs

Respondents appreciated the value of the ‘experience’ gained from IAs but were uncertain as to its impact on their careers. While working in different countries provided interesting memories, they did not consider the IA provided them with a competitive advantage over people who have only domestic experience. In their mind, IAs were ‘intangible’, having no obvious and substantive impact on their career capital. They understood the importance of external factors that contribute to their career development. ‘*Many things are out of my own control*’ (male, IT developer) and ‘*not of my own free will*’ (male, marketing manager) were typical attitudes towards their career opportunities. The reflection of ‘bounded’ career (instead of boundaryless career) where the organisation was in control of career progression was a strong theme from the interviews. Table 3 offers a summary of key findings in three ways of knowing.

Developing career capital from an international assignment  
Page | 85

**Table 3. Career Capital of Chinese Expatriates**

<i>Career capital</i>	<i>Individuals identifying factor (N) / (%)</i>
<i>Knowing-how</i>	
Limited development in language skills	23/ 82
Limited development in interpersonal skills	17/ 61
New ways of doing things	14/ 50
General industry understanding	11/ 39
No new technical skills	10/ 36
<i>Knowing-whom</i>	
Maintaining existing guanxi is the most important	26/ 93
New networks are temporary	25/ 82
Barriers to non-work related networks	17/ 61
Potential loss in personal friendship/networks	16/ 57
<i>Knowing-why</i>	
Self -awareness	20/ 71
Broaden views	16/ 57
Changes in IA motivation	15/ 53
Chinese identity	15/ 53
My future is in China	13/ 46
Personality changes	10/ 36

*N= the number of respondents who have reported the factor*

*%= the percentage of respondents who have reported the factor*

## *Knowing-how*

In general, these Chinese expatriates develop little technical knowing-how from IAs. They consider IAs as a process for transferring their existing skills instead of developing new ones. Participants had often been selected specifically because of skills they already had, or they were especially trained at the headquarters to complete a task on expatriation. Hence, the expatriates knew the IA would be within their capabilities and there was no expectation of learning new or different skills. Similarly, organisations did not expect expatriates to develop new skills or knowledge.

*‘I learnt something new for the first month or so because it was a new environment. But soon after that, I was just doing the same thing again and again....’ (female, software technician).*

*'If I wanted to improve my technical skills, it would have been better to stay in China where most of the training takes place. Our company usually sends someone who has the required skill sets' (male, software development).*

Expatriates however, acknowledged some learning in 'soft' skills including language, interpersonal and communication skills. Nearly all expatriates mentioned some improvement in their language skills.

*'I never had the opportunity to practice my English in China after graduating from university. I always wanted to improve it' (male, marketing).*

*'At the beginning of the IA, I was hardly able to speak English in full sentences but now I am much more fluent and confident talking to people. I also learnt to write letters/emails in English which I had not done before' (male, IT).*

However, interviewees identified only a limited improvement in English because it was only used at work and a low level of fluency was sufficient to meet job requirements. They also doubted the practical value of their language skills when they returned to China.

*'When I go back to China, I do not think I will get a lot of use from my English because Mandarin will be the only language that is required within the organisation' (male, IT).*

There are similar findings in interpersonal and communication skills. The impact of this new skill on their career is again limited, as once they are back in a Chinese organisation, many of these skills would lose their functionality.

### *Knowing-whom*

Knowing-whom career capital involves interpersonal networks and resources. An important and dominant knowing-whom theme is the influence of guanxi in the Chinese organisational context. Twenty-six respondents emphasised the importance of having good guanxi with managers and colleagues, providing access to career opportunities such as IAs and increasing the chance to progress within the organisation. Therefore, maintaining existing guanxi during IAs is essential.

*'Being liked (by my managers) definitely helped me to get this IA opportunity. There is no formal procedure to select an employee (to go onto an IA), most of the time, managers decided who they want to send so of course they will choose someone they like' (female, IT)*

*'It is important to be visible even though you are away from the headquarters. For example, I ring my managers for their birthdays or Chinese festivals and make sure to bring them presents every time I go back to China' (male, marketing).*

Expatriates found it difficult to maintain their existing networks during IAs. Although expatriates were often in frequent contact with staff in headquarters, collaborating on tasks, they found the distance had the potential to damage their networks. The importance of personal interactions in order to maintain guanxi in the Chinese culture means that absences could erode their social ties.

