



Laying the foundations of international careers research

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Abstract

As an editorial to the special issue “new avenues in international careers research” this article discusses the roots of the international careers research stream, which sits at the intersection between career studies, HRM and international management. In order to support future studies in this emerging area of enquiry, we attempt to lay down the foundations of a research agenda based around what we see as the three core areas of interest: contextualised careers research, comparative careers research and careers research in internationally operating organisations. After providing some suggestions for the kinds of theoretical and methodological tools that will be required to build on these foundations, we introduce the five empirical papers that comprise this special issue.

KEYWORDS

career studies, context, HRM, international careers, international management

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Practitioner Notes

What is currently known

- Existing knowledge, rooted in career studies, is based on the agentic role of individuals in a limited diversity of career settings.
- Knowledge on international careers is focused on globally mobile employees in multinational corporations.

What this article adds

- We define international careers research as broader than expatriation to include how career contexts influence career meanings, attitudes and behaviours.
- We propose three interrelated areas: contextualised careers research, comparative careers research and careers research in internationally operating organisations.
- We suggest ways to deepen our knowledge about the influence of the international career setting on career actors.

Implications for practitioners

- This encourages practitioners to acknowledge that careers unfold dynamically over time in a social and geographic space.
- New knowledge this research stream creates can improve decision-making of both individuals and organisations that manage careers across international boundaries.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this editorial of the special issue “new avenues in international careers research,” we make the case for bringing the international perspective into career studies, and define what we believe can serve as the three main foundations of the international careers research stream: contextualised careers research, comparative careers research and careers research in internationally operating organisations. We then proceed to outline the tools needed to conduct this research relating to theories and frameworks, and methods and methodology. After providing some ideas for new avenues in international careers research, we conclude by introducing the five empirical papers of the special issue that respond to some of our calls.

2 | CAREER STUDIES AT A CROSSROADS

The origin of what we now call career studies can arguably be traced back to the work of Hughes (Hughes, 1937; Hughes, 1958) and other members of the so-called “Chicago School” (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018). They followed the tradition of generating “ethnographies of deviant subcultures based on the life histories of people who partook of the subculture” (Barley, 1989: 43). Their focus was broad and they viewed careers as encompassing a person’s entire life. Studies include the careers of hobos (Anderson, 1923), taxi dancers (Cressey, 1932), professional thieves (Sutherland, 1937) and jack rollers (Shaw, 1930).

The developments during the 1960s and 1970s saw massive societal changes, triggered by, for example, the student movement, the blooming of large multinational companies and new approaches to theorising about organisations (e.g. March & Simon, 1958) and individual behaviour (e.g. McGregor, 1960). Career studies mirrored the scholarly *zeitgeist* and remained broad in focus. Research looked at various facets of careers in organisations (e.g. Hall, 1976; Rosenbaum, 1979; Schein, 1978; van Maanen, 1977); careers of specific groups such as managers (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974), scientists (Glaser, 1964) and medical students (e.g. Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961); and careers over time, reflected in work on career phases, stages and cycles (e.g. Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee, 1978).

In the 1980s, the focus of career studies started to narrow. In career studies, the focus remained on organisations, for example, looking at internal labour markets (e.g. Baron, Davis-Blake, & Bielby, 1986) and their relationship to performance (e.g. Stewman, 1986) and on the individual, analysing managerial career structures (e.g. Kanter, 1984) and mentorship (e.g. Kram, 1985). The 1990s saw a further sharpening of focus on the individual. The dissolution of conglomerates as corporate ideals in combination with technological advances gave rise to new organisational forms such as alliances, networks and virtual or boundaryless organisations (Davis, Diekmann, & Tinsley, 1994). Correspondingly, organisational careers were no longer at the forefront of academic interest. Rather, the agentic individual was put centre stage and concepts such as the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and the protean career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 1976) dominated the career discourse for almost two decades.

Today, due to the interlocking flow of global trade and finance, the boundary-spanning data exchange via the internet, and the increase of international business travel and migration, mobility across boundaries is an almost inevitable part of everyday life (Smith & Favell, 2017). Likewise, the current situation with regard to societal, organisation and individual life is anything but stable and predictable (Syrett & Devine, 2012). Whether this is unique in terms of complexity and dynamics is questionable, as one observer acidly put it that “the present is always an exciting, challenging time to be contrasted with a stable past” (Collin, 1998: 412). Yet, it seems safe to say that we have reached a historic peak in terms of international interdependence in nearly all aspects of work and life.

