THE ADAPTABILITY STYLES OF INTERNATIONAL CAREERISTS

Abstract:

Based on 120 semi-structural interviews undertaken with a large French multinational petroleum corporation, 86 of which were with non-French internationals, this article identifies how non-host country internationals maintain their national identities while adapting to the corporate and national cultures in which they reside. A truly international career is a trade-off between numerous professional and personal life choices. Five identity strategies are delineated : conservatives, defensives, opportunists, transnationals, and converts. How exercising corporate power, living within the family, and being part on an ethnic peer group all impact adaptability are discussed, as are the action implications for international human resource managers.

1.   Introduction:

Today's multinationals are caught in dialectical tension between the desire for unified strategy at executive level (the headquarters) and the social realities within subsidiaries that might be termed multi-cultural and which have an urgent need to co-operate with a larger number of actors than at any other period (R. SAINSAULIEU, 1991: p. 258). Caught between local levels of regulation, between autonomy and centralisation, managerial actions have grown in complexity.

The main area of research for this article, the oil industry, illustrates particularly well the fact there is on large companies to look for wealth where it is found, i.e. underground, in a distant country of origin, making use of a variety of investment possibilities (merger, participation, licence and technical agreements etc.). We have observed that, since the end of the 1970s in most oil companies, there has been an evolution in the way both technology and management have been transferred from the headquarters to subsidiaries. This is due to a variety of factors: greater availability of long distance travel, quota systems introduced by local administrations anxious to promote access to managerial posts for their own citizens, reduced international mobility costs, and a decline in the number of extended overseas postings for families. Within such firms, the drawing up of uniform, written budgetary auditing and reporting procedures to guide the actions of inter-dependent units at a global level represents only one aspect of co-ordination mechanisms. These firms also rely on what J. F. HENNART calls "a process of socialization consisting of strengthening and developing an organisational culture by geographical mobility, career management and systems of remuneration and recompense" (J. F. HENNART, 1993: p. 157).

The international personnel system can therefore be referred to, in terms of its size and the liveliness of its underground contacts outside of the formal contacts it is supposed to maintain, as the 'nervous system' of the organisation. Companies everywhere have made a progressive break away from the classic system of expatriation, wherein the company looks to fill competence gaps in the expatriate area and faithfully represents the interests of the mother company. At stake is the appropriation and dissemination of complex technology, thanks to pluri-national specialists professionally dedicated to intense geographical mobility within differentiated and networked units (P. PIERRE, 1998: p. 229). For these firms, the presence of racial, national or ethnic minorities already rooted in their own particular cultures, or of a mobile workforce who, both as expatriates and impatriates bring with them their own view of work, necessitates that the process of adaptation of already socialised individuals to new organisational and cultural forms be ensured in a practical way.[1] The difficulty for these organisations is one of providing a primary recognition space (P. DUSSAUGE and B. RAMANANTSOA, 1984). These questions are precisely what this article seeks to address, by presenting the principal results of a long study on the socialization of international executives belonging to a large French company in the field of oil exploration and production (*Alpha* in this study) (P. PIERRE, 2000).

The results lead us to highlight a typology of five identity strategies for internationally mobile executives and discuss the resources necessary for their adaptation to work in a multi-cultural context. Carried out using full-time salaried workers, the results described in this paper are based on 120 semi-directed interviews undertaken in 1993 and 1994 with a population of executives and managers working for *Alpha*. 86 of these interviews were conducted with 'international' executives – by 'international' we mean non-French executives who, while working for *Alpha*, are, or have been, away from their original subsidiary and are internationally mobile, whether this mobility takes place in France (the case for 70 of the interviewees) or within another subsidiary in the organisation studied (for the remaining 16).

Sample studied and methodology

Interviewees come from 18 Alpha subsidiaries, 6 of these executives were from Middle Eastern countries, 24 from Europe, 5 from Asia, 31 from Africa, 11 from North America and 9 from South America.
17 of these international executives worked in administration (Human Resources, Legal, Economics), 15 worked in Finance (Accounting, Telecommunications, Organisation), 17 in the area of Exploration (Geology, Geophysics) and 33 in the area of Oil Technology (Exploitation, Mineralogy, Drilling). The average length of service of those on long-term contracts was 11.3 years; the average number of trips abroad (of over three months) by each executive was 2.3 and the average length of the stay abroad was 2.6 years. Of the 86 international executives questioned, 5% had less than 5 years seniority, 30% between 5 and 15 years, 35% between 15 and 20 years and 30% had been with the company more than 20 years (these were often the Directors of a subsidiary or Service Division). Of these 86 interviews, it should be noted that only two women were questioned. The French executives who also experienced international mobility (intra-organisational) are, in this paper, referred to as expatriates. Expatriates are generally defined as employees temporarily leaving their home country for an assignment of a few years duration in a foreign country with the perspective of returning to their home country.
During this interview, we try to facilitate a "self-critical" approach and the expression of personal experiences and emotions. It is more a matter of understanding processes than objects (Cassell C & Symon G. (1994)).
They talked about their projects (what motivates them to be an international executive ?), their career, their family history (are they trying to escape something, do they belong to associations or religious organizations, are they looking for new changes and what are the restrictions ?).
Interviews lasted 105-180 minutes. Some did not speak the language of their host country, but all spoke at least English. Once transcribed, with repetitions, contradictions, representations, the interviews were submitted to the executives for corrections and additions as necessary in order to understand how expatriation is experienced.