*'We still keep in contact due to our work tasks but it's different because I don't have the chance to talk to them face-to-face, people tend to forget you and you become less important when you are absent too long' (male, management).*



During IAs, participants perceived little increase in 'knowing-whom' competencies. Their social and work networks were limited to local employees, clients and business partners, and these networks were considered 'temporary' and so they did not anticipate a potential impact from them on their careers. Also, because the expatriates were often accommodated together, they were not proactively involved in experiencing and learning the new culture, making it difficult to develop non-work related social capital.

Developing career capital from an international assignment  
Page | 87

*'I don't really have the opportunities to get to know people outside work; I spend most of my time at the office and then the rest of the time with other expatriates. I don't really feel like making new friends. After all, the culture is different' (male, engineering).*

Another interesting finding was the importance of personal, non-work related networks, such as friendships with their university classmates, to one's career.

*'In China, the more people you know, the easier you can get things done, and the more opportunities you may get. It is the same case for careers. I need to keep connected with my friends, so if there is any good opportunity in their company, they can let me know.... You never know what might be there around the corner' (male, IT).*

Several respondents identified the difficulty of maintaining personal networks due to lack of personal interaction during an IA.

*'My contacts with old friends have decreased as well, being away makes it difficult to keep in contact. I miss the old times when we would meet every week for dinner or drinks' (male, management).*

*'One needs to invest in your friendships. If you put more effort and time into it, there will be returns, for example, friends can be very helpful in providing opportunities for new jobs. (In my case), being far away means I lose all these opportunities' (male, IT).*

### *Knowing-why*

Knowing-why career capital includes the motivation for the IA experience, perception of future career opportunities and an understanding of career value. In general, Chinese expatriates perceived some influences from IAs but to a limited extent. These included changes in characteristics, better assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, and developing certain aspects of their personality (for example, becoming more flexible, open to new things, and non-judgmental to any situation):

*'There is an old Chinese saying: "You can know more by travelling thousands of miles than by reading thousands of books". The more I see, the more changes there are in my mind. And it has changed my views on how to look at things in the future' (male, management).*

*'The international experience has broadened my views. I realise there are many different ways of doing things now' (female, IT).*

These changes have also caused expatriates to re-evaluate their initial motivation for accepting the IA. Several respondents indicated that they became more realistic about expectations from the international experience.

*'I did not know what to expect before coming to the UK, but now, after working six months, I began to think about the value of this IA and what I am going to do in the future' (male, IT).*

The importance of different factors began to be re-prioritised. For example, many respondents said one of the most important motivations for accepting IA is financial benefits but after working on an IA for a while, the economic value of this experience is no longer significant:

*'I accepted this IA because of the high salary; I thought I could save money to buy an apartment in Beijing but I don't really care about it anymore, I would rather get less money but stay with my family. Besides, with the current real estate climate (in Beijing), I will never save fast enough to buy an apartment' (female, IT).*

More than half of the respondents affirmed that the international experiences have strengthened their cultural identities and the desire to going back to China.

*'It (Australia) is good, but it is not my home.... (before I came to Australia), I thought I would enjoy settling in a foreign country, but now, I want to go back to China. It is not bad to be a Chinese' (male, marketing).*

*'You will always feel like a foreigner, no matter how long you live here (the US). There is something powerful pulling me back to China. My family, my friends and everything I know are there' (female, IT).*

Overall, these changes in knowing-why were strongly related to culture and have impacted on expatriates' future career orientations. Nearly half of the respondents noted that their long-term career focus is in China and nearly a third of respondents said they will not accept another international posting.

The next three sections presents major contextual factors that emerged from the findings and they are summarised in Table 4. It is not the intention of the current study list *all* possible contextual factors; instead, these sections aim to allow significant themes to surface from the data and emphasise what matters the most to participants in this study.

### ***Perceived individual factors on the impact of IAs***

The most dominant individual factor emerging from the data was the importance of family in expatriates' careers. Twenty-six out of 28 interviewees reported that family considerations such as 'looking after elderly parents' or 'the need to raise a family' are the most important factors in making career decisions including whether to accept another IA or whether return back to China earlier.