This puts career studies at a crossroads. The focus on the individual, while essential, is too narrow. Career studies must widen again to incorporate a broader and, we would argue, an international perspective. An environment that cuts across national, cultural and institutional boundaries and is constantly in flux requires the simultaneous analysis of the individual as an agentic entity, their embeddedness in a social and geographic space, and their development over time (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018).

For career studies, bringing in the international perspective means, in essence, laying down three interrelated foundations. First, it has to take into account the *contextual embeddedness of careers*. In a multi-faceted world, turning a blind eye to the contextual contingencies for careers results in, at best, limited and, at worst, misleading insights. Second, and building on the previous issue, contextualising careers leads to *comparing careers across different contexts*. An understanding of global commonalities and differences in careers ultimately reveals what is universal in careers around the world, and what remains more context specific. Third, an international perspective requires us to take a renewed and broadened interest in the relevance of major collective actors in the global business and societal landscape of careers that provide unique contexts in and of themselves: *internationally operating organisations*, that is, multinational corporations and organisations outside the for-profit sector such as the UN or internationally active NGOs.

3 | PREPARING THE GROUND: THREE FOUNDATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL CAREERS RESEARCH

Progress in international careers research requires a solid foundation in a double sense. First, as a young, emerging field it requires the identification of joint areas of interest upon which to build knowledge development and a coherent scientific discourse. Second, it calls for sound theoretical, methodological and method-related bases for carrying

out this kind of research. We address the latter in a subsequent section; the former as three major foundations – or areas of interest – that lie at the intersection between career studies and the international perspective: contextualised careers research, comparative careers research and careers research in internationally operating organisations.

3.1 | Contextualised careers research

Prima facie, contextualised careers research seems to be a pleonasm, unnecessarily repeating what is an essential building block of the career concept anyway: careers inevitably are careers in context (Collin, 1997; Schein, 1984), located at the “intersection of societal history and individual biography” (Grandjean, 1981: 1057) that link micro and macro frames of reference (Gunz, 1989). However, despite continuing calls for a better integration of contextual issues (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007) and a renewed interest in some aspects of contexts such as boundaries (e.g. Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012), we argue that careers research has lost its contextual way. This has culminated in an arguably excessive emphasis on individual and agentic perspectives where context only plays a minor role, often limited to single aspects of, for example, organisations.

For international careers research, this is problematic. It limits the sound conceptualisation of (international) careers, with context as an integral part of the theoretical architecture and empirical work. At the same time, losing sight of the effects of the broader national context fails to create a prerequisite for comparative careers research, as well as research focusing on careers in and between internationally operating organisations. Contextualised careers research responds to this.

As a starting point, we assume that career studies use three perspectives when analysing careers of individual or collective career actors (for a more detailed account see Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018). The *ontic* perspective has its focus on the career actor and their condition, that is, everything that is known about them. Depending on the main interest, framework and practical details of the study, various aspects can come into play. For example, in a study on the effects of international career development programs in an MNC one might be interested in aspects of actors' conditions such as previous experience abroad, social networks of the career actors within the MNC and age. This perspective distinguishes career actors by comparing their condition.

The *spatial* perspective takes into account that career actors and their conditions are intertwined with the geographical and social space within which careers unfold. This space is a bounded space, that is, boundaries separate certain segments of these spaces from other segments, and contribute to internal differentiation. For example, professional boundaries may only give career actors with a specific formal qualification profile access to the field. This is the case in many countries for physiotherapists, medical doctors and pilots. Geographical boundaries may favour some people over others, for example, with regard to resilience in the face of heat, cold or altitude. One can locate career actors' positions in relation to these boundaries, for example, placing them inside/outside, resulting segments of the social and geographical space.

Finally, the *temporal* perspective acknowledges that careers entail a sense of movement that requires time. Notwithstanding the rich debate about what time “is” and how to conceptualize it (for an overview see, for example, Mayrhofer & Gunz, 2020), the combination of even a simple chronological view on time with the ontic and spatial dimension enlarges our views on careers. For example, explicitly taking into account the time dimension allows the tracking of career patterns over time.