2. SOCIALIZATION OF INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVES AND THE PLURALITY OF ALLEGIANCES

Mr R. is Iranian. With a doctorate in Geology from the University of Tehran, he also holds (with a very good grade) a Diploma from the French Oil Institute, and speaks fluent English and French as well as his native Farsi. He often visits his parents, who are exiled in London, accompanied by his British wife, whom he met 15 years ago in Paris. He has worked for *Alpha* for more than ten years, which has taken him to Africa, the Middle East and Central America. Both Mr R. and his wife believe they can feel at home anywhere in the world – they are the living representatives of a species en route to professional development: those referred to by the economic press as 'the new inter-cultural practitioners' and which we need, today, to distinguish from working class immigrants, stateless persons, political refugees and even foreign students when articulating the delicate question of the diverse sources of an individual's identity. His example is fairly typical of the Alpha group.

Faithful members of religious confraternities in the evening, speaking in local dialect and wearing traditional dress to express their animist faith, some oil executives of the *Alpha* group participate actively in the economic and political life of their country. They speak English and French with colleagues, training other members of staff in management techniques from the United States, taking on – not without certain tensions – another social role. Depending on the situation and the interviewee, there always exists with the individual a certain cut off principle (R. BASTIDE, 1955) between those moments when they express themselves publicly using a 'native style' (cf. the Congolese context where, during the course of a drilling training session at *Alpha*, the actions of each participant were expressed as a proverb or in the style of a writer from his own country). Yet these managers also need to evidence that they are able to judge industrial projects in a rational manner and organise their work according to Western timetables, entering into contact with colleagues using relationship codes acceptable in to the 'modern' rationale. These international executives seek to develop strategies that answer the question "who am I in the other's eyes?" They try to anticipate to any unfavourable identification by constantly moulding their own actions and appearance according to what they perceive as proper social norms. In this process of image construction, shame (the nakedness one wishes to conceal when exposed to the public gaze, and which one cannot flee from lack of affection) and envy (what one would like to be and fears one is not) play fundamental parts (P. MOESSINGER, 2000: p. 153).

Because an international career means having to make repeated choices about education for the children, a place to live, housing, the partner's work (and all of this in totally new legal and social environments), what often takes place is a king of search for equilibrium between diverse interests, a coming to an accommodation between professional and personal spheres of life. For many *Alpha* international executives, though well prepared thanks to training in the specificities of inter-cultural management of the host country, geographical mobility involves detaching the self from its community of origin. These executives need to interiorise rapidly a new kind of specialist knowledge – professional knowledge and roles being rooted in the division of labour within the firm – comprising vocabulary and procedures and driving an idea of work that might differ considerably from the cultural world of their origins.

"The strange happiness that I sometimes feel" recalled an American financier during one of our interviews, *"is that of finding myself experiencing a journey, seeing a hidden part of myself appear, a part that I was looking for back home in my country. Living with foreign colleagues allows me to be, or not, someone other than myself. Managing in an international context is first of all a school for humility, where you can re-discover yourself, realising that good management is above all understanding precisely that cultural basis of all decision-making and behaviour which seems at first sight incomprehensible".*

Constrained to adopt the tastes and habits of a new environment, some international executives decide, partially and locally, to convert a part of their mental landscape in order to preserve an intimate link with what they consider to be the truest part of themselves. Finding themselves in numerous incongruent registers, in situations that are not always codified and foreseeable, international executives explain and justify themselves and step back. Between several communities and several value systems that are attractive but sometimes irreconcilable (culture of origin, culture of the host country and culture(s) of the company etc.), such cultural shocks survived will cause "a problem of consistency between the new and the internalised" (P. BERGER et T. LUCKMANN, 1996: p. 192).

"I'm from Gabon when nobody speaks to me. I'm from Gabon only when no one wants to recognize me, when it's only French society that is speaking, outside the company where I'm recognized. In reality, however, my work, my studies in Paris, in the Netherlands and the United States, with my postings and mobility, mean that I'm the only one who knows who I really am. In the midst of several cultures. It isn't easy! It causes a lack of understanding within my family and amongst my friends because, quite simply, I don't want my value to be reduced to the colour of my skin and country of origin (which was colonised by the French), or even to my social identity, which is that of a person with money and power within the firm where I have been working for more than sixteen years." The remarks of this *Alpha* financier, the son of a member of the French armed forces, who was born in Gabon and lived as a child in the South of France, illustrate clearly this constant search to contradict the identities imposed on him and the image he has of himself.

In contrast to a static conception of ethnic groups defined (from without) by culture, this research deliberately takes a constructivist view of ethnicity. F. BARTH defines the concept of ethnicity as one of variable processes by which actors identify themselves and are identified by others on the basis of cultural traits supposedly derived from a common origin and consciously highlighted in social interaction. (1963) We prefer such a definition in which ethnicity can be seen as like a system of symbols that can be described, according to L. DRUMMOND, as a "set of constraining ideas on the distinction between self and others that furnishes a basis for action and the interpretation of the actions of others" (1981: p. 693). What is important for L. DRUMMOND is not to study "how the members of group X see the members of group Y and act towards them" but "how people define X-itude or Y-itude" (P. POUTIGNAT and J. STREIFF-FENART, 1995: p. 366). For example, a female German manager of Asiatic origin (a Vietnamese father and a Turkish mother) could be perceived, during a professional mission in Canton, as being of Chinese origin, perfectly understanding local manners and customs. Her contacts in the host country would be astonished at her inability to make contact with and translate her Chinese colleagues; in reality, she perceives herself as a citizen of the world, or, more precisely, a Bavarian smitten with cosmopolitanism.

