

Coping With Work-Family Conflicts in the Global Career Context

By

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In order to increase our understanding of the work-family conflicts experienced by global careerists and their families and the related coping strategies they adopt to address them, managers with long-term global careers were interviewed. The results indicate that the challenging nature of their jobs means global careerists face not only time-based and strain-based work-family conflicts but also mobility-based conflicts, a category added in order to fully capture the work-family conflicts faced. Managers were found mainly to use active problem-solving strategies alongside family-level coping strategies, though, in addition, emotional coping, avoidance, and reappraisal strategies were in evidence. © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Introduction

Research interest in global careers has increased recently (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005; Dickman & Harris, 2005; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004; Suutari, 2003; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007; Thomas, Lazarova, & Inkson, 2005). The nature of careers is very different from only a few years ago, requiring new and creative ways to engage with the emerging phenomenon (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 concern-

ing these developments is not very surprising (Mayrhofer, Iellatchitch, Meyer, Steyrer, Schiffinger, & Strunk, 2004).

Studies of international careers to date have tended to focus on the circumstances and subsequent career impacts of single assignments instead of more long-term global career perspectives. At the same time, there is an increasing number of internationally oriented managers who have more extensive experience gained from assignments abroad. In some European studies, it has been reported that 64% of French expatriates, 41% of German expatriates, and 55% of Finnish expatriates interviewed already had prior international assignment experience

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(Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004). According to Roberts, Kossek, and Ozeki (1998), global careerists whose careers involve frequent international relocations demonstrate the deepest learning of global competencies, and may also subsequently seek out further assignments with a local contract. Overall, these people represent the most internationally oriented and experienced people. The need for such leaders, with global mind-sets and globally applicable skills, has been widely stressed in the literature, and addressing the lack of internationally experienced global leaders is one of the major future human resource management (HRM) challenges faced by multinational corporations (MNCs; Morrison, 2000).

Existing research on international assignments indicates that single assignments are very challenging for all parties, managers and families alike (e.g., Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Findings also highlight the mediating role of partners and families in determining a positive or negative work-life balance outcome (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshia, & Bross, 1998; Harris, 2004), so it comes as no surprise that work-life balance concerns rank among the key challenges reported by people with careers involving more frequent international relocations (Suutari, 2003). It has even been argued that such careers would be too challenging for most individuals and their families (Forster, 2000).

The literature concerning itself with the interface of work and family has focused on questions about people coping with two interconnected parts of their lives (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinleya, 2005; Frone, 2003). Interest has centered on the direction of influence, whether work affects family or vice versa and, if so, in what ways. The work domain has been more strongly favored in the existing research than the family domain, and, in general, work-life balance research has been interested in negative effects caused by clashes between the two life spheres. This literature has thus focused on work-family conflict (WFC), 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. 76). Empirical studies have usually been conducted in order to find antecedents or outcomes of conflicts (Eby et al., 2005), while there is a scarcity of research on the coping strategies used to counter the conflict (Hyman, Scholarios, & Baldry, 2005) or studies that take into account the different career contexts (Gutek & Gilliland, 2007).

In light of this, the present study reports on the work-family conflict experiences of 20 long-term global

careerists. The goals of the study were to analyze the types of work-life conflict global careerists face and also the coping strategies global careerists and their families use in order to preempt or manage such conflicts. There follows a review of the existing literature on work-family conflicts and coping strategies, generally and specifically within the global career context. Finally, research methods and findings are presented.

The Work-Family Interface

The work-family interface has usually been studied from the perspective of role stress theory, concerning the challenges caused by multiple roles that individuals in modern societies adopt (Bagger, Li, & Gutek, 2008; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kinnunen & Mauno, 2008). Different roles, such as being a partner, a parent, and a worker, lead individuals into complex situations in which they have to prioritize issues, make decisions, and apply coping strategies. These different roles may cause conflicts in our lives but may also enrich them. Conflicts between work and life are found to be bidirectional, with the work domain conflicting with the family, and, on the other hand, the family domain conflicting with that of work.