Against this backdrop, contextual careers research firmly advocates what is called bivalent and balanced as opposed to focused research (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018). The latter focuses on one of the perspectives mentioned above, most often the ontic. Contextualised career studies require the inclusion of at least one of the other perspectives as equally important. This leads to bivalent studies in the case of combining two, and balanced career studies in the case of three included and well-developed perspectives. To be sure, we are not saying that focused studies are inadequate or wrong. There are circumstances where the “full” picture is not achievable due to restrictions.

However, we maintain that international careers studies clearly fall short of their core contributions if they exclude or inadequately take into account the spatial or temporal context of careers.

3.2 | Comparative careers research

Every nation has its own unique sets of institutional arrangements, deep-seated values, attitudes and beliefs. They inform and are reflected in the ways that the society and the economy operate, and that people work and are managed at work. Based on this, comparing careers between national contexts seems to be the inevitable extension of contextualised careers research.

However, the majority of careers research to date has been carried out within single countries, predominantly the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries that clearly do not constitute the majority on the planet by numbers (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). This has contributed to a general lack of understanding about the nuances of career-related concepts and the heterogeneous views on careers possessed by individuals around the world. Consequently, a systematic comparison of various aspects of careers across a variety of national contexts (e.g. Briscoe, Dickmann, & Parry, 2020) can greatly contribute to progress in our understanding of commonalities and differences of careers across the globe in different settings. This is exactly what comparative careers research (Lazarova et al., 2018) tries to achieve.

Underlying this discourse are a number of tensions, assumptions and aims. The first one is the debate surrounding universalist versus contextualist approaches in management (Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2015). The universalist camp assumes, broadly speaking, that a universal valid model exists of doing things professionally the right way, both at the organisational and the individual level. Advocates of a contextualist view emphasize that no such thing as a "one-size-fits-all" approach can meaningfully exist since there are always contextual features that require, at the minimum, an adaptation in practice even if the outer mantle seems identical, or even renders a concept or practice meaningless and counterproductive.

Career success is arguably a good example of this tension. Building on the long tradition of differentiating between objective and subjective career success (Hughes, 1937), this view for a long time has dominated the career discourse and, often implicitly, has been regarded as a given. Likewise, the most prominent measure of career success, the career satisfaction scale (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990), implicitly assumes universal validity without relating to contextual specifics. More recently, a number of efforts have been made to paint a more differentiated and context-sensitive picture (e.g. Dries, Pepermans, & Calier, 2008; Mayrhofer et al., 2016; Shockley et al., 2010).

Conceptually, much of the existing comparative careers research builds on two types of literature: culture and institutional theory. Although culture is "one of those terms that defy a single all-purpose definition and there are almost as many meanings of culture as people using the term" (Ajiferuke & Boddewyn, 1970: 154), it has a prominent history in describing and explaining individual and organisational behaviour in different contexts. Prominent examples include Hofstede's dimensional view of culture (Hofstede, 1980); Schwartz's concept of culture as value oriented (Schwartz, 1992); and the GLOBE project with its nine culture dimensions (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). National boundaries and national culture often have a large overlap or are identical. However, there are countries where this is not the case, for example, Belgium and Nigeria.

Institutional thinking takes a different angle. Societies and nation states preserve their distinctiveness via particular institutions. As there are different ways of organising economic activities with similar outcomes, efficiency and effectivity (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 1999), the observable pattern of what is actually done reflects the specific institutional environment that exists in the respective nation states and relevant supra-national units, for example, the European Union. In order to gain and maintain access to necessary resources, such as capital and labour, organisations seek legitimacy in the eyes of influential stakeholders that regulate access to these resources, for example, shareholders, trade unions, financial institutions and governments (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). They face

coercive, mimetic and normative pressures coming from, for example, collective agreements and labour law, and professional bodies and certification agencies. As a result, both commonalities and differences across national borders exist due to the specifics of the national institutional environment (Pauwe & Boselie, 2007). Because of these specifics and countering forces of globalisation pushing towards homogeneity, differences prevail with regard to, for example, employment practices, labour market mechanisms, industrial relations systems and organisational structures as well as processes.