In this incessant battle of perception and classification, of manipulation of mental representation, executives are prepared in different ways, and may often be understood via several types of identity, presenting varied modes of resistance or acceptance of the ambient cultural milieu: from a radical and hermetic falling back on their culture of origin to quasi-total penetration by the host culture and the signs of an identity conversion (E. M. LIPIANSKY, I. TABOADA-LEONETTI and A. VASQUEZ, 1997). The interplay of such tensions result in the varied usage of ethnic categorisations and interactive behavioural skills that can be identified through five strategies of identity: Conservative, Defensive, Opportunist, Transnational and Converted.

3. THE FIVE IDENTITY STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVES[2]

3.1 Conservatives

In the presence of a foreign culture, where the individual feels himself to be a stranger, the vital imperatives of conservatives include their own personal reassurance and making the society in which they work feel secure. (A. SAYAD, 1999: p. 407).

This categorization of executives, which we have called Conservative and which forms 10% of our population, is driven by the desire to minimise any social or emotional engagements that might result from interaction at work with colleagues of a different national origin. These executives seek to satisfy the most immediate demands of the host society while making at the same time a great effort to maintain their own cultural codes in the private area of primary relations.

"Between foreign and French executives this can work well but there will always be a temporary period of adjustment. It will always be difficult to forget that we are foreigners in the world outside the company and this often impinges on our families and us," observes a financier from Gabon transferred to Paris for two years. To reassure themselves and others, daily work is seen by Conservatives as a task to be undertaken in a highly constrained emotional climate but one made bearable by the remembrance of the original motivation for mobility. The career ambitions of these executives are not defined in terms of the *Alpha* Group but rather in terms of their own subsidiary or original country. International mobility will help them reach, after a programmed return, more prominent positions.

During their stay abroad, Conservatives divide their social world into two halves; an 'inside' (usually home and family), where ways of thinking inherited from their original culture are kept as intact as possible, and an 'outside' half (mainly the world of the company), where the manager adopts the minimum behavioural adaptation required by the world of work. Around the social spheres of schools, shops, churches and meetings, contact with compatriots contributes symbolically and materially to create a sort of ethnic space created within the host society. There are many international executives who are quite willing to travel thousands of miles to follow events in the countries they have left and who expend considerable energy in getting hold of papers and filmed events relating to their home countries. In a complex process of idealisation, these international executives imbue their nation of origin with a magnified personality. Conservatives also have a tendency to exert strong cultural pressure on wives and children to ensure that they retain all the strength of their original culture and avoid the menace of acculturation. The spouse is often entrusted with the mission to undertake whatever practical adaptations might be needed to live in a new cultural environment that is perceived as menacing. Faced with the constraints of local administration and the problem of bringing up children, she has to be capable of managing on her own, being modern and smart while still retaining the distinctive qualities called upon in her society of origin.

In the home that shelters them for the duration of their stay, father and mother show off furniture and personal objects imbued with specific meanings and personal histories, which aim as much as anything to reduce the imaginary importance of geographical space to the limits of a family circle that reminds everyone of their origins. Conservatives say that they are worried about the transmission of their language to their children (as well as supra-linguistic elements such as accent). In the context of relationships at work, they speak alternately French and English with no desire to learn the language of the host country. At home, they are scrupulously careful to speak nothing but their mother tongue. They also take care to respect religious practices, which if ignored might, they feel, fade away with the move, and try therefore to remove themselves physically as far as possible from the dominant group.

While cultural resistance is never openly expressed, the behaviour of Conservatives sites the problem of protective retrenchment against existential difficulties in the context of something perhaps more archaic: ethnic identity. The importance of the Conservative's defence mechanisms also highlights an important conclusion: an individual does not integrate into a host society unless s/he can find a "a guarantee of security equivalent to that furnished by his or her ethnic culture" (A. SAYAD ; 1999), a guarantee that might at least counterbalance the desire of finding again in his or her original community the warmth of personal relations and the secret of a significant history.

3.2 Defensives

Unlike Conservatives, Defensives (estimated to be 20% of our population) have no sense of inferiority with regard to the society that welcomes them. Identified as managers with potential within the company, they define themselves clearly as foreigners and organise a representation of their original universe in ways that can be understood by the society in the host country.

If Conservatives tries to protect themselves from outside contacts, Defensives, not content with appearing different, often enjoy their status as foreigners and cultivate it. *"In Paris I am a bit special, I am an American and everyone takes care of me. In America I am just one American among others, speaking the same language as everyone else, there is nothing to differentiate me from the others",* explains a financier born in Houston who says that he likes the feeling of "social weightlessness" experienced by the foreigner. International mobility in the company has awakened in Defensives the consciousness of local belonging and the social mix has sharpened the sense of a cultural claim. From praise for the benefits of the local food compared to the annoying uniformity of dishes served in inter-continental hotel chains or for the oddities of French cuisine to lectures on the beauty of the country one has just left or the legendary hospitality of one's compatriots, a whole range of behaviour comes to systematise, in various degrees, a strategy of over-affirmation of the depreciated self (C. CAMILLERI, 1989: p. 383).

"I'm a new style of immigrant. Man in the twentieth century is born adventurous. Despite my nomadic behaviour and the journeys linked to my job, I try to remain natural, that's all" a Congolese executive explains during our interviews and admits he has *"a system of thought within the company that is, at one and the same time both instrumental and animist".* It is Defensives that best illustrate the experience of stigmata accepted, in the sense that the individual, faced with an image of himself drawn up by the majority society from the signs of difference that are found within him (a name, a skin colour, a marriage customs etc.) tries to evade it and live his or her own life. By contrasting one or more elective homelands with a native homeland and claiming the right to multi-citizenship,[3] the behaviour of Defensives shows the choice of a distinctive type from a set of possible social and professional interactions[4].