*'Both of my parents are in China, they are getting older so I need to make sure I am close to them to look after them. This is more important than just developing my own career' (male, manager).*

Interviewees had a strong sense of responsibility with an emphasis on 'what needs to be done' at specific stages of their lives. For example, family issues became more significant when expatriates reached their mid to late 20s and overtook the need to develop individual careers from IAs.

**Table 4. Contextual Factors of Career Capital Development**

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Individuals identifying factor (N)/ (%)</i>
<i>Individual</i>	
Family is my priority	26/93
Different stages of my life	26/93
Future is in China	24/86
Home belongingness	24/86
<i>Organisational</i>	
Organisational structures: highly hierarchical	28/100
Chinese organisational culture	26/93
Organisational motives	25/90
Repatriation position	25/90
<i>Social factors</i>	
Cultural differences	28/100
Job market conditions	24/86

Developing career capital from an international assignment  
Page | 89

*N= the number of respondents who have reported the factor*

*%= the percentage of respondents who have reported the factor*

*'I am getting older (age 27) so I am always under pressure to get married. My parents do not want me to stay in another country for the long term; they said other children my age have already got married. So I will go back permanently after this posting' (male, IT).*

More than 80 per cent of respondents confirmed that careers are not individual and many factors are involved when making a decision. Balancing the family needs, almost all interviewees (26 out of 28) consider China as the ground for their future career development.

*'From my personal point of view, I haven't planned to stay abroad too long. I want to go back to China to develop my future so it means the longer I stay, the more difficult it would be for me to get back on track. You see, you need contacts for everything (in China), but after staying on an IAs for two years, I would lose all my Chinese contacts including business partners and friends. I will have to start from zero (male, management).'*

## ***Perceived organisational factors on the impact of IAs***

All interviewees acknowledged the highly hierarchical structures and bureaucratic culture of their organisations, and understood that developing careers in such context involves more than demonstrating skills and experience.

*'Getting promoted is not all about capability, it is still very much about seniority and where you are position within the company' (female, IT).*

*'There are still many 'grey' areas of Chinese organisational culture in my company. It (career development within an organisation) is not a fair competition. Sometimes you need to make compromises; sometimes you need to use unconventional channels to get what you want' (male, management).*

The organisational motives for using IAs were also a major category including themes on the length of IAs, expatriate management and expatriation selection. The average length of the interviewees' current posting was less than 12 months meaning most of these IAs were for task implementation, problem solving or fixed-term project management. The short durations of IAs meant expatriates face difficulties of developing continual and transferable career capital and maintaining its value when they finish the expatriation.

Developing career capital from an international assignment

The selection process was highly driven by technical requirements focusing on 'skill match' instead of finding candidates with the potential to be trained to do such a job. There was often no specific IA training prior to expatriation although some MNCs did provide various destination information on their corporate websites.

Page | 90

*'Use my company as an example, every second, there is someone (expatriate) flying (to an IA destination), it is impossible to train everyone before they go. That would be a huge hassle for the company.'* (male, IT).

Efficiency was a major requirement among Chinese MNCs and in order to achieve this, companies had to eliminate time consuming processes such as training. Therefore, Chinese MNCs often rely on the individuals themselves to adjust to the new environment. During IAs, unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese MNCs were often provided with free (shared) accommodation and meals. Expatriates, therefore, spent most of their time with fellow expatriates. This practice aimed to provide a familiar cultural environment so expatriates could adapt to the new environment quickly. However, some expatriates voiced disapproval of such arrangement.

*'I had no chance to meet new people. I spent most of the time with other expatriates, yes, it was very convenient because I did not have to worry about dealing with lots of daily things but it was no different to working in China. What is the point of working in the UK when everyone I knew was a Chinese expatriate?'* (male, IT).

Chinese MNCs did not aim to assist expatriates to merge into the new cultural environment. Instead, they created a temporary safety net so expatriates would not experience cultural difficulties. Respondents believed that the Chinese companies did not expect expatriates to develop new cultural skills from IAs. This is another reflection of Chinese expatriate management practices which focused on utilising individuals' existing career capital as opposed to developing them. Job arrangements upon return were a major area of dissatisfaction among interviewed expatriates. There was clear evidence that the organisations neither expected the expatriate to obtain new career capital from IAs nor considered international experiences as important part for promotion.