Moreover, work-family conflicts can be time-based, strain-based, or behavior based (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2002; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Time-based conflict occurs when role pressures originating from the two different domains compete for the individual's time—for instance, due to long working hours. Strain-based conflict exists when the strain experienced in one role domain interferes with the effective performance of required role behaviors in the other. This kind of situation occurs, for example, if family problems prevent an individual from concentrating on work. Behavior-based conflict is described as a conflict stemming from incompatible behaviors demanded by competing roles. For example, a person who makes autonomous decisions at work may find that behavior inappropriate when making family decisions. After discussing the nature of the interface between work and family, two different groups of coping strategies, individual and family-focused, are presented.

Coping Strategies to Achieve a Work-Family Balance

Coping in the context of work-family conflicts has been described as an ability to deal with stressful organizational situations and is defined as the efforts individuals may make 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, a concept suggested to be comparable to coping strategies (Voydanoff, 2002), are defined as the actions families devise for coping with the challenges of living and for achieving their goals in the face of structural barriers (Moen & Wethington, 1992).

Many ways in which individuals cope with stressful situations have been presented (Rotondo, Carlson, & Kincaid, 2003), and our research considers four different coping strategies at the individual level, based on a review of previous research (Pienaar, 2008). The first coping strategy is *active or problem-focused coping*, and the second is *emotional coping*. These two initial strategies are presented by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Later, avoidance coping and reappraisal were recognized as important coping strategies, too (Pienaar, 2008; Pienaar & Rothman, 2003). Active, or problem-focused, coping is an individual's active effort to solve problems, rethink situations, and change the environment. Emotional coping refers to an individual's tendency to manage emotional reactions and may be particularly applicable when an individual does not have any opportunity to influence assignments (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Snow, Swan, Raghavan, Connel, & Klein, 2003; Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, & Danoff-Burg, 2000). Avoidance coping exists when one moves away from a stressful situation either physically or psychologically, and may be temporary or permanent. Reappraisal as a coping strategy is a further appraisal made on the basis of information derived from past experiences (Aldwin, 2007; Rotondo et al., 2003). In addition, social support has been suggested to be a combination of these two first strategies (Pienaar, 2008) but has also sometimes been conceptualized as a separate strategy (Rotondo et al., 2003).

Studies of coping at the family level have revealed three types of adaptive strategies. As with individual coping strategies, the first, changing work and family roles, relates to active problem solving (cf. problem-focused coping). The second adaptive strategy presented is obtaining support from a partner, and the third is utilization of programs provided by an employer (Voydanoff, 2002), although the success of the latter in reducing work-family conflict is not always guaranteed (Solomon, 1994).

There is an apparent need for more specific knowledge of work-life balance (WLB) related questions, and therefore for more focused data collection based on, for instance, specific career contexts and family circumstances (Gutek & Gilliland, 2007). Empirical studies have usually aimed to find antecedents or outcomes of such conflicts (Eby et al., 2005), but there is a scarcity of research on what kind of coping strategies

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people use in order to manage these situations (e.g., Hyman et al., 2005).

The Work-Family Interface in the Global Career Context

There are many reasons why the challenges faced by global careerists during their international assignments are different from those encountered in domestic settings. First, international assignments, which typically include the relocation of the whole family, will inevitably affect the whole family, not only the assignee. The importance of family concerns has been brought out by studies of the motives for accepting or rejecting international assignments (Baruch, Stelle, & Quantrill, 2002; Chew, 2004)—among dual-career couples, the issue of one partner abandoning their career and finding a job abroad or of picking up a career after repatriation has been stressed (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Overall, the important role of family concerns is emphasized in the literature on expatriation (Au & Fukuda, 2000; Harris, 2004) since family reasons are reported to be among the main reasons for expatriate adjustment problems and failures. At the same time, the importance of recognizing the overall repatriation adjustment challenges that expatriates and their families face should not be overlooked (Baruch et al., 2002; Chew, 2004; Kelly, 2009).