During training sessions in the subsidiary in the country of origin, sessions aimed at executives in the company as a whole, we noticed that Defensives tend to become living ambassadors for their country. Wearing traditional dress, *"it's easier than a suit to wear in town",* a person from Gabon might be more likely to write a report on the training in the form of a poem or in the style of one of the great writers of his or her country; a Scotsman may well linger over a careful description of all the stages necessary for the preparation of the culinary specialities served to the participants of the training session. This assuming of roles is made easier by the exceptional and temporary nature of the training session; it acts a visiting card for international executives; their discourse, manner and accent, which are the products of acculturation (folklorised), present them as they wish to be perceived (A. VASQUEZ, 1997: p. 167).

Defensives therefore symbolise an evolution in the customs of *Alpha*, as underlined by a Norwegian executive: *"When internationalisation of staff first began, the executives from subsidiaries felt they had to act like the French in all things when they went to France, but today they prefer to act more selectively. We no longer have to give up our customs to succeed". "Things are changing radically. For France it's a bit like the end of Jacobinism, and for the Group's subsidiaries it is the beginning of internationalisation. The company as a whole can no longer think about its development in terms of subsidiaries catching up technologically with the centre. Expatriates have to face a different relationship model, and gradually recognise our cultural specificities or risk challenge or confrontation",* explains a Congolese financier who has lived in France for three years on behalf of *Alpha's* American subsidiary.

Defensives, when questioned, do not hesitate to claim their subsidiary's autonomy from the Group's headquarters. *"Companies who do not understand about the prominence of minorities understand nothing. People naturally want independence. Liberty, equality, fraternity: I only ask that the principle be extended to all countries"* demands a man from Gabon who has progressed in France in a Human Resources department and who notes that, in Gabon, there is *"a change in mentality, increased freedom of the press and the desire on the part of staff to be treated equally in the development of the country and the subsidiary".*

The duality of particular and trans-national identification means that, at the end of professional life, two types of Defensives emerge: an elite, that might be described as modernist, which chooses to remain within the multi-national firm to the end of his or her career, and another type of Defensive who looks forward to returning to their country of origin. As part of this traditionalist elite, a number of Defensive Nigerian, Scottish and Congolese executives who, after ten or twelve years of intense mobility are at the end of their working lives, wish to return to their own country and " symbolically ward off the fluidity of the time that is passing and which is passing elsewhere" (G SIMON, 1995: p. 210).

At this point in their lives, the individual's professional career seems suddenly less important in the long term, and as one of these managers put it, *"one's roots become more important than sparkling professional success abroad"*. The managers' vision of themselves as members of a world organisation gives way to the self-conceptualization of that of an entrepreneur. These Defensives feel that what is required of them is to put their individual experience at the service of a new chosen community and are likely to engage in activities such as political involvement in their homeland, holding positions of responsibility in a non-governmental organisation, or creating a new business. These concrete possibilities represent a return to self, integrating during *"this latter part of my life"* social and family life and a sense of roots into a harmonious whole.

The return to one's country is not without difficulty, and international executives often discover that years spent far from one's native land have, at one and the same time, transformed both their perception of themselves and that of their origins. In order to re-integrate themselves, former international executives need to undergo the same kind of social re-apprenticeship that they had previously undertaken, repeatedly, when they had to make the considerable effort to find a place within the social contexts imposed upon them by their careers.

3.3 Opportunists

The identity group that we call Opportunists consists mainly of young executives aware of the fact that, while they do not possess any of the diplomas that are highly esteemed by the organisation, they have, while doing the job, revealed themselves to be considerable specialists, and who wish to make up for this lack of initial training with great enthusiasm and over-activity. Aged on average about forty, Opportunists who have already had two or three career moves abroad, *"preferably in subsidiaries where one is not treading in another's footsteps",* very rarely in positions of great responsibility but in posts that nonetheless require technical expertise (such as geologists, IT specialists or logisticians). The Opportunists (25% of the population) viewed this experience of mobility as the main source of potential job satisfaction. For these individuals the professional world is a space in which they will try to maximise the chances of favourable events with a series of individually identified actions and appropriate identities (J. LAUFER and C. PARADEISE, 1982: p. 476). Opportunists tend to apply a no-risk alternation of cultural codes, taking special care to adapt their behaviour as well as their ethnic visibility when speaking to different people.

They employ polite and familiar appellative forms of language according to the situation and choose themes for discussion particularly suited to a particular culture; they use a repertoire of Anglo-Saxon gestures during public presentations and those gestures associated with their country of origin during conversation with their compatriots, making it easy to discern, a highly developed capacity in these certain international executives to play the game of 'the right social distance in the right circumstances' (what anthropologists have called 'the situational use of ethnicity'). These international executives often benefit from a home environment that accepts opportunist manipulation of cultural models and allows, by so doing, for the removal of any possible guilt about such arrangements with oneself and with one's past. Subjects do not have to hide their strategy from those close to them. The mask is dropped at the front door, so to speak, which differentiates them from certain executives who need to maintain a traditional way of being for aged parents, young cousins or friends who have stayed at home as well as with the modern world of the work situation, relations with management in the host country or at the children's school. The Opportunist's way of life is, therefore, more often based on a firm cut-off principle between family and professional life and by the practical difficulties of reconciling the two.

