

Psychosocial Variables Related to the International Professional Mobility of Congolese and Moroccan Executives

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Abstract

Taking a sociocognitive approach, the aims of our research were to identify the links between psychosocial variables and the international professional mobility of Moroccan and Congolese executives, and to examine the extent to which this desire can be explained by a hypothetical model, setting the explanatory psychosocial variables and the explained variable in a nomological space. The investigation was conducted through a set of questionnaires completed by 63 Congolese and 128 Moroccan executives. The results identify the executives who are satisfied with their present career and their life in general and who believe in the advantages of a national career, and those who express a desire for change and believe in the advantages of an international career. The former aspire to a sedentary life, while the latter show a tendency towards mobility. The discussion underlines the relevance of this sociocognitive approach and method based on nomological space to explain these results. It also raises management issues regarding the international mobility of African executives in a context of accelerated globalization.

Keywords: Congolese executives; executives' beliefs; international career; international professional mobility; Moroccan executives; nomological space.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there are about 20,000 African scientists working in Africa (while at least one million are required), representing only 3.6% of the total number working worldwide. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimate that 27,000 African executives left the continent between 1960 and 1975 to work in industrialized countries. In general, this drain is seen as depriving Africa of a significant proportion of the quality human resources required for its economic and social development. On the other hand, the presence of African workers in industrialized countries in general, and in France in particular, is usually examined from the angle of immigration, analyses focusing on the problems of sociocultural and economic integration (Mokoukolo & Taillandier-Schmitt, 2008).

The aim of this study was to examine the variables associated with the desire of African executives to undertake an international career, using a method based on nomological space. In this study, the term *executive* refers to the chief administrative officer of a strategic business unit, the chief operating officer, and all the managers who report directly to either of these two senior executives (Chattopadhyayi, Glick, Miller, & Huber, 1999). Executives can be seen as emblematic of international mobility, being simultaneously the main actors of the modernization of African countries, the targets of the policy of “chosen” immigration preached by industrialized countries, and the symbolic vectors of African globalization (Gadea, 2003). Many studies have shown the advantages for companies of having a pool of managers who have developed intercultural skills in order to expand their international business. For their part, employees hope that this will improve their career prospects and living conditions (Boies & Rothstein, 2002). Finally, depending on the country and the company, various concepts are used to describe this process (expatriation, international transfer, international mobility, etc.) and thus different rules governing it (status and length of time spent in the host country, etc.).

Our study focuses on the desire of Congolese and Moroccan executives to undertake an international career. According to Deroure (1992) and Guzzo (1996), this involves leaving one’s country and settling abroad for a relatively long period, but with the prospect of returning to the home country.

The sociocognitive approach to the choice of an international career

Most studies take a macroeconomic or geopolitical approach when analyzing South-North labor migration (e.g.,: UNESCO, International Labor Organization). While acknowledging the impact of objective factors, our investigation takes a sociocognitive approach which involves analysing satisfaction related to personal (Richer, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2002) and professional (Lu et al., 2009) life.

Over the last two decades, there has been growing interest in executive cognition and its impact on strategic processes and outcomes (D'Aveni & MacMillan, 1990; Huff, 1990). This model postulates that people make rational behaviour choices, based on their beliefs in the relationship between their behaviour and the resulting outcome on the one hand, and between their behaviour and the rewards they receive (or hope to receive) on the other. In his Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ajzen (1991) highlighted the impact of individuals' own beliefs and intentions on their actual professional behaviour. This theory holds that only specific attitudes toward the behaviour in question, notably beliefs, can be expected to predict that behaviour. Beliefs are defined here as a set of perceptions of credible relationships between objects, properties, or ideas (Sproull, 1981), including both objective factors (e.g., salary, promotion) and subjective elements (e.g., job satisfaction, career satisfaction). Most researchers have observed that executives' beliefs exert a strong influence on their strategic choices and actions (Chattopadhyayi et al., 1999). In a study of Canadian executives, Boies and Rothstein (2002) observed that those who are satisfied with their career are emotionally attached to their work and set out to achieve it as well as possible, wherever they do it. Therefore, they are more open to the idea of an international career, especially if they believe that it will lead to new career advancement opportunities. Our main goal is not to confirm these models, but to analyse the beliefs related to the desire of Congolese and Moroccan executives to pursue a national or international career.