Comparing careers across different contexts inevitably raises the issue of time. Essentially, the question is whether to take a cross-sectional or longitudinal view, tracking commonalities and differences over time. Both approaches have their merit. A purely cross-sectional view allows an in-depth and systematic analysis, sheds much-needed light on the situation at a particular point in time, and allows a deeper understanding of careers. A longitudinal analysis, for example a trend or panel study, has additional merits. It allows tracking developments over time at the individual, organisational and national level as well as identifying convergent, divergent or static developments (Mayrhofer, Brewster, & Pernkopf, 2020 [forthcoming]). Compared to the established field of comparative human resource management (Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Farndale, 2018), comparative careers research is still in its early stages. However, in recent years, work in this area has grown (Lazarova et al., 2018).

3.3 | Careers research in internationally operating organisations

While much of the research in international HRM and global careers has concentrated on MNCs, there are clearly many non-profit international entities including governmental and non-governmental organisations (such as the United Nations) that also have a key role in globalisation and in which many employees pursue international careers (Brewster, Boselie, Leisink, & Alfes, 2016). Specifics of these organisations, relevant to careers, include mission, socially expected output and success criteria, organisational culture, ownership structure, importance of the capital market, specifics of the labour market and significance of legal regulations. How these influence individual career actors in international organisations in various institutional, cultural and location-specific contexts are likely to be complex and varied (Dickmann & Baruch, 2011).

From an international organisational perspective and looking at the ontic level, the realities of individuals and organisations can be distinct from those that apply to purely domestic firms. For instance, organisations grappling with the local versus global dilemma (Humes, 1993) have more complex strategic choices (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989) and HRM configurations (Farndale et al., 2010). Depending on these choices, the requirements for working abroad and for a purely “domestic” employee will vary. The HRM approach and approach to career management will depend on the strategic choices that organisations take, including those in relation to the goals associated with international mobility (Harzing, 2001). International career systems and their management vary across global organisations and many of these differences and their associated outcomes are still unclear (Dickmann, Suutari, & Wurtz, 2018).

From an individual perspective, an ontic view on global careers and organisation-sponsored mobility will need to acknowledge the mutual dependency between individuals and organisations. Individuals are driven by their own sets of motivators to work abroad (Hippler, 2009). They have their own competencies, personality traits and networks that have an impact on their global career patterns, career success and broader outcomes (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). Much of the global careers research has concentrated on so-called assigned expatriates (AEs) with the career journeys of non-traditional forms of working abroad remaining comparatively underexplored (McNulty & Hutchings, 2016). Self-initiated expatriation, that is, people who normally undertake to work abroad, unassisted by their employers, is a distinct, yet interrelated, phenomenon of international work (Doherty, Richardson, & Thorn, 2013). The drivers of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are distinct, their work experiences, career progression and other long-term outcomes also seem to differ from that of AEs (Andresen, Al Ariss, & Walther, 2013). Many other forms of global work exist and it is clear that global careers research would benefit from a more systematic, context-sensitive exploration of those (Brewster, Dickmann, & Suutari, 2020).

With regard to the wider context, the spatial nature of careers in international organisations consists of individuals being exposed to, often deeply embedded in, a wide variety of differences, including diverse institutions, cultures, languages, weather patterns and security situations. Extant research has concentrated on understanding different cultures and their implication for individual behaviours and careers (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004), the compliance aspects of working abroad (Dowling, Festing, & Engle Sr., 2013) or issues around physical hostility and danger in host locations (Gannon & Paraskevas, 2019). Recently, the interest in macro talent management and its impact on expatriates has also increased (Vaiman, Sparrow, Schuler, & Collings, 2019).

In terms of time, the temporal perspective on international careers has been explored in various studies. For AEs, the expatriate cycle tracing the stages of pre-, during and after expatriate work has been developed (Harris, Brewster, & Sparrow, 2003). Issues in relation to intellectual, behavioural and emotional adjustment when living in the host country (e.g. Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2014) or repatriation (e.g. Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012) are also well researched. However, longer-term consequences such as very long-term insights into the career satisfaction of repatriates or other issues such as employability, life satisfaction and work–life balance are still underexplored and, crucially, we have very little cross-country comparative data (Suutari, Brewster, Mäkelä, Dickmann, & Tornikoski, 2018). It is, therefore, not surprising that we have even fewer insights into the long-term career outcomes of non-traditional forms of working abroad (Mello, Dickmann, Brewster, & Suutari, 2020).