Thus, the first challenge to the work-family balance comes from the changed situation of the family, as both a partner and possibly children have to adjust to a totally new living environment and culture with each

assignment. It should also be noted that while expatriates receive support from the host organization and local colleagues, the partner and family often lack such a social support network (Florkowski & Fogel, 1999). Challenges in this area have an impact on the success of expatriate adjustment and naturally affect the extent to which the assignee is able to focus fully on work and adjusting (Caligiuri et al., 1998). On the other hand, family support can be an important source of stability and support for the expatriate (Solomon, 1996), and partner satisfaction positively affects expatriate adjustment (Saba & Chua, 1999).

At the same time, international jobs can be very challenging for expatriates for several reasons. First, the breadth and level of responsibilities of international assignees are typically higher than on domestic tasks (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Kelly, 2009). Because expatriates often work in smaller or less-developed foreign units or with fewer experts or support functions around them, they have to take greater responsibility for the overall development of the unit. Second, expatriates often work at a higher organizational level than they were accustomed to before the assignment, and so overall have a higher status (Forster, 2000; Kelly, 2009). These issues are typically combined with a higher level of autonomy due to both the distance from headquarters and the smaller size of foreign affiliates (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall,

1992; Boies & Rothstein, 2002; Stroh & Gregersen, 1998). Finally, cultural differences challenge the relevance of individual thinking and behaviors, and cause adjustment pressures for assignees. Overall, the nature of the international environment is perceived by expatriates as being more complex and challenging than the domestic environment, meaning expatriates frequently have to cope with unexpected events in a turbulent environment, which complicates the interpretation of situations. International jobs are thus perceived to be very challenging but at the same time very developmental (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Dickman & Harris, 2005; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). This naturally puts assignees into a position in which they have to use all their resources and energy to deal with difficult job-related challenges, but also have to deal with their personal adjustment to a country context besides their family concerns.

In light of these views on the nature of the global career environment, it can be assumed that one of the key concerns of global careerists is how to deal with the work-family interface during their various relocations and the cyclical nature of the lifestyle involved, when both managers and their families are facing challenges. Still, there is a lack of research providing a more in-depth understanding of work-life conflicts and, in particular, coping strategies that global careerists and their families use to succeed in this demanding career environment. Before providing new empirical evidence on these issues, the research methods are briefly described.

Method

We adopted a qualitative research design based on semistructured interviews (King, 1994) with 20 Finnish managers with a global career, empirically defined as having had three or more international assignments during the course of their working lives. The sample was derived from a larger quantitative survey of Finnish business graduates currently on expatriate assignment. Twenty interviews were conducted during 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 ($n = 5$). Twenty-five percent of them had three international assignments behind them, 30% had four such assignments, and 45% had already had five or more international work assignments during their career. The interviews lasted between 33 and 132 minutes, resulting in an extensive database of verbatim transcripts for analysis.

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The interviews used semistructured, open-ended questions, and there was sufficient flexibility in the interview technique to enable participants to raise unanticipated issues or for the researchers to ask probing follow-up questions (Mason, 2002). The interviews covered a range of issues related to career paths and current assignments, the work-family interface, and how the respondents managed it. The interviews were all conducted in Finnish, and the verbatim quotations were translated into English by the authors. Analyzing the data involved thematic categorization and coding to identify patterns, as well as inconsistencies in the data (Seale, 2004). The literature provided a starting point for the analysis process, but themes were largely generated inductively (Mason, 1994).

Findings

This section reports the findings on work-life conflicts faced by global careerists and the coping strategies that both they and their families have used to either preempt or cope with the conflicts.