The intention to emigrate for professional reasons will depend on whether the person believes that there are more advantages in a national or an international career. A number of meta-analyses (Tett & Meyer, 1993) have shown that the intent to leave an organization is a predictor of actual staff turnover. Finally, various empirical studies have confirmed the role of beliefs in the advantages or disadvantages of an international vs. a national career in the domains of general life and professional opportunities (Boies & Rothstein, 2002; Eby & Russell, 2000).

Professional international mobility in the African context

Adegbidi (1998) in Benin, Mchichi (2001) in Morocco, Kouvidila (2010) in Congo, and Cox and Hemson (2008) in South Africa have all highlighted paradoxes and tensions characterizing the way governments manage the mass exodus of African executives often financing their training in the hope that they will contribute to national development. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that it costs \$184,000 to train an executive. However, in order to meet their own requirements for qualified people, African countries are sometimes obliged to employ foreign experts. Between 1960 and 1975, the number of foreign experts rose to 40,000 a year, but since 1990, it has fallen to 20,000 (UNESCO, 2004). In 2000, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that 22.2% of the Congolese and 17% of the Moroccans working in OECD countries were highly qualified (Lucas, 2009).). With regard to African executives, Mbodj (2010) observed that the main factors underlying their decision to emigrate or remain abroad were first that jobs in their home country were frequently unrelated to their qualifications, secondly repression by political systems, and thirdly that their perception of efficiency acquired while working in industrialized countries is not appreciated. Many African executives reproach their governments for continuing to favour government-sponsored development aid workers from industrialized countries, generally former colonial powers such as France, over local or African executives, who consequently feel that their only option is to emigrate (Carr, Rugimbana, Walkom, & Bolitho, 2001).

In fact, as suggested by Frimousse and Peretti (2006) in the Maghreb, Frimousse (2007) in Morocco, and Slama and Ben Ferjani (2008) in Tunisia, this situation can be attributed to poor human resource management, essentially among African political and economic leaders, leading to a high rate of staff turnover, as observed by Van Scheers and Wiid (2011) among teachers in public schools in Soweto (South Africa).

However, to our knowledge, no studies have specifically investigated the psychosocial or sociocognitive factors influencing the desire of Moroccan and/or Congolese executives to emigrate for professional reasons.

Aims and hypotheses

The aim of our research was to identify the links between psychosocial variables and the international professional mobility of Moroccan and Congolese executives. Our work is based on a sociocognitive approach (Tett & Meyer, 1993) and empirical work (Boies & Rothstein, 2002). In accordance with the literature, five psychosocial variables were studied: career satisfaction (Kim & Slocum Jr, 2008), beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career vs. an international career (Boies & Rothstein, 2002), satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and the desire for change (McAndrew, 1998). We expected to observe:

H1. A negative link between international professional mobility and career satisfaction.

H2. International professional mobility linked positively to beliefs in the expected satisfaction of an international career and negatively to beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career. Executives who believe they will be more satisfied abroad will be those most in favour of emigration, in contrast to those who believe satisfaction lies in a national career.

H3. A negative link between international professional mobility and satisfaction with life, satisfied executives having little desire to seek work abroad.

H4. A positive link between international professional mobility and desire for change, executives with a personal tendency to mobility being more likely to choose to emigrate.

At the methodological level, we developed a hypothetical model to explain this choice, setting explanatory candidate variables within a nomological network. (For further details, see the results section.)