4 | TOOLS FOR CONSTRUCTING THE DOMAIN OF INTERNATIONAL CAREERS RESEARCH

Knowledge development, upon these three foundations outlined above, requires the application of appropriate tools. In what follows, we structure this discussion around theories and frameworks, and methods and methodology. Our intentions are developmental. We want to sensitize the field – including ourselves – to the basic requirements of future theoretical and empirical work.

4.1 | Theories and frameworks

At a higher level of abstraction, adequate theories and frameworks in the three areas should strive to meet four general criteria. First, international careers research requires theories and frameworks that avoid a one-sided view that over-emphasizes either the individualistic, agentic stance or the contextual influence. They take into account, as best as possible, the intricate interplay between personal and contextual factors when it comes to behaviour (Lewin, 1936). Individuals are neither “cultural nor psychological dopes” (Garfinkel, 1964: 244) who reproduce what common culture or psychological make-up seems to demand. Rather, they are “able, in varying degrees, to participate in multiple cultural traditions and to maintain distinctive and inconsistent action frames” (Delmestri, 2006: 1515). This is essentially true for all kinds of career studies. Yet, in the area of international careers research, this becomes especially important because the context within which career actors operate and careers unfold is not only unique, but also vastly different.

Second, theories and frameworks applied in international careers research should not only allow for multi-level analyses, but have a focus on various levels of social complexity as one of their constituting characteristics. Given the importance of different actors, as well as different segments, of the social and geographic space within which international careers unfold, the ability to grasp this complexity conceptually at different levels is crucial. For example, the Big Five concept, elaborating on personality dimensions, is valuable in international careers research, too. However, without embedding such a view into broader perspectives, for example, a situated and actor-centered stance on organisational institutionalism (Boxenbaum, 2014) that takes into account factors beyond personality, such as “person-only” analyses will have clear limitations.

Third, including temporal aspects as an integrative element of the theoretical and conceptual architecture is crucial. While this is true for all kinds of careers research, it has a specific importance in international careers. On the one hand, in different contexts the view on career-related issues, such as timeliness, fast-track, rapid, urgency, short-versus long-term, etc., is markedly different depending on the underlying, often culturally and/or religiously influenced views on time. On the other hand, developments over time play an important role, in particular, in comparative careers research and in the study of careers in internationally operating organisations. In comparative careers research, the time span chosen for analyses, in order to identify convergence/divergence/stasis, is crucial for both finding effects (or not) and interpreting them. Regarding the latter, anticipated future effects of career moves across organisational and national boundaries do play an important role for current career decisions for both organisations and individual career actors.

Fourth, intersectionality plays an important role. While it is important to include conceptually, for example, cultural or institutional factors into one's theorising, this is arguably not enough. The interplay between two or more manifestations relevant for the phenomenon at hand, that is, their intersectionality, adds crucial insight to its understanding (McBride, Hebson, & Holgate, 2015). For example, not just focusing on one or several aspects of "culture" or "institutions," but also on the interplay with other factors such as gender, occupation, and proactivity – in analytic terms: interaction effects such as culture*gender, culture*occupation, culture*proactivity – allow studies in international careers research to adopt a more nuanced view.

4.2 | Methods and methodology

Both in terms of disciplinary scope and time span, there is an extensive literature outlining method-related and methodological problems in research in an international and particularly country- or culture-comparative setting. A steady stream of major readings has emerged over more than half a century (e.g. Brislin, 1976; Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973; Davidov, Schmidt, & Billiet, 2011; Lonner & Berry, 1986; Moore, 1961). This allows international careers research to build on a solid body of insight and instruments that it can use without the need to reinvent the wheel.

At an abstract level, the challenges in international careers research are not so different from mono-contextual research. They refer to formulating an adequate research question and choosing a fitting research approach within the nomothetic-interpretative spectrum ("quantitative vs. qualitative") with its respective underlying epistemological assumptions, and making adequate choices with regard to sampling, data collection and interpretation. However, international research adds specific aspects to these issues.

Some world regions have unique research traditions that give certain epistemologies and ontologies a different degree of credibility. Take the strong continental European tradition of interpretative research with its underlying assumptions about what reality is, how research can capture it and which methods are suitable to do this as exemplified by German and Austrian voices like Simmel and his neo-Kantian anti-positivism (Simmel, 1917), Husserl's phenomenological view (Husserl, 1980 [Orig. 1922]) and Schutz' phenomenology of the social world (Schutz, 1932). It is easy to imagine fervent arguments with regard to methodology and methods if research from such a tradition encounters views that are not only different, but incompatible.