*'Our company does not have any clear policies regarding repatriation positions. That's the aspect I am very disappointed about. In my case, I decided to go back to get married so have to return earlier, but my company wants me to stay here longer and there might not be a position when I return'* (male, IT).

*'It would be lucky if I get my old position back, most of the colleagues I know left their companies (after return) because they were not happy about the new job arrangements'* (male, Marketing).

### ***Perceived social factors on the impact of IAs***

The cultural differences between China and the new host country had an impact on career capital in ways such as increased language skills, and the development of new work-related

contacts from IAs. However, the respondents felt that much of the career capital developed on IAs would not function effectively in the Chinese context.

*'When I go back to China, I do not think I will get a lot of use from my English skills because Mandarin will be the only language that is required within the organisation' (male, IT).*

*'I haven't planned to keep contacts with them (knowing-whom during IAs). It is difficult to maintain contact over the long distance. Also, I don't think they will have much benefit to me because I am planning to develop my career in China' (male, Marketing).*

Therefore, Chinese expatriates tended to develop (or maintain) context (China)-based career capital during IAs. The career capital which was highly valued by society would soon show its benefits and that was not considered as important would soon fade out and lose its value.

The job market in China is competitive, particularly for those highly desired positions in Chinese MNCs because of higher pay and better job security. However, overseas experiences might not be unique or offer any competitive advantage. Many interviewees expressed their uncertainty about the impact of IAs on their new employment opportunities. Although international experiences would add benefits if the new positions should involve international business, Chinese-specific skills such as dealing with *guanxi*, and the familiarity with the local context are more desirable assets to employers. In fact, many expatriates did not think they have any particular advantage when competing with local workers.

*'IAs may sound prestigious, but it might not have any practical meaning to new employers. For example, employers would be more interested in people who have more local experience because they have accumulated guanxi resources, instead of expatriates like myself who have been away for two years and have lost existing contacts' (male, management).*

Therefore, expatriates were very realistic about their international experience and cautious about career moves despite dissatisfaction with proposed job arrangements once they return to China. Within a big organisation, the role of an individual is insignificant and can be easily replaced by others. In this regard, individual career capital was evaluated by the social context and career choices were bounded by external factors.