H5. In line with the literature, we expected to observe five psychosocial variables in a bidimensional nomological space, linked positively to an international career (desire for change and beliefs in the expected satisfaction of an international career), or to a national career (career satisfaction, satisfaction with life and beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career). We postulated that the regression line representing the desire for an international career would fit the coordinates of the dimensions of this space.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 191 executives, 32% Congolese and 68% Moroccan. They included 79% men and 21% women and were aged between 21 and 58 years ($M = 41.09$; $SD = 7.44$). With regard to their professional background, 67% had trained in Africa and 33% in Europe;

60% had technical and scientific jobs, and 40% had administrative or social duties; 23% worked in the public sector, 49% in the mixed sector, and 28% in the private sector; 65% worked in a national organization and 35% in an international organization. All the participants were French speaking.

Materials and Procedure

Five scales were used. Items in each were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, from (1) “totally agree” to (7) “totally disagree”. Internal consistency was checked.

- *Interest in International Assignments* (Adler, 1986) was used to measure international professional mobility (6 items; e.g., “I am seriously considering pursuing an international career” (alpha = .91).

- *Career Satisfaction* (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990) was used to evaluate career satisfaction (5 items; e.g., “I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career”) (alpha = .84).

- *Beliefs about International Assignments* (Adler, 1986) measured beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career vs. an international career (6 items; e.g., “More interesting professional life”) (alpha = .89 for both dimensions).

- *The Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Blais, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Brière, 1989) was used to evaluate satisfaction with life (5 items; e.g., “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”) (alpha = .84).

- The *Desire for change* subscale of the *Rootedness Scale* (McAndrew, 1998) measured desire for change (6 items; e.g., “Moving from place to place is exciting and fun”) (alpha = .54)¹.

The first step was to translate the scales into French, using the back-translation method recommended by Vallerand (1989). The preliminary versions were administered to individuals similar to those in our sample to check their relevance and that they were easy to understand. No modification was necessary, mainly because of the simple and concise formulation of the items. Biographical information was also collected. The questionnaires were self-administered in Morocco and Congo on a voluntary basis, after the purpose of the research had been explained and the respondents had given their manuscript consent.

RESULTS

Correlation analyses

There was no significant correlation between international professional mobility and career satisfaction ($r = .054$; $p < .01$) (H1). International professional mobility was positively correlated with beliefs in the expected satisfaction of an international career ($r = .445$; $p > .01$) and negatively correlated with beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career ($r = -.392$; $p > .01$) (H2). There was no significant correlation between international professional mobility and satisfaction with life ($r = -.075$; $p < .01$) (H3).

International professional mobility was positively correlated with desire for change ($r = .263$; $p > .01$) (H4). However, we did not necessarily expect to find that beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career and of an international career would be antinomic ($r = -.539$; $p > .01$) as there is nothing to prevent one from thinking that it is possible to be as successful in one's own country as abroad. We can infer that the initial decision has little to do with the situation in the country of origin but arises essentially from a desire for change based on beliefs founded on more or less realistic expectations. This point merits further investigation.

We then looked for a way to present these results as a whole. We chose to construct a nomological network to explain the international professional mobility variable (H5).

Using nomological space to explain the international professional mobility variable

The methodology adopted by most authors involves the reduction of information, which prevents the expression of the diversity and complexity of the relationships between the postulated explanatory variables on the one hand, and between these variables and the desire for expatriation on the other (Reuchlin, 1987). Our aim was to analyze the interrelationships between the variables which we hypothesized would lead to the expression of a desire for a national or international career. We therefore decided to use the technique of nomological space, which enables results to be interpreted easily, while taking into account the complexity of the process. Unlike techniques such as comparison of means or regression analysis, nomological space has various advantages linked to Multidimensional Scaling: It provides an overview of the organization of the variables explaining the phenomenon examined, which reduces the constraints in the interpretation of the results, and there is greater flexibility in how these

variables are organized. By including the complexity of the psychological process, it is better adapted to a psychosocial investigation of the way executives deal with the internationalization of their career. In the psychometric tradition, the search for the meaning of a measure is based on the nomological network (i.e., the network of connections between variables) that the measure shares with the measures of other characteristics (Dickes, Tournois, Flieller, & Kop, 1994). Overall, from a systemic perspective, a nomological network gives an account of the complexity of the living being in general and of psychological complexity in particular by giving meaning to the studied variables². The procedure has three steps: Building the nomological network of the explanatory variables using an Multidimensional Scaling model, definition of the regions of this space, and projection of the variable to be explained in this space (see Figure 1).