Most Opportunists say that they find a new zest for life in a foreign environment. Maintaining a playful front internationally, they seem to have a bulimic attitude to new sensations, unusual images and work situations that are constantly being renewed. They are like certain other French expatriates in that what is important to them is to live change with unceasing mobility between the subsidiaries of the Group, and who feel that their return to France, to the headquarters, is a loss of liberty. Geographic mobility meets what seems to be a physical need, and the language of determinist biology is often used to explain it, *"I get itchy feet before I leave"; "travelling is in my blood".* For older Opportunists, after the 'adventure of work,' material insecurity is not a problem. What worries these travellers, who have constantly renewed their professional identities and fought above all to adapt to their environment, are the repercussions of breaks with the groups they formed part of, the ever-present gap between the means of self affirmation and the ability to obtain collective stable recognition (R. SAINSAULIEU, 1985). We find in the ranks of these executives the best guardians of the social order that gave them space to grow and still honours them today.

Although they only remain within the bounds of a frame of reference until the time comes to build a new one, it would be foolish to consider Opportunists empty ethnic and cultural subjects. Being able to act in

several registers involves the incorporation into oneself of several parts of another culture, which takes time. One thing that is certain is that, in these conditions, authentic cosmopolitan behaviour consists at first of suffering and a feeling of being a stranger to others and oneself.

3.4 Transnationals

As the largest part of our population (35%), Transnationals were sufficiently self-confident and sure of being able to play along. For them, reassuring and being reassured consists of abolishing the otherness within themselves and always calling *on human reason when making choices within the company".* Transnationals admit "*they attach more importance to the person over and above passports, place of birth and societies encountered.*" "*Willpower, the most widely shared attribute in the world",* should be able to halt racial discrimination and the discourse of a number of the executives calls on a *"necessary pluri-lingualism",* on free enterprise and the building of a cosmopolitan spirit within the company. Early on, Transnationals undertake studies far from home within universities that welcome students of all national origins. In this way, from the beginning, these executives are able to learn the same sort of behaviours that would later be needed to survive in the world of the company. At work in relatively constraining educational establishments, these executives quickly hone the tactical skills to succeed in formalized institutions. Later on within the companies they work for, the same *"need for results, regular systems of individual evaluation, work on the resolution of problems undertaken in English and in small teams"* will drive this individuals modes of work and means of success.

In part because of such an education, Transnationals perceive the most acutely the existence of a dominant culture within *Alpha*, *"a culture of engineers, first and foremost rational, not just of French origin but one which borrows many elements from Anglo-Saxon managerial techniques".* In the eyes of Transnationals, those who do not share this heritage cannot succeed on a professional level.

Transnationals are, for example, the keenest on the development of cross-cultural training sessions, and say that they maintain with the languages they speak "*an instrumental type rapport which does not enter into the field of their consciousness".* Each move constitutes a milestone in the process of a vertical rise during which the extra-professional life is pushed back for later, on retirement. Subjects continually adjust their way of life to their career and inversely after a certain age.

Transnationals also represent a family unit that has great plasticity of form. It is within this population that we find the strongest phenomenon of the voluntary restriction of family size and managers most inclined to harmonise, while abroad, the size of their family unit with that which is prevalent in the host country. There are many cases where the working wife continues with her activities, while one or two children are sent to good schools (sometimes abroad) during the husband's expatriation until they have attained the necessary qualifications. For Transnationals, personal identity tends to merge with certain elements of global company. In the same way that companies find names for their business that will be acceptable everywhere to describe their business, some international executives will give their children a first name that will *"be immediately recognisable and accepted"* wherever they are in the world.

Just as it is an environment where linguistic diversity is taken for granted, making the subject truly bilingual, international culture is better transmitted because it forms an integral part of the family's history and its recognition markers, and the test of international mobility is perceived as the accomplishment of an old and mature arrangement, not as a temporary uprooting on behalf of the company. Similarly, there are differences of prestige between commercial and engineering schools at a national level; the upper echelons of internationalisation distinguish themselves from those lower down. The most efficient Transnationals, the inheritors of international mobility in whom career management is mixed with pre-existing abilities, differentiate themselves from local executives who see their move to a foreign country as an end-of-career reward for work well done.

3.5 Converted

Originating mainly from the Gulf of Guinea, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, these are the *Alpha* executives most anxious to melt into the background of the host country, those that can no longer find links with their country of origin and have "*renounced their membership and nationality to take up the destiny of the French".* Wanting to remain permanently in France, the Converted are also those whose home environment has little in the way of resources and who, on the professional side, have ceased to be international to mature in an exclusively national context (France). To reassure and be reassured, these executives will force themselves to be, as often as possible, in the company of those they consider to hold the reins of power in the organisation, the

French executives and directors. One of the practical consequences of being with the company is the choice of naturalisation as the most sought after and successful outcome following a career entirely built in the country of adoption; France. Certain ostensible manifestations are: a religious conversion, the shortening or changing of the family name, the choice of first names for the children and languages that will or will not be handed down, all of which indicate a desire to assume definitively the societal model of the host nation. Although most international executives reveal, through their choice of first names for children born while they are abroad, a fidelity to their national or religious origins (this even at the risk of ethnic visibility, which the carrier will bear), the Converted will make the opposite choice.

In this image trade, our research has shown that the rule is to give a good impression, even gain prestige, by demonstrating a normal appearance, i.e. by showing that one respects the norms. This delicate game in the image trade, in which it is necessary to control the presentation of self to benefit from an improved social image, is especially difficult for certain stigmatised nationalities from developing countries where belonging to a cultivated elite is not automatic.