Conflicts Between Work and Family Life

Starting with work-life conflicts, it was found that global careerists experience different kinds of conflicts between their work and family lives. Typically, the respondents pointed out the demands made by a global career, and the effort required to maintain a work-life balance. The conflict situations that our global careerists had faced were first classified into time-based and strain-based conflicts, since behavior-based conflicts did not emerge from our data. Instead, it was seen as necessary to include a new conflict category, mobility-based conflict, in order to be able to describe the reality faced by global careerists. In most cases, conflict between the two life spheres occurred more commonly in the work to family domain than in the opposite family to work domain, though both directions appeared to be important.

Time-based conflicts were found to be very prevalent among global careerists and related to long working hours, the extent of traveling, 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 (the job) involves a lot of traveling." Another said, "So many years went by in a way that you were practically working for the whole year. Every weekend and all, just working." They reported that this pattern has greatly affected their family lives: "And the family says 'we thought we were going to the 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 a few cases, international assignments have helped reduce time-based conflict: "When you are traveling from Finland, you are not always back at home at night. Now I am traveling significantly less than before, and those trips are in Central Europe, and I don't need to stay overnight."

Strain-based conflicts reflected the high level of responsibility, autonomy, and the challenging nature of the assignments: "You give everything to your work. Most of your energy, the day, your time, everything, goes to work." One interviewee talked about the situation where she considered working part-time due to family reasons but found such family-oriented decisions impossible in her line of work: "My work has its own demands; it is not possible to go part-time." Sometimes, even though a person is at home physically, work follows them home: "You are there, at home, hanging around with your family, but your family is doing something else."

In addition to the forms of conflict that previous work and family studies have presented, results here suggest that global careerists also experience *mobility-based conflict* between their life spheres. First, in contrast to domestic jobs, international assignments require both assignees and their families to exchange one general living environment for another, often distant one, creating adjustment challenges when dealing with a new living and working environment, culture, climate, education and daycare systems, and social networks.

The mobility requirement, and the discontinuity it brings to work and private lives, also creates uncertainty-based stress. Job-related concerns may also be in conflict with family concerns (e.g., the job may be very interesting but the location very challenging for the family). International assignments typically last for a few years, and thus global careerists and their families frequently need to dismantle their living arrangements and social connections: "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, the decision on the next assignment has to be made quickly from among few available alternatives, and this causes work-family conflicts when the family does not know where they will be living next: "It takes quite a lot out of you when you leave your stuff and systems and friends. Take your family and move again and then put up somewhere. And everybody has to, husband and son, have to restart with work and schools and friends." If the length of the international assignment has not been clearly agreed

upon, it creates additional uncertainty for the expatriate family.

The mobility requirement and the distance to the home country (i.e., to friends and family) as an outcome create new kinds of work-life conflicts both for the global careerists themselves and for the whole family: “You saw your relatives once a year or even more rarely; you became quite distant. When I noticed that those relatively short periods in host countries did not permit the same kind of friend or family relationships as in Finland [. . .] that was a bit scary.” The situation of older parents also came up as a problem caused by distance: “When my mother died, I didn’t live in Finland then. But my father at the moment—he is an amputee and partly paralyzed and he can’t move from the bed at all. This kind of thing bothers me; I’d like to go and see father but now you can’t go [due to distance].”

The global careerists also had experienced and understood the challenges typically faced when repatriating back to the home country. They were frequently aware that, having lived abroad for an extensive period, repatriation would be quite a challenge both for them and their families. One outcome of this was that many careerists did not see repatriating during their present career and life stage as an attractive option. It was also common that due to many global careerists being at an advanced stage of their careers, they had older children studying or working abroad, and often somewhere other than where the respondent was working.

After this description of the various work-family conflicts, we examine the coping strategies that global careerists and their families use when trying to prevent or cope with the work-life conflicts involved with this unconventional career choice.

Coping Strategies

The findings on coping strategies indicate that the global careerists mainly adopt active (problem-solving) strategies, but emotional coping strategies, avoidance, and reappraisal strategies also emerge. In addition, the role of family adaptive strategies was found to be central to achieving a work-life balance in the challenging, international job environment.