Insert figure 1 here

Using a basic Multidimensional Scaling model³, we were able to position the five explanatory variables in a two-dimensional space. The adjustment values are acceptable, the stress is lower than .10 without being too close to 0, which would be the sign of a partial degeneration of the solution (Dickes et al., 1994), and Tucker's ratio of congruence is .99. With regard to the second step, one of the traps of Multidimensional Scaling is to confuse the coordinate axes which organize the Euclidean space following the monotone transformation of dissimilarities in distances and in dimensions which have a psychological meaning. As pointed out by Dickes et al. (1994), the significant dimensions are not necessarily represented by the coordinate axes and can be explored in any direction. We carried out a hierarchical analysis of the same data to validate the relationship between proximities. In this way, we obtained a dendrogram which determines the structure organizing the nomological space.

The dendrogram highlights two distinct clusters comprising the psychosocial variables contained in our hypothetical model:

(a) The first cluster includes satisfaction with life (SWL) and career satisfaction (SATCAR), and also beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career (BNC), indicating an interest in a national career. It seems that the executives who are satisfied with general life and with their present career have little desire for international professional mobility and believe that they can

satisfy their needs with a national career. (b) The second cluster includes desire for change (DESCHA) and beliefs in the expected satisfaction of an international career (BIC), indicating interest in an international career. It seems that executives who desire international professional mobility (IPM) are those who on the one hand like to move, and on the other hand believe that international professional mobility will give them greater advantages. These clusters can be displayed in the nomological space, in which the meaning is structured from right to left, from “sedentary tendency” to “migratory tendency”.

The third and final step involves projecting the international professional mobility variable to be explained within this two-dimensional space. In accordance with Tournois and Dickes (1993), a regression analysis equation was calculated, taking international professional mobility into account and with the coordinates on the axes as independent variables. The partial regression indicators show the predominance of dimension 1 (horizontal) of the nomological network in the topological fit of the international professional mobility regression line. This stresses the relative importance of the opposition between beliefs in the expected satisfaction of a national career and beliefs in the expected satisfaction of an international career. The ratio $R^2 = .98$, $F(2, 180) = .019$ expresses a satisfactory relationship between the international professional mobility variable and the coordinates of the axes (98% of explained variance). The ratio of regression was converted into cosine⁴ and became an 18° angle. From this angle, we could draw the international professional mobility regression line in the two-dimensional space.

The use of this procedure is based on the principle expounded by Tournois and Dickes (1993) which stipulates that for each X_i point of the Multidimensional Scaling, its projection is obtained at right angles on the regression line. It provides a value estimated by the regression as being optimum.

Finally, this technique provides an easy to interpret visual display, the desire for international professional mobility crossing the nomological network from a “stay-at-home tendency” to a “migratory tendency”. The two groups of variables thus explain differentially the desire for international professional mobility (H5).

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research aimed to establish to what extent the desire of Moroccan and Congolese executives for a national vs. an international career could be explained using a hypothetical psychosocial

model, based on nomological space. A low level of internal consistency can be observed in the questionnaire regarding the desire to move abroad, suggesting that this desire relates fairly independently to different items on the questionnaire. Further study of this result on a metric and/or sociocultural level should provide more precise information. Moreover, as this study dealt only with Congolese and Moroccan executives, the results cannot be generalized to African executives as a whole. Likewise, it is a snapshot taken at a given moment, which needs to be complemented by examining all possible career developments throughout working life, and by an in-depth study of the effects of other variables concerning professional and non-professional life.