The emic-etic differentiation (Brislin, 1976) constitutes a basic tension in international studies. An emic approach focuses on understanding what members of the respective units of analysis regard as valid and emphasizes context-specific insight and deep-level understanding. In contrast, an etic focus often uses ideas developed in "Western" countries, such as the USA, and applies them to substantially different contexts. Such studies look for generalisations across different contextual settings and focus on general theory building. Whereas emic studies have to cope with the problem of what one can say beyond the respective case, etic studies have to grapple with the problem of validity.

Equivalence is a core issue at various levels of the research process (Cavusgil & Das, 1997). Beyond conceptual equivalence, this also relates to methods. When trying to compare like with like, labels used in one context might not

resemble the ones used in another context, although the underlying phenomenon is similar. Equally, similar labels – “redundancy” in Japan and the USA, for example – may refer to different phenomena. When collecting data, norms and legal regulations in various countries differ. What is perfectly acceptable in one country, for example, a “cold call” to a company, might jeopardise the whole project in another.

A specific aspect of equivalence in its own right is language and translation. This not only refers to the widely debated issues of survey research in multi-language settings and various forms of translation–retranslation procedures trying to make the right trade-off decisions between exact or literal translation (Brislin et al., 1973). Interpretative research in an international setting, including members from different nationalities, with varying native tongues leads to specific problems. It is a substantial task to translate original interview passages in the local language into English without losing the unique flavour of the quote so that the whole research team can access the text. “Thus throughout the whole of the research process investigators are faced with the dilemma of delineating the boundaries of equivalence and finding practical mechanisms for achieving equivalence” (Tregaskis, Mahoney, & Atterbury, 2004: 440).

Due to the specifics of contextual settings that cut across national, cultural and institutional boundaries, an in-depth knowledge of the respective contexts is needed not only to be able to access the field, but also to decipher what the data mean. As an immediate consequence, this suggests putting a stop to “safari research” (Peterson, 2001) where researchers with little first-hand knowledge and very limited, if any, contact to local experts merely scratch the surface of the phenomena they are exploring. Conversely, this calls for inclusive, international research collaborations that allow for a context-sensitive approach (Morley & Heraty, 2019).

5 | NEW AVENUES IN INTERNATIONAL CAREERS RESEARCH

Building on the previous sections, a number of issues emerge that we feel could form part of a future research agenda. This is not an exhaustive list, rather a shortlist of the more promising avenues. In doing so, we follow the logic of the previous sections and highlight topics across each of the three foundations and the tools that can be used.

5.1 | Contextualised career research

Arguably the most glaring deficit in international careers research is its limited geographic, cultural and institutional spread. Much of what we know about careers is related to western, industrialised countries, leaving out large parts of the world. The picture is slowly changing and we now have accounts about careers from very different national contexts such as Malawi (Chipeta & Chawinga, 2018), Turkmenistan (Hofmann, 2018), Mongolia (Pastore, 2010), Brunei Darussalam (Musa, 2016), Papua (Karim, Asang, Yunus, & Irene, 2015) and Guyana (Ogowewo, 2010). Still, we are a far cry away from having a comprehensive, descriptive picture of careers or studies on the interplay between various factors of careers in these regions.

In a similar vein, we have an incomplete picture about different professional contexts. With few exceptions such as, for example, refugees, much of the careers research is focused on elites. Even there, we have an insufficient understanding of the more specific professional contexts that shape careers. Take, for example, careers of people in various segments of mobility such as pilots in aviation, truck drivers in ground transport, sailors and naval officers in the merchant navy, train drivers in the railway system and tram drivers in public city transport. Each of these contexts is highly specific, with very different rules with regard to access to the field, required qualifications and length of service.

A widely uncovered context is the newly emerging social space linked with various internet-based activities leading to interesting career patterns. Examples include electronic sports and gaming, influencers who possess

prestige among their followers on various social media platforms, and blogs and tweets of individuals and organisations, such as newspapers, focusing on different themes. In settings like these, we know very little about the careers, the contextual influences and the interplay between various factors involved.