On an individual level, *active coping strategies* (i.e., problem solving) were commonly used. Respondents often pointed out that they tried to be flexible with their working time, even though usually they were working very long days and were traveling a lot: “usually you can plan your timetable in a way that, if needed, you can drive or pick up the children from ballet, swimming, tennis, or what hobbies they have. It is possible to organize.” They

also actively limit their working hours or traveling and make a distinction between work and family life (both in terms of time and role). Sometimes work and family conflicts have been solved by more extreme actions like changing employers or assignments, or even becoming an entrepreneur: “[Starting my 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, active coping also refers to the choices made about future relocations to ease the traveling burden, the need to renew contacts, or the adaptation to a host country’s culture, by choosing one less distant or diverse from the home country’s. Global careerists have also coped with conflicts by seeking different forms of help and advice, and also by creating social networks. Such contacts may be former expatriates, compatriots in the host country, or corporate experts on international mobility: “I had the ability to seek help by myself and create such a social network. [. . .] I went to talk with somebody to say ‘hey, this issue really annoys me.’ It helped me over it.” To obtain assistance with practical matters, respondents use legal counselors, pension specialists, insurance advisors, and investment and tax consultants: “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 handled by local lawyers.” Global careerists actively try to keep in contact with friends and relatives in their home country or abroad but also with their own families when traveling due to work: “I make time for it and keep in touch by phone and e-mail and also always when I visit [Finland], I try to be active and take time for contacts.”

Emotional coping strategies did not emerge as often as did active problem-solving strategies in the study. Emotional coping strategies were discernible in the global careerists’ comments on how they or their families get “used to the situation” and accept certain difficulties as part and parcel of having global careers. These situations included issues such as extensive job-related traveling, longer working days, constant adjustment challenges, or additional relationship-building efforts: “We are so used to living like this, in two addresses and traveling between [them]; it is so ordinary for us.” This emotional acceptance also emerged when one interviewee talked about being unmarried and childless, a situation attributed to the international career. Emotional coping is also evidenced in that interviewees justified their dedication to work with the work’s importance and so ascribed to their families a more positive

attitude toward them and their work. In some cases, interviewees related that they felt badly about being so far from relatives in their home country but perceived that their relatives were proud of their careers abroad, and it was that approval that had helped them to accept the outcomes of their career choices.

The *reappraisal strategy* did not appear very often during the interviews but was still reflected in several comments. First, respondents reported that although the difficulties were sometimes painful and complex at the time, they later came to see them as useful from the perspective of personal growth and professional development, and so were reappraising negative experiences as positive learning experiences, making the individual stronger and more self-confident. Similarly, some negative concerns about how frequent moves involving changes of school and living environment have affected their children's development were sometimes reappraised positively by recalling the various positive effects of an international career on their children: "In this kind of life one often thinks about the situation from the perspective of the children—how good or bad a thing it is for them. . . . On the other hand they become multicultural and international and used to living in different kinds of environment[s]."

The issue of a partner being forced to abandon a career due to the need for mobility was sometimes reappraised as providing the opportunity for the partner to stay at home with the children. The global careerists also perceived that the challenging experiences of their international careers had strengthened their immediate family relationships: "You have a spouse and a family, they create sort of strong bastion that goes with you around the world. [. . .] the solidarity, really strong front . . . it is the family."

An example of global careerists using *avoidance strategies* arose when potential conflicts were mitigated by avoiding certain international assignments due to the nature of the job or the country, which were seen as threatening the achievement of a good WLB: "I have also had to say no to some interesting assignment opportunities, for example to Peking [. . .] The family was totally against it [. . .] they felt slightly uncomfortable with the culture, and pollution in Peking is what it is." Sometimes avoidance strategies relate to the decision of whether or when to repatriate to the home country: "our life situation at the moment, also in the family, is such that there is no hurry to make any changes to the present situation." Overall, such avoidance strategies were mainly adopted during the decision-making process concerning new assignments, whereas they were not much in evidence while being in a specific job abroad. The reason why avoidance strategies did not

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appear common while abroad may reflect the seniority of the positions held by expatriates, making it difficult to avoid taking responsibility or being actively involved, despite the challenges presented by certain situations. In private life, avoidance can be seen in attitudes toward building close relationships with locals or other expatriates: "in general, when you are getting closer to new people, then you consider, or everybody does, that there is no idea to get friends with the ones who are leaving soon anyway." Sometimes one strategy used to decrease WFCs was to minimize the time spent pursuing the respondent's own hobbies or friendships and to concentrate on the family when not at work.