At a methodological level, our study highlights the advantages of using nomological space to give an overall view of the explanation of international professional mobility by a set of indicators (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2008). The advantage of this procedure, in addition to visually displaying the results, is that it retains all the available information, unlike the more widely used multiple regression analysis which only retains the part of the variance that is useful for the explanation, the remainder being treated as residuals. In our study, we retained the relationships between explanatory and explained variables in a way that is similar to natural intuition, particularly as the monotone transformations do not distort the order and retain the properties of the variables (Reuchlin, 1987). But above all, at a theoretical level, our results show that the organisation of these variables matches two trends postulated by our hypothetical model related to the role of personal and professional variables. The first is current satisfaction with general and professional life, together with a belief in the advantages of a national career. The second trend is the desire to move to another country and a belief in the advantages of an international career, which explain the desire to emigrate for professional reasons.

At the economic level, the desire of executives to further their career abroad is also stimulated by the inability of African job markets to absorb the great majority of their executives trained locally or abroad. Consequently, rather than repatriating all top-level workers or making a clear distinction between national and international careers, it would be interesting to set up a network of executives allowing movement between industrialized and developing countries, along similar lines to the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) founded in 1976 by the United Nations Development Programme. Another interesting

programme is the Junior Manager Development Program (JMDP), which enables South African managers to carry out an internship in a French company. The aim is to reinforce the managerial skills and to increase business opportunities for junior managers.

According to UNESCO (2004), the migrants who return home do so with qualifications and work experience acquired abroad and they take part in technology transfers, while those who settle abroad send money back to their home country. However, exporting skills also decreases the profitability of investments in education and exhausts the assets in human capital of the home country. Docquier (2007) suggested that a limited but positive skilled emigration rate (say between 5 and 10%) could be good for developing countries. Finally, Ikubolajeh Logan (2009) proposes The Reverse and Return Transfer of Technology (RRTT), a comprehensive model of the migration of African experts structured in terms of the brain drain, the brain gain and remittances.

In our study, the desire of executives to work abroad seems to be based less on aspects of their current work than on their expectations for their future career, following a tendency towards either “settlement” or “mobility”. The extent of this divide is probably not unrelated to the profound political and socioeconomic insecurity that exists in their countries (Adegbidi, 1998; Kouvididila, 2010). For example, Mchichi (2001) found that the aspirations of Moroccan executives include personal fulfilment, the opportunity to acquire experience at the international level, and taking part in interesting scientific work. Judge, Cable, Boudreau, and Bretz (1995) showed the importance of distinguishing between the material and the psychological aspects of these beliefs, because the variables that lead to objective career success are often quite distinct from those that lead to subjectively defined success.

Our results for desire for change tend to confirm the role of individual characteristics, notably the desire for new experiences (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2007). However, working abroad involves adapting to a multicultural context. This cultural aspect was discussed by Maetz, Hassan, and Magnusson (2009) who highlighted the possible cultural dissonance, while Chattopadhyayi et al. (1999) postulated that executives’ beliefs are likely to be influenced by organizational culture. Finally, Pasquier, and Valéau (2011) studied the links between involvement in the organization and work-related anxiety and emotional states within an intra-cultural framework. It would be interesting to examine how these relationships evolve within a process of professional intercultural transition. Overall, it would therefore be useful to measure

more precisely the respective weight of each of these individual, organizational and sociocultural variables in the desire of Congolese and Moroccan executives to undertake a national or an international career.