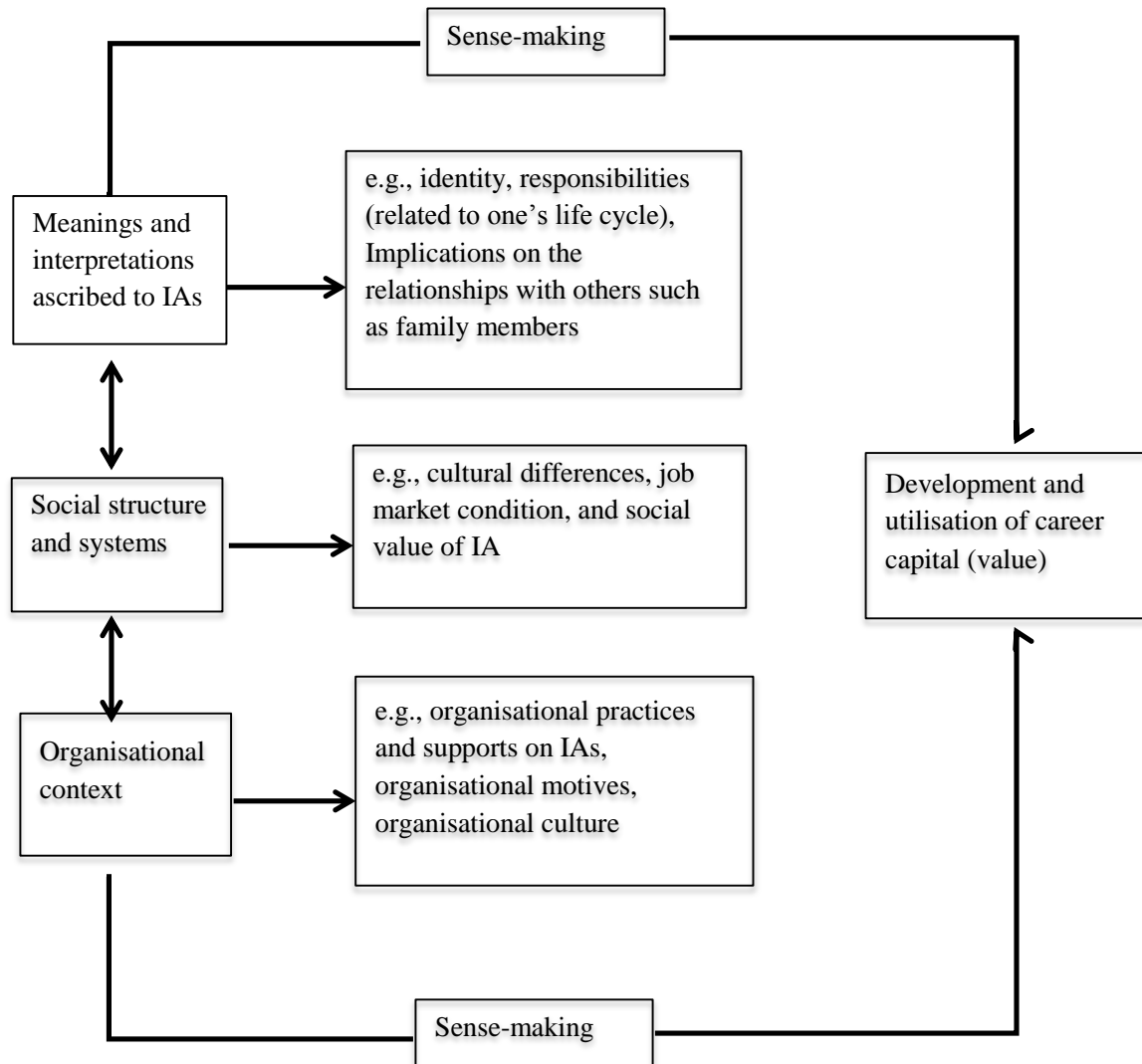
### DISCUSSION

When questioned about their motivation and decision to accept an IA, most of the participants chose to describe their reasons in 'narrative' rather than 'paradigmatic' thoughts (Polkinghorne, 1988). Few offered reasons in abstract terms. It seemed important for them to make their decisions within the context by describing various factors existing on individual, family and organisational domains. While the contextual impacts on careers are acknowledged in the literature (Mayrhofer et al., 2007), most studies only give attention to one dimension (e.g., Stambulova and Alfermann, 2009, Dickmann et al., 2008). This study offers an overview on all three contextual dimensions and examines their interrelationships with each other. A proposed integrated framework is presented as below (Figure 1).

The findings reported here suggest that the notion of *individual action* is crucial in career capital development. Participants' understanding and interpretations of IA experiences affect their willingness to plan and develop certain components of career capital. For example, those who have a high desire to return to China after the IA, intended to maintain their connections with key *guanxi* (existing knowing-whom) in China. Similarly, participants who wanted to pursue their long-term career goals in China paid more attention to developing (or preserving) Chinese related practical skills. To these individuals, the career focus during an IA is not simply about

developing various types of knowing. Instead, they gave more emphases to the importance of 'transferrable value' of career capital (Doherty and Dickmann, 2009).

**Figure 1. An Integrated Context of Career Capital Development**



Developing career capital from an international assignment  
Page | 92

The central role played by family, mainly spouses and children, is widely acknowledged in the literature (Konopaske et al., 2005, Lee, 2007, Andreason, 2008). Indeed, the effect of IA on expatriates' interrelationships or 'significant others' (Lent et al., 2000) influences their international career experience. This paper further suggests that Chinese assignees face different challenges due to their unique demographic characteristics and their idiosyncratic understanding of their social identity and roles. For example, most of the family issues discussed in this paper were related to participants' parents because most of the participants are the only child in their families. The specific Chinese cultural values such as family-oriented collectivism, respect for elderly and long-term orientation (Fan, 1994), mean that Chinese expatriates, at certain ages, have to put more focus on looking after their parents instead of exploring their own freedom. This contrasts with the extant academic literature, which argues that individuals, especially those who are highly mobile, have more freedom to make individual career decisions to achieve personal satisfaction (De Vos and Soens, 2008). In the Chinese context, cultural and social

obligations, influence individual understanding of IAs, their social roles, and consequently career behaviors. The social ties with families in China played an important connection in their emotional belongingness (Chu, 2008).