The Converted believe in the possibility of living the same lifestyle anywhere, in any country, and do not want to leave room for cultural factors in the management of businesses. When asked to define themselves, they talk of a community of age that brings them closer to their other colleagues, a community of skills and of social status that makes them managers. A Norwegian geologist married to a French woman for six years explains, *"Common sense says that the French, German or English are not the same. They don't think or work the same way or eat the same breakfast. If we look at things closely we can see that the executives of the Group who travel internationally form a separate group and have more points in common between themselves than between their respective compatriots".* These international executives share with Conservatives the characteristic of being the most likely to declare themselves objective when it comes to appreciating the characteristics of France and its people. They are the quickest to link purely descriptive elements with value judgements. Their tone and strength of their convictions is only slightly modulated when faced with different contexts (in public or not, in their original context or not, placed exclusively with their compatriots or not, etc.)

Trying above all to *"be appreciated for themselves alone",* the Converted find themselves torn between being members of an original (rejected) population that allows others to designate them as members of a more general category (nation, skin colour etc.) and to which they are no longer part of, and belonging to a group which, by the introduction of their own characteristics, has difficulty accepting them. Behind the stereotyped figure that s/he tries to espouse, the foreigner constantly risks being betrayed by the presence of the rejected other that s/he is not always able to master fully. The Converted best illustrate the fact that assimilation is something that can never be achieved, and that ethnicity is not a state but a process of social construction[5]. The behaviour of the Converted sheds light on the concept of negative identity first introduced by E. ERIKSON. Negative identity refers to all those traits which the individual in a new host community learns to isolate and avoid. In an ever-imperfect process of de-culturation, the Converted provide examples of individuals hoping to reject a part of their past in an effort to personally rewrite the history that underpins their troubled phase of opposition and the search for new identities.

4. POWER, FAMILY AND PEER COMMUNITY: THREE ADAPTIVE RESOURCES WHEN INTERNATIONALLY MOBILE

Our research has emphasised that the experience of mobility for even those international executives with a high degree of cross-cultural amenability still experience ethnic barriers that weigh on professional relations. The phenomena of categorisation and even racism in social interactions do not disappear. Thus, oftentimes even for those international executives whose capability and status have been enhanced by advantages such as excellent education or experience are still not called upon to compete for the most senior posts within the organisation because they do not necessarily have certain informal expected advantages such as social capital, or because they come from a marginalized ethnic origin. In fact, a presumption of incompetence seems to weigh upon them; skin colour becomes an exterior sign that reveals intellectual characteristics and specific minority practices. In itself, the inter-cultural confrontation cannot be examined independently of the national point of departure of the actors, and thus, as A. C. WAGNER writes: "international is a long way from meaning a-national, though certain nationalities can, more easily than others, use this term" (1998: p. 38)[6]. For mobile executives, the capacity to master their job in a professional and international space seems also to derive in part from the capacity to transform one's own national attributes into professional resources. Successes in this area

include advantages such as mastery of the language of the country and expert knowledge of the business environment and its norms.

Thus, although Human Resources managers assessing a international's chances for success abroad would take into consideration the need to correctly assess the length of the posting abroad, the situation of the spouse and children in the family, and requisite technical competence needed for the position, our work concludes that the mode of adaptation to work and the socialization of the executive stem first from *the degree of power they have in their relations at work,* or in other words, that individual's "power advantage."

Relations with the international executive, seen as a foreigner, are initially equivocal, divided between a sort of fascination and a kind of resistance. For example, in intercultural meetings between international executives and the French, the reactions on both sides revolve around two essential poles: an attraction towards the unknown possibility that exists in the other, as well as an antipathy towards what could be seen as menacing and outside of one's own world. For a foreigner whose presence and identity do not provide, at one and the same time, all the guarantees of exchange and protection, this double feeling of fascination and resistance on the part of the host society gives rise to a need on the part of the subject to reaffirm his or her fidelity to the collective identity. (A. CAILLES, 1986).

In long-term situations, however, when the international executive is able to be an adaptive carrier for the whole of the work force due to the individual's own special knowledge or skills, (for example, the executive is a specialised translator or an expert geologist), we have noticed that there is a lessening of negative stereotypes on the part of the dominant group accompanied by signs of acceptance towards a peer they feel to be their equal. It is foremostly the balance of power in the relationship that proves the most prominent cue as to understanding the nature of the "other" and his or her cultural differences. An equal balance of power between the executive and the dominant group facilitates the integration of the executive into the host milieu by making the difficulties inherent in inter-personal communication seem to be only a small drawback in maintaining an especially skilled person in the company.

The exercise of power does not, however, signify a conversion of identity and the programmed disappearance of the subject's cultural specificities ; A. CAILLES explains in such cases, these international executives will temporarily adopt some of the traits of the host culture; these executives do not necessarily imbue these traits and values as their own, however. This kind of trait adoption must instead be seen as the mastery of another method of communication which gives the executive access to another means of exchange, and of argument. For this to occur successfully, however, it is requisite that the executive have "sufficient resources to resist the cultural norms of the other during exchange" as well as have "sufficient possibilities for exchange within his own culture" (A. CAILLES, 1986).

These international executives can be divided into two categories according to their membership of different national groups and, beyond that, by the degree of cultural or linguistic proximity of the culture of origin to the host society; those executives, who, by their knowledge bring a means of adaptation or efficiency into the work situation (technical ability to resolve a problem, contribution of large relational capital etc.), and then those executives without knowledge, living their move as a period of intense acquisition of skills within a socio-professional group more qualified than they are. Members of the first group, appreciating the possibility of social integration via the means of recognised professional competence, will voluntarily expose themselves to strong sequences of identification to enable them to model their identity, while those within the second group will be more reticent to open up to the original cultural forms of the host society. The first will be able to mobilise power in social interaction and will utilize group relationships in debate and cognitive exchanges, while the second, without power, will favour affective bases of exchange and seek to speak via a collective solidarity that was not dissolved by the experience of the international move.