At a more concrete level, issues that emerge evolve around the impact of culture, institutional context and other macro factors that can, and do, impact a variety of core career-related concepts. Examples of this include conceptions of career and career success (Benson, McIntosh, Salazar, & Vaziri, 2019; Kaše et al., 2019), the context-sensitivity of concepts of career and career success and the role of individual-level factors, for example, self-directed career behaviour and personality versus higher-level factors such as culture, type of economy, educational level or generation (see for example, Andresen et al., 2019); and individual-level aspects such as individual career management, career expectations, career success measures and career mobility aspirations (see for example, Afiouni, Karam, & Makarem, 2019).

5.2 | Comparative careers research

The issue of longitudinal studies is crucial to future research that compares across national, cultural and institutional contexts. Especially the highly dynamic developments in the political, economic and societal areas reflected in the emergence and partial dissolution of political entities, such as nation states and country conglomerates like the European Union call for such analyses. This can take the form of panel or trend studies that help to answer the question whether we can observe patterns of stasis, convergence and/or divergence between countries in terms of individual careers and organisational career systems and practices over time.

In addition, the theoretical underpinnings for comparative career research can be strengthened. In particular, we advocate the use of a greater variety of theoretical concepts more fully to describe and explain commonalities and differences of careers in different contextual settings. For example, from an institutionalist perspective, neo-institutional, economic institutional and national business systems approaches can offer different angles on contextual settings and their interplay with individual careers and organisational career management. In another example, Afiouni et al. (2019) use an explicitly feminist perspective in order to analyse the contextual embeddedness of women's careers in one country (Lebanon) that can provide a springboard for comparative analyses.

An explicitly comparative perspective on contextualised careers research leads to the question of context sensitivity of various career success dimensions. An example would be the impact of varying national levels of, for example, education, gender (in)equality and economic wealth on different aspects of careers and dimensions of career success, and analyse whether some dimensions greatly react to contextual forces while others are more stable across different settings (Lazarova et al., 2018). The study by Andresen et al. (2019) is an example of this by focusing on the career-related human potential composite. At the level of the organisation, issues arise around the stability and changeability of career systems and practices in various countries and what factors and processes lead to that. The analysis by Kaše et al. (2019) not only contextualises career success schemas, but also uses an explicitly (configurational) comparative perspective. At the individual level, the study by Benson et al. (2019) looking at the link between cultural values and definitions of career success is another good example.

5.3 | Careers research in internationally operating organisations

Much of the literature on careers in internationally operating organisations has focused on careers associated with working abroad. Where this literature has adopted an organisational angle, it has predominantly employed perspectives such as human capital, resource-based view, resource-dependency, diversity and/or gender to analyse organisational career and expatriation phenomena. Individual careers have been explored through lenses such as

protean careers, boundaryless careers, intelligent careers, identity, conservation of resources or leadership theories. Macro perspectives have often used institutional or power approaches.

However, the field is characterised by a relative lack of large-scale internationally comparative studies. Among the many issues that these may help us to understand is the potential existence of specific career concepts in different countries or regions. This would not just refine our understanding of these areas in terms of careers, but may also provide useful insights into different career patterns within internationally operating organisations. Moreover, promising further areas of exploration may be the distinct career patterns amongst diverse age groups or varying concepts of country-specific career success (Mayrhofer et al., 2016; Smale, Bagdadli, Cotton, Dello Russo, Dickmann, Dysvik et al., 2019). While global mobility comprises more unusual types of international work – business travellers, globe trotters, cross-border commuters, virtual workers, etc. – and associated career patterns are increasingly being explored, much more remains to be done (Mello et al., 2020). In addition, as with many other research areas, a systematic investigation across different domains would be usefully combined with longitudinal studies as well as generating an improved understanding of broader consequences of career success.

Internationally operating organisations outside the for-profit sector have a unique setup of their HRM and career management systems and differ vastly. The legally regulated and at least formally transparent context of UN organisations stands in stark contrast to the kind of rules in globally operating criminal organisations, which in turn differ from NGOs such as *Médecins sans Frontiers*. Our career-related knowledge about the specifics of these types of organisations is scarce. Given the global importance of these organisations, this is an important gap in our knowledge.