On a family level, *family adaptive strategies* occurred commonly. Several activities that can be seen as *active coping on a family level* appeared. First, decisions on whether to accept the international assignment were usually jointly made with the partner and family, and careful joint planning of the move abroad was seen to be part of a successful assignment. Second, sometimes families did not move abroad together but the global careerist went first and the family followed later, when the assignee had prepared what one described as a "soft landing." In order to get the best from each assignment, it was also stressed that it is important to maximize the living standards for the family rather than, for example, trying to maximize savings. WFCs were also reduced by utilizing external help with housework: "when the children were small, especially in the Philippines, it was easy to get a domestic

worker, and so we had two live-in staff. That helped our situation a lot since my wife did not have to take care of everything herself." Au pairs recruited from the home country were also used, bringing the added benefit of helping to maintain children's language skills.

Another important element in successfully balancing work and family spheres during assignments was giving careful consideration to accommodation and schooling prior to departure. Interviewees highlighted "how important it was to find and choose a pleasant home for the family and find good schools for children." Families also made choices that helped them to cope with international movements during the period they were in their home country, like sending the children to an international school.

Work-family conflicts related to the extended family and friends in the home country were balanced by regular visits home—for example, during vacations. To facilitate these visits, assignees usually retained a dwelling in the home country. Similarly, relatives and friends often visited interviewees in their foreign homes, and our careerists had often ensured that they had the room and facilities to make guests welcome: "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 people now."

One really important resource for coping with family and work-life stresses for global careerists was *partner support*. It was often the case that the interviewee's partner had left his or her job when the family had moved to a new location. A very commonly employed coping strategy was then the decision for the partner to stay at home or work part-time or do volunteer work: "My wife was in Finland, almost eight to ten years at work. Since we moved abroad she has been at home. She has not been working but has taken the children to school and supported their hobbies. That has enabled me to work long days and travel if needed. Otherwise, that would not have been possible." The interviewees typically support the view that their partners abandoning their careers made it possible for them to select a global career path, but they were also aware of the sacrifice involved. On the other hand, the opportunity for one partner to stay at home when the children were small and still maintain a good standard of living was sometimes seen as a positive side effect of the global career of the assignee. This may be specific to Finns, from a country where in nearly all households both adults work. Typically, the partner takes care of most family issues related to children and housing, monetary affairs, and even dealing with public authorities.

Partner support, as a coping strategy, also includes an affective perspective. The partner is seen as a "backup"

or "best friend." Psychological support and family stability were perceived to be important, and global careerists related that it was very helpful to have something stable in the midst of all the changes: "It is a sort of foundation stone. . . . It could be rather hard, this kind of life, if you didn't have a family, supporting you in the background."

As international assignments are situations that are very specific to individuals and their families, they are also exceptional for organizations. There aren't many other situations where organizations have to consider the whole family unit, not only the individual they are employing. Here, *active utilization of corporate policies* has a very important role in how the global careerists cope with the challenges. In particular, the support offered by companies with preparations for the move, and the move itself, were important. Different organizations also offered the family an opportunity to visit the host country in advance in order to look for a home and to get a feel for the living environment, and helped arrange schools or daycare, or helped with very specific issues like immigration requirements, health care, banking, and even everyday shopping and garbage removal contracts. Often organizations offer language and/or cultural training to assignees and their partners (and sometimes to their children) before they leave their home country or shortly after the move: "The family is trained in such a way that they know where they are going and can survive with the language."