Identification and cultural process for the international executive also depends on the presence (or lack thereof) within the host country of a community of peers that allows the individual to maintain a strong affective tie with his or her culture of origin outside the workplace and out of the strict context of production ("community advantage"). Faced with a different perception of time and space in a foreign country, the creation of an intermediate cultural, ethnic and psychic space allows conflicts arising from acculturation to be negotiated dynamically backward and forward, and viable compromises to be found between mother tongue, company language, the culture of the host country and the work culture of the globalised company. The nuclear family, the empathy of partners and belonging to co-ethnic mobility group ensures emotional stability by becoming a protected area for self expression, a space for renewal in the face of the functional and instrumental necessities of work.

This ability to live in a "national ghetto" abroad, thanks to compatriot groups, schools and national churches, is usually the privilege of the upper echelons, which are historically those of the French in *Alpha.*

Mobile executives from subsidiaries, in contrast, live outside of any strong community enclave when moving to a foreign country; since these executives chances for international mobility is limited to begin with, there will be only a few of them in the host country, and thus the few executives that do make the international move will be virtually left alone in adjusting to the new culture. As a result, these executives are more exposed to cultural uprooting than French expatriates.

Many international executives differentiate themselves from the traditional model of expatriation of the French whose desire for coherence in their career path led them to attempt to marry maximum integration within the company to a mode of adequate familial organisation ("family advantage"). Today, international executives, in contrast to this traditional pattern, accentuate the plasticity of family unit, choosing (as a function of the country where they are to be established) to go alone or as a couple or to send their children to specialised institutions. This new flexibility introduces with each period of mobility a profound redistribution of roles and authority at the heart of the family.

When families judge that the preservation of links with the country of origin governs social rise or the maintenance of desirable posts, the father will often separate himself geographically and functionally from the family. Executives who live away from their families show strong individualisation in their professional paths; this double observation is based on separation from the original national community, and professional success in the organisation leads to balance the notion that executives who best adapt to the world of work in a host subsidiary are those who benefit from a large amount of support from compatriots at their sides.

What is certain is that the family is a vital example of managing cosmopolitan capital; or in other words, international moves, if they cover a wide geographical area, take place for most executives in a relatively restrained social, cultural and linguistic milieu. For those that have grown up from their earliest years an international environment, the feeling of disorientation is attenuated by occasional contacts with acquaintances abroad as well as the benefit of subsequently being able to mobilise multiple sources of information gained from the experience of spatial mobility. If a number of executives from subsidiaries experience frequent renewals of their individual identities during their move up the hierarchy, those individuals who have experienced international mobility since their earliest schooldays find that continuous acculturation in an international environment produces a sense of ease and a natural manner with the individual's own original culture that any training at school or later in business would find difficult to achieve.

Because of this, many international executives remain nationals, and the most fruitful strategies are precisely those based on the use in the international field of national resources. In an apparently paradoxical manner, those executives who define themselves as being the most international, and who truly cultivate the traits and styles of the international way of life (pluri-lingualism, marriage to someone of another nationality, cosmopolitan in one's friends, international education of children etc.), are also more often than not those who mobilise most systematically their national resources in all areas of their social lives, maintaining the strongest links with their country of origin.

5. UNDERSTANDING HOW INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY IS LIVED, WHAT ARE THE STAKES FOR HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENTS OF COMPANIES?

If the observation of the liveliness of inter-ethnic relations (in the occupation of urban spaces (M. GUILLON and I. TABOADA LEONETTI, 1986; V. DE RUDDER and M. GUILLON, 1987), in university environments (J. P. PAYET, 1994; J. STREIFF-FENART, P. POUTIGNAT and L. VOLLENWEIDER, 1993) and in the inter-generational reports on citizenship (A. HILY and M. ORIOL, 1993) has proved its validity, it might be possible to show that such analysis could be equally pertinent in all social spaces, especially in workplaces which often offer the first occasions for prolonged contact between migrants and the host society, between mobile employees of a company and the workplace. It is perhaps the main thrust of this article to underline the double movement by which international executives continue to appropriate the spirit of the original community to which they originally belong ("primary socialization" harking back to a subjective importance of ethnicity) while, at the same time, identifying themselves with professional roles by learning to play them in a personal and effective way outside of the context of their cultural origins.

This work seeks to underline the impossibility of studying the population of international executives in *Alpha* armed only with the tools of past understanding, and focuses instead on what the individuals themselves have put together, important affirmations of self when abroad, similar to the manner in which we have long described immigration in a French context (G. E. SIMPSON and M. J. YINGER, 1953)[7] which was proper to long term expatriation in the sixties as well as the forms of professional mobility analysed by sociologists during the eighties in a purely national context (R. SAINSAULIEU, 1977; C. DUBAR, 1991). We cannot, moreover,

conduct research using managerial literature of Anglo-Saxon origin, which values the profile of the transnational manager as hyper-adaptable, a "Euro-manager" (T. PETERS and R. WATERMAN, 1983; V. PUCIK, N. M. TICHY and C. K. BARNETT, 1993; M. W. McCALL, 1997) following the path of mechanical and accelerated assimilation into the values of the company.