Finally, studying the international professional mobility of African executives would also gain from being seen as part of the acculturation process resulting from globalization. This phenomenon has led organizations to encourage executives to return to their home countries and to foster the movement of top-level workers between African countries⁵ (UNESCO, 2004). However, it is important to create conditions whereby the brain drain can become an advantage, in a context of high North/South and inter-African competitiveness (Paterson, 2007; UNESCO, 2004).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, international professional mobility has become an essential feature of the modern economy. African nations and organisations must therefore prepare workers to travel abroad and return to their home countries. This could be achieved by portraying expatriation not as a threat (Slama & Ben Ferjani, 2008) but as a challenge (Cerdin, 2005). Understanding executives' beliefs and aspirations would help promote relevant expatriation projects (Cerdin, 2007), even though the impact of these beliefs is complex (Chattopadhyayi et al., 1999).

We are aware that our results are not conclusive, and before extending them to other African countries, further studies are required to identify critical organizational and/or personal factors (e.g., using qualitative surveys). However, they highlight the importance of analyzing the sociocognitive factors likely to explain the desire of African executives to undertake an international career, in addition to geopolitical, professional, and/or family considerations.

FootNotes

¹. We chose to retain this variable despite its relatively weak internal consistency because of its significant correlations with the other variables, and because it covers various aspects of the desire to move.

2. The use of a nomological network is not incompatible with the strict experimental method which can be used to confirm a specific relationship asserted a priori.
3. Using PROXSCAL in S.P.S.S.
4. $cr = br/(b1^2 + b2^2)^{1/2}$ where “c” is the cosine and “b” the ratio of regression.
5. e.g., South African Network of Skills Abroad (SANSA); Moroccan Association of Researchers and Scholars (MARS); Research and Development Forum for Science in Africa (RANDFORUM).

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Figure

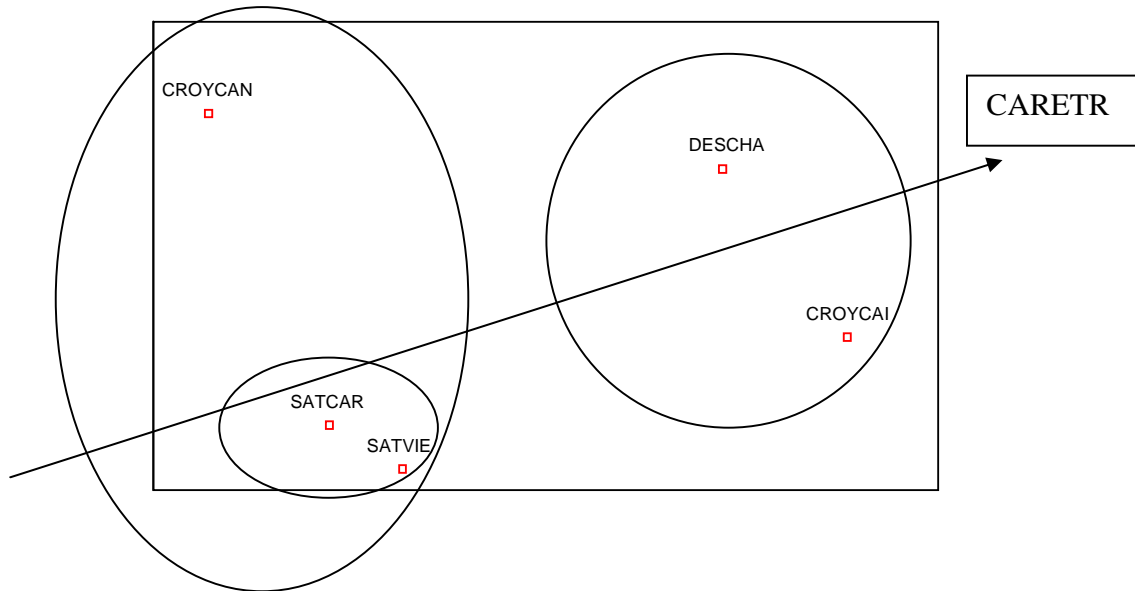


Figure 1. Multidimensional scaling analysis showing the relationship between international professional mobility and the five explanatory variables.