The employers usually totally or partly cover the costs of removals from country to country, storage of family possessions in the home country, and also residential costs and the cost of the children's schools. Organizations typically pay for travel costs incurred when a global careerist has to live in another country temporarily, and for regular visits home, usually annually, and often also offer other benefits, such as membership in sports clubs, payments to cover the loss of salary, and a self-development allowance for the partner.

A further coping strategy related to corporate policy was taking advantage of the offer of flexible working options. In addition, some corporations organize "family days" or paid holiday travel for the family. As in any other organizational context, a positive attitude from the organization toward the work-life balance is an important factor. An example mentioned is a flexible attitude to parental leave to care for a sick child.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study aims to increase our understanding of the work-life conflicts faced by global careerists and the coping strategies used by the careerists and their families

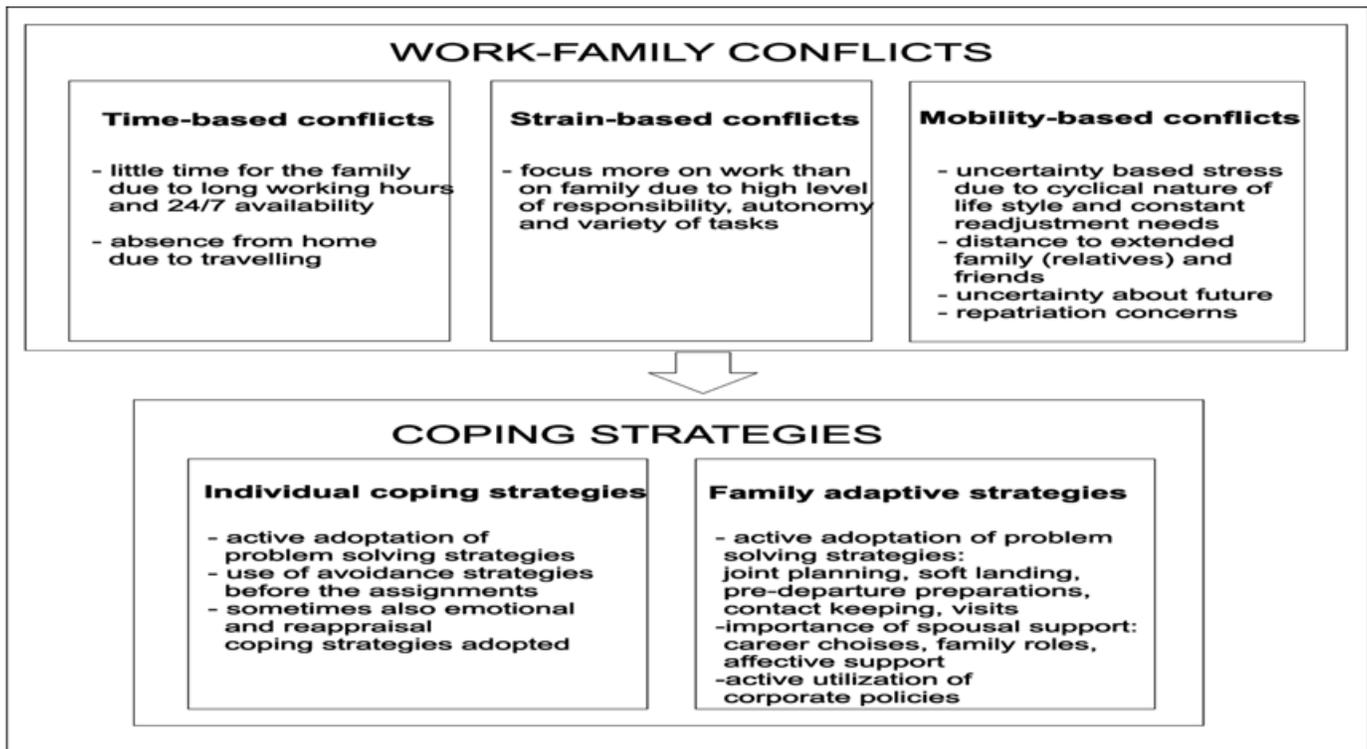
in order to cope with or preempt such conflicts. The data was collected through semistructured interviews of 20 global careerists with long-term global careers behind them. The key findings are summarized in Figure 1 and discussed below.