6. Conclusion

Our typology around five identities shows that, far from being reduced to a unique process of socialization within an organisation, prolonged experience of international mobility ; in other words, international executives do not form a homogenous social group. In the global company, the successful social integration of employees into the company now increasingly requires much more than the simple acceptance of workers from different cultures within the system (which was thought to eradicate any differences). The focus is now instead on long-term collaboration between the company and employees which allows the employee to develop their own national, regional, and micro-local levels of self-perception instead of imposing a company culture upon individual members of the company to the detriment of the national identities of these employees, Therefore, just as immigrants were the symbols of French society as it modernised, international executives, seeking to be recognised by their attempt to tear themselves away from the stigma of their particularities and with generous resources at their disposal, symbolise the global company. The manipulation of ethnicity by international executives leads, in a little-explored professional world and where we least expected to find it, to a sociology of stigmatisation and hidden relationships of dominance. International executives are also fighting to impose their own definition of self, i.e. to be able to define, in line with their interests (material and symbolic), the principles of definition of the social world and legitimate criteria for personal evaluation. In the context of adding to the resources held by executives to enable them to live through the effects of the modernisation of large organisations, our research calls for a sociology of dynamic transactions of identity which does not bind them to a tragedy (obliging them to forget their roots in the name of conversion), but seeks instead to illustrate the possibilities for cultural enrichment and social distinction based on ethnicity. The better understanding of the situations of inter-cultural confrontation will tomorrow be an important field of research in sociology, the results of which will enlighten the work of directors and managers in the Human Relations departments of companies who wish to examine the processes leading to the understanding of foreign culture and better understand the professional adaptation of cosmopolitan managers, ensuring that pluri-national teams work well together.

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[1] The question as R. SAINSAULIEU puts it is "fundamentally that of interdependence between society and the company since individuals, executives or just workers, are not easily able to alter their identities or culture as they pass through the doors of the company. Just how far, in fact, is the individual master of the cultural base of his or her human potential? This is a crucial question in his or her development" (1991: p. 142).

[2] By "identity strategies" what we will describe, in an ideal-typical way, are groups of individuals who are perceived at work through their shared particularities as much as in their values (affective register), behaviour (cognitive register) representation (symbolic register) as in their past history (register of origins).
They aim to highlight the logic of action as defined by C. DUBAR (1992: p. 512), linking a professional future, a statutory position in the company and the subjective reconstitution of their biographies.

[3] A. C. WAGNER, in another research context, reports the case of M. SCHNEIDER [who] underlines the symbolic profits of the capital brought in by his family: "they couldn't place me". Because he thought he had escaped the status of being a foreigner without being purebred French, he was able to define himself as a prototype of Franco-German friendship, a social image that was particularly useful in his area of activity (1998: p. 174).

[4] N. GLAZER and D. P. MOYNIHAN (1975) have illustrated the emergence of what they call a "new ethnicity", a process of ethnic identification among the upper and middle classes of the wealthy suburbs of American cities (the Irish and St Patrick, the Italians and the annual Mulberry Street parade). The subjective identity invoked on demand during these temporary events has no influence over the rest of their social lives.
M. WATERS explains that the "new ethnicity" persists as it allows the individual to satisfy two contradictory desires inherent in the American psyche: the desire to belong to a community and the desire for individuality. The new ethnicity is attractive to the middle classes because it implies a choice. It gives the impression of having a rich cultural background without the costs attached to ethnic loyalty (commitment to a group with social obligations) being high (1990).

[5] In the effort of the individual to symbolically mark his or her membership of a favoured social milieu, between symbols of prestige and symbols of stigmata, A. C. WAGNER describes the use of dis-identifiers "those signs that tend to question the information transmitted by the stigma". M. ALAWAN proved at length during his interview that he had an erudite rapport with Islamic and Oriental civilisations. A movement like SOS Racisme seems to him to be "of an unbearable vulgarity". His knowledge of Islamic civilisation lets him see all that separates him from the immigrants who know Islam less well than they know French" (1998 ; 36).

[6] The career strategies suppose a judicious choice of international experiences as all destinations do not give the same rewards. Everything occurs as if the prestige of the country posted to will attach to the career of the international executive who is sent there: geographical trajectories and professional trajectories are far from being independent.

[7] For a long time left to philosophers, historians and political scientists the question of cultural differences and the business of thinking about the failure of the United Nations as in the question of the integration of minorities, most social research into inter-ethnic relations in France, with the exception of the work of R. BASTIDE, or G. BALANDIER or the ethno-psychiatric approach of G. DEVEREUX has been strongly influenced by the cohabitation at the heart of the American nation of human communities that are differentiated by race (African-American and native Americans), national origin (Italian-Americans) or by religion (Jews, Muslims). It was only by the extension of this American research into the field of cultural anthropology that the question of syncretism and confrontation of intra-state cultures began, after the Second World War, to be widely looked at in France, and we should therefore, as underlined by D. CUCHE, ask ourselves why research into the interweaving of cultures as compared to the study of isolated cultures was undertaken so late (1996 **:** p. 51).
For D. SCHNAPPER, the lowly place of sociological studies into immigration in France was mainly due to its history "the birth and institutionalisation of sociology, founded by a professor, an assimilated Jew, who, at one and the same time foresaw that the ethnic dimension of collective life would weaken as a new modern society unfolded and thought, that an evolution which liberated people from their inherited attachments was a good idea. It was no doubt reinforced by the influence of Marxist thought which has dominated the intellectual landscape since 1945. This explains why French researchers have not been part of the debate on the definition and meaning of ethnicity, about which they know little, and why they willingly highlight the social and political dimension of human relations" (1998: p. 395).