Also, due to the cultural differences between China and the host country, some of the knowing developed from an IA may have limited practical value in China. For example, language was found to have limited use if participants want to pursue their future careers domestically. Therefore, the argument here is that the development of career capital is socially driven and its impact on individual career success depends on its functionality and value within a specific cultural setting. Furthermore, participants' accounts presented here suggest that the role of the organisation cannot be discounted in the process. Similar to Dickmann and Doherty (2007)'s study exploring the career capital impact of IAs within distinct organisational contexts, this study found organisational policies and practices have an impact on individual perceptions and career behaviours. This paper suggested further two organisational factors: MNCs' motives for using IAs and organisational culture. For example, key characteristics of Chinese organisational culture - 'unwritten rules' 'guanxi' and 'personal impression' (Chen, 2001) - have direct associations with knowing-whom career capital. Therefore, participants have given more emphasis to the importance of knowing-whom and what needs to be done in order to ensure a good personal resource within the organisation. Similar to the interrelationships between the individual and social context, these organisational factors are also mediated by the social and cultural elements of China.

From the findings, it became clear that the career development during an IA is a complex, dynamic process with influences from various domains. Simply focusing on one single domain (for example, for individual development) or neglecting the interdependencies between these domains, may result in a significant negative impact on one's career. The findings pointed to the notion of the protean career adding arguments to 'whether individual own their careers' (Qin and Baruch, 2010, Briscoe et al., 2006, Hall and Moss, 1998, De Vos and Soens, 2008). While an individual may have more freedom to make career decisions, their career choices are strongly shaped by the context they are in and their perceptions of the outcomes of career decisions. These contextual factors are particularly significant for individuals such as expatriates who move across different contexts including individual, organisational and social domains. For them, the challenges are not only developing essential career capital to enable effective job performance during an IA, but also to ensure finding their own 'context' for long-term career development and developing relevant knowing.

Another significant finding is the dominant role of the social context on both individual and organisational domains. While some studies offer insights on cultural or social influences on individual careers (e.g., Stambulova and Alfermann, 2009, Tu et al., 2006), most of them explore how individuals develop careers in single cultural setting and there is limited knowledge on cross-cultural perspectives on career development (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). Findings in this study contribute to the understanding of this topic by revealing the perceived career transitions across different cultures. For Chinese expatriates, the development of career capital is influenced by the desire and responsibilities associated with their social roles. For Chinese organisations, the practices and policies on utilising individual learning from IAs are influenced by Chinese social and political agendas. For Chinese society, the social value of IAs is determined by public perceptions on what is important in the specific cultural context. Using Chinese expatriates as the sample, this study confirms that culture builds up the foundation of individual careers even for those who are highly mobile and have the opportunities to experience a new culture.

### CONCLUSION

Overall, this study drew together the notion of career capital and a contextual perspective to investigate the perceived value of IAs. It goes beyond the current static focus in research on IAs to include multi-dimensional perspectives on the perceived outcomes of IAs. In doing so, it has made several contributions. First, it proposed a framework for further research on the utility of career capital to further understand the impact of IAs and expatriates' career development. Based on previous studies, this paper proposed an integrated model including individual, social and organisational dimensions. The study offers a dynamic and interdependent view of how different contextual factors impact on expatriates' career capital development. Future studies can provide closer investigation on how these dimensions impact with each other to form the 'context' of career development. It added to the current, rather unilateral, understanding of career models.

Second, it outlined the role of social context mediating individual and organisational factors on career capital development. These factors serve as an important foundation to understand the complexity of IA contexts. Some factors such as organisational support and cultural differences are acknowledged in the literature (e.g., Van Vianen et al., 2004, van der Heijden and Paauwe, 2009), but other factors such as organisational culture and home country job markets are relatively new. While some may be limited in the Chinese context, future studies can explore their relevance in other cultural samples or any other important factors to be considered to enhance the understanding on the theoretical applicability across different cultural contexts.

This study also offers some implications for management and MNCs. It emphasises the importance of meeting individual expectations in order to improve individual satisfaction and IA effectiveness. While MNCs use career benefits (such as the development of career capital from IAs) to attract and motivate employees to accept IAs, MNCs often have limited support to facilitate the transfer of new skills and knowledge. This study suggests MNCs need to provide adequate practices so the *value* of career capital will be appreciated by individuals, organisations, and wider society. Furthermore, some Chinese organisational practices, such as the use of short-term assignments and offering shared-accommodation/ living arrangements, may offer new alternatives to improve the effectiveness of adjustment and personal satisfaction.