In line with the literature (Forster, 2000; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Suutari, 2003), the results of the study indicate that maintaining a favorable work-life balance is considered very challenging by global careerists. Conflicts manifested themselves mainly as time-based conflicts (typically caused by long working hours, 24/7 availability, and a lot of traveling) and strain-based conflicts (caused by high levels of responsibility, unusual challenges, and autonomy involved in expatriate jobs; see also Boies & Rothstein, 2002; Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Stroh & Gregersen, 1998), while behavior-based conflicts did not emerge from the data. In order to fully capture the work-life conflicts caused by frequent international moves that pose a series of adjustment challenges to the whole family and make its lifestyle cyclical, we have added a new category termed *mobility-based conflict*. Distance from extended family and friends also appears to be a challenge. Furthermore, respondents have to manage uncertainty about future assignments and locations, and also have

difficult choices to make about repatriation (Baruch et al., 2002; Kelly 2009).

With regard to the coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pienaar, 2008; Voydanoff, 2002) these global careerists adopt, several key observations arise. First, the assignees clearly used problem-solving strategies very actively. It could be clearly seen that this respondent group recognized maintaining the WLB as a major challenge and during their global careers had learned to deal actively with it. Emotional coping and reappraisal strategies also emerged, 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, though they were not often employed once such choices had been made. Having accepted the assignment, the focus was turned to active, problem-solving strategies in order to make a success of it. Furthermore, the central role of family adaptive strategies (Moen & Wethington, 1992; Voydanoff, 2002) emerged clearly—that is to say that for global careerists, the adaptability of the partner and the whole family provides very important support to the career of the assignee and the WLB of the whole family. The active utilization of corporate relocation programs

FIGURE 1 Work-Life Conflicts and Related Coping Strategies Among Global Careerists



and flexible working policies can also provide a crucial further support structure.

Overall, it becomes clear that from a work-family conflict perspective, a global career is not a choice made by global careerists alone, but has to be a family decision, and that a supportive corporate policy also boosts the chances of success. A major implication of these results is that family concerns should be taken into account from the selection of the expatriate through the planning and necessary relocation support and training (Caligiuri et al., 1998). The work of expatriate global careerists is challenging and stressful and has an impact on their overall work-life balance. From this perspective, assignments should be carefully considered well in advance, and planning should include adequate training to minimize the risk of the expatriate becoming overloaded (Harris & Brewster, 1999). Though the prior international experience of global careerists will help make sense of situations and lead to more realistic predeparture expectations (Kelly, 2009), each relocation brings its own adjustment challenges. Expatriates stressed the efforts that facilitate a “soft landing” either by the assigning company, such as previsits or the family following a few weeks after the assignee to ensure that arrangements are already in place, or by the host unit, such as settling-in programs or providing support staff (Schell & Solomon, 1997). The im-

portance of corporate support for relocations was seen as important by the global careerists, and they had learned to utilize such support. It also became clear that in the global career context, such arrangements support the WLB of expatriates and their families to a larger degree than do supervisor support or the more general work-family support provided by the company culture—issues stressed in WFC discussion (Eby et al., 2005). This just indicates that the WFC concerns appear different in the global career context than they do elsewhere.

Our findings provide new evidence on work-family conflicts and the related coping strategies found among global careerists. There are still several limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the small sample size and related qualitative approach limit generalizability. Clearly, larger-scale research is needed to validate our findings. Second, all the global careerists were Finns, who come from a small country but with an increasingly internationally oriented economy. 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 the international assignment context, but partners and other family members were not interviewed. In future studies, it would be beneficial to obtain their input in order to ensure a balanced view.



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