6 | ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The open call for papers under the heading of “new avenues in international careers research” produced 21 submissions by the April 2017 deadline. Fifteen of the submissions were sent out to review, and five were accepted. In total, the submissions reflected that international careers research, whilst in its relative infancy, is understood as more than only expatriation research and includes interesting and innovative attempts to explore career meanings and career contexts across and within country, cultural and institutional boundaries. An impressive coverage of countries and research designs were also evident.

The five papers accepted to be part of this special issue collectively cover data from 35 countries, covering all the GLOBE cultural clusters. In loose reference to the research tools we mentioned above, the papers incorporate a range of contextual theories (e.g. cultural theory, institutional theory, structuration theory, relational theory) and multilevel theorizing. They include both qualitative and quantitative studies, the latter including multilevel analyses and the combination of macro and individual factors. And they all involve international collaborative research efforts to a smaller or larger extent, with contributing authors comprising a diverse range of nationalities. This is all very encouraging vis-à-vis our recommendations above for how we should go about building this research domain.

In terms of contextualised careers research, Afiouni et al.'s (2019) article entitled, “*Contextual embeddedness of careers: Female ‘non-survivors’ and gendered relational context*” examines the narratives of 24 Lebanese female career actors who used to work but are no longer in paid employment. Applying feminist relational theory, they demonstrate the importance of context by drawing attention to the gendered power dynamics that shaped the Lebanese women's (dis)connection with their working self, the perceived (mis)alignment of others and the career investments they had made. The article by Andresen et al. (2019), “*Careers in context: An international study of career goals as mesostructured between societies’ career-related human potential and proactive career behavior*” addresses the question of if and why career goals and behaviours differ between countries. Their study on nearly 18,000 employees from 27 countries examines the cross-level relationships between societal macrostructure, career mesostructured and individual career behaviour. It finds that career mesostructure (importance given to financial achievements) fully mediates the relationship between societal context and individual proactive career behaviours.

Turning to the area of comparative careers research, Benson et al. (2019) in their article “*Cultural values and definitions of career success*” empirically address questions relating to the cross-cultural equivalence of the career success concept. Based on structured interviews with 269 professional service employees in 15 countries, the study finds that differences in societal cultural values are associated with individuals defining career success in ways that place differential emphasis on interpersonal, intrapersonal, achievement-oriented and safety and security outcomes. Kaše et al. (2019) take a very different approach to much the same question in their article, “*Career success schemas and their contextual embeddedness: A comparative configurational perspective*.” Adopting a comparative configurational approach and drawing on institutional factors, they examine the structural characteristics of career schemas based on a sample of 364 individuals across 13 countries. As an outcome of a cognitive mapping procedure, they propose a two-dimensional taxonomy of career schemas (career success schema complexity and convergence) at the country level.

Finally, addressing an important set of issues for those with careers in internationally operating organisations, Ramsey and Lorenz (2019) draw upon conservation of resources (COR) theory to examine the effects of expatriates being in the state of flow on their work adjustment and work–family conflict in their article, “*Every flow has its ebb: The impact of flow on work–family conflict and adjustment in global careers*.” Interestingly, the findings of the study show that expatriates who experience a higher state of flow at work are more likely to adjust to their culturally novel work environment, but are also more likely to experience greater work–family conflict. This finding was the same for both samples of expatriates in Brazil and the USA. Unlike previous theorising, this study, therefore, demonstrates that the same mechanism of flow can contribute resources that have both positive and negative consequences in the same context.

These articles, and the special issue as a whole, take the field forward in at least four different ways. First, they demonstrate that within the field of organisational and management careers research, a growing stream of contributions has emerged over the past two decades that we label international careers research. Second, these contributions build on, and shape, this research stream’s three core foundations: contextualised careers research, comparative careers research and careers research in internationally operating organisations. They emphasize different aspects, notably the importance of including various facets of context into theorising and empirical research, the need to systematically identify commonalities and differences of organisational career management and individual careers across countries and the specifics of careers in various kinds of organisations that operate internationally. Third, this body of work provides new knowledge and ideas for how to improve and extend existing theorisation in ways that address the influence of international career contexts head on, as well as showcasing some under-utilised methods for teasing this out both qualitatively and quantitatively. Finally, this special issue serves as a call for future research to build on the foundations that have been laid. We have tried to outline ways in which we think this could be done, but we remain hopeful that international careers scholars present and future will contribute their own voices to this agenda.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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Laying the foundations of international careers research

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