Due to its exploratory nature, the study is limited by several factors. The sample was relatively small and not selected to be representative, but instead to provide rich data and insight to understand IA experiences. The use of a semi-structured interview method relied on expatriates' self-reports of their careers and organisational practices and further studies can implement multi-method strategies or select various stakeholders (e.g., HR managers, senior management) to gain different perspectives on issues. Also, the current study has not tested the significance of variables such as cross-industry differences, or gender differences. Further studies can investigate their impacts and how they fit into the theoretical framework. Lastly, the study is limited to Chinese MNCs and whether findings can be applied to other contexts need to be tested. Further work on transnational companies from emerging economies is important in gaining fuller understanding of theories and developing global or universal frameworks.



## REFERENCES

- Andreason, A. (2008). Expatriate adjustment of spouses and expatriate managers: An integrative research review. *International Journal of Management*, 25, 382–395.
- Briscoe, J., Hall, D. & Frautschy, R. (2006). The interplay of boundaryless and protean careers: An empirical exploration. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 69, 30–47.
- Briscoe, J., Hall, D. and DeMuth, R. (2005). Protean and boundaryless careers: An empirical exploration. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 69, 30–47.
- Briscoe, D., Hall, D., & Mayrhofer, W. (2012). *Careers around the world*. New York: Routledge.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brookfield (2012). Global relocation trends: 2012 survey report. Chicago.
- Cerdin, J., & Le Pargneux, M. (2009). Career and international assignment fit: Toward an integrative model of success. *Human Resource Management*, 48(1), 5–25.
- Chen, C. (2003). Integrating perspectives in career development theory and practice. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 51(3), 203–216.
- Chen, M. (2001). *Inside Chinese business: A guide for managers worldwide*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Chen, Z., Wakabayashi, M., & Takeuchi, N. (2004). A comparative study of organizational context factors for managerial career progress: Focusing on Chinese state-owned, Sino-foreign joint venture and Japanese corporations. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 15(4–5), 750–774.
- Chu, Y. (2008). The importance of being Chinese: Orientalism reconfigured in the age of global modernity. *Boundary 2*, 35(2), 183–206.
- Defillippi, R., & Arthur, M. (1994). The boundaryless career: A competency-based perspective, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15, 307–324.
- Defillippi, R., & Arthur, M. (1994). Boundaryless contexts and careers: A competency-based perspective. In M. Arthur & D. Rousseau (Eds.), *The Boundaryless Career. A New Employment Principle in a New Organizational Era*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, pp. 116–131.
- De Vos, A., & Soens, N. (2008). Protean attitude and career success: The mediating role of self-management. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 73(3), 449–456.
- Dickmann, M., & Doherty, N. (2007). Exploring the career capital impact of international assignments within distinct organizational contexts. *British Journal of Management*, 19(2), 145–161.
- Dickmann, M., Doherty, N., Mills, T., & Brewster, C. (2008). Why do they go? Individual and corporate perspectives on the factors influencing the decision to accept an international assignment. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19(4), 731–751.
- Dickmann, M., & Harris, H. (2005). Developing career capital for global careers: The role of international assignments. *Journal of World Business*, 40(4), 399–408.
- Doherty, N., & Dickmann, M. (2009). Exposing the symbolic capital of international assignments. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(2), 301–320.
- Fan, Y. (1994). A classification of Chinese culture. *Cross Cultural Management - An International Journal*, 7(2), 3–10.
- Hall, D. , & Moss, J. (1998). The new Protean career contract: Helping organizations and employees adapt. *Organizational Dynamics*, 26(3), 22–37.
- Harris, H., Brewster, C., & Sparrow, P. (2003). *International human resource management*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Iellatchitch, A., Mayrhofer, W., & Meyer, M. (2003). Career fields: A small step towards a grand career theory? *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 14(5), 728 –750.
- Inkson, K., & Arthur, M. (2001). How to be a successful career capitalist. *Organizational Dynamics*, 30(1), 48–61.
- Jokinen, T. (2010). Development of career capital through international assignments and its transferability to new contexts, *Thunderbird International Business Review*, 52(4), 325–336.
- Jokinen, T., Brewster, C., & Suutari, V. (2008). Career capital during international work experiences: Contrasting self-initiated expatriate experiences and assigned expatriation. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19(6), 979–998.
- Kim, K., & Slocum, J. (2008). Individual differences and expatriate assignment effectiveness: The case of U.S.-based Korean expatriates. *Journal of World Business*, 43, 109–126.

- Kohonen, E. (2008). The impact of international assignments on expatriates' identity and career aspirations: Reflections upon re-entry. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 24(4), 320-329.
- Konopaske, R., Robie, C., & Ivancevich, J. M. (2005). A preliminary model of spouse influence on managerial global assignment willingness. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16(3), 405-426.
- Kraimer, M., Shaffer, M., & Bolino, M. (2009). The influence of expatriate and repatriate experiences on career advancement and repatriate retention. *Human Resource Management*, 48(1), 27-47.
- Lee, H. (2007). Factors that influence expatriate failure: An interview study. *International Journal of Management*, 24(3), 403-413.
- Lent, R.W., Brown, S.D., & Hackett, G. (2000). Contextual supports and barriers to career choice: A social cognitive analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 47(1), 36-49.
- Li, S., & Scullion, H. (2010). Developing the local competence of expatriate managers for emerging markets: A knowledge-based approach. *Journal of World Business*, 45(2), 190-196.
- Lin, N. (1999). Social networks and status attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 467-487.
- Makela, K., & Suutari, V. (2007). The career capital of managers with global careers. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(7), 628-648.
- Mayrhofer, W., Meyer, M., & Steyrer, J. (2007). Contextual issues in the study of careers. In H. Gunz & M. Peiperl (Eds.), *Handbook of career studies* (pp. 215-240). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Parker, P., & Arthur, M. (2000). Careers, organizing, and community. In M. Peiperl, M. Arthur, R. Coffee & T. Morris (Eds.), *Career frontiers: New conceptions of working lives* (pp. 99-121). Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Qin, C. Y., & Baruch, Y. (2010). The impact of cross-cultural training for expatriates in a Chinese firm. *Career Development International*, 15(2-3), 296-318.
- Stahl, G., & Cerdin, J. (2004). Global careers in French and German multinational corporations. *Journal of Management Development*, 23(9), 885-902.
- Stahl, G., Chua, C., Caligiuri, P., Cerdin, J., & Taniguchi, M. (2009). Predictors of turnover intentions in learning-driven and demand-driven international assignments: The role of repatriation concerns, satisfaction with company support, and perceived career advancement opportunities. *Human Resource Management*, 48(1), 89-109.
- Stahl, G., Miller, E. L., & Tung, R. L. (2002). Toward the boundaryless career: A closer look at the expatriate career concept and the perceived implications of an international assignment. *Journal of World Business*, 37(3), 216-227.
- Stambulova, N. B., & Alfermann, D. (2009). Putting culture into context: Cultural and cross-cultural perspectives in career development and transition research and practice. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 7(3), 292-308.
- Tu, H., Forret, M., & Sullivan, S. (2006). Careers in a non-Western context: An exploratory empirical investigation of factors related to the career success of Chinese manager. *Career Development International*, 11, 580-593.
- van der Heijden, J., & Paauwe, J. (2009). Expatriate career support: Predicting expatriate turnover and performance. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(4), 831-845.
- Van Vianen, A., De Pater, I., Kristof-Brown, A., & Johnson, E. (2004). Fitting in: Surface and deep level cultural differences and expatriates' adjustment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(5), 697-709.
- Vondracek, F., Lerner, R., & Schulenberg, J. (1986). *Career development: A life-span developmental approach*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Wang, Y., Horng, J., Cheng, S., & Killman, L. (2011). Factors influencing food and beverage employees' career success: A contextual perspective. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 30(4), 997-1007.
- Wong, A. (2005, Dec 04-07). *Making career choice: A study of Chinese managers*. Paper presented at the 11th International Colloquium of the Asia Pacific Researchers in Organization Studies, Melbourne, Australia.
- Young, R., Valach, I., & Collin, A. (1996). A contextual explanation of career. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 477-512). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.