

## Sticks and Stones: The Naming of Global Talent

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### Abstract

In the workplace, demand for globally mobile workers continues to grow. This article examines the consequences for the individual of being named as global talent. Findings from a qualitative study within a large, multinational organisation, reveal the identity struggles these individuals engage in as they seek to reconcile the tensions inherent in such challenging careers. By combining and building on extant literature in naming, identity and global talent, the article offers a greater understanding of the lived experiences of global talent, as they construct and re-construct their identities in an on-going cycle. By drawing on the emerging field of socio-onomastics, a greater understanding of the meaning and connotations of being named as global talent is offered. By highlighting how names do not merely mirror identities, but are negotiated and resisted through a process of identity work, a contribution is made to the fields of identity studies and global talent management.

### Keywords

global talent, identity work, names, naming, qualitative

### Introduction

The metaphor ‘war for talent’, which emphasises the challenges of finding and retaining scarce expertise, was conceived by McKinsey Consultants in the late 1990s (Chambers et al., 1998). Talent management in its earliest form provided a construction of, and legitimated, the notion of talent as being the preserve of the ‘upper echelons’ (Hambrick and Mason, 1984: 193). Motives for introducing talent management tend to be strategic in nature and linked to establishing competitive advantage in an increasingly global market (Tatoglu et al., 2016). Global talent management is concerned with attracting,

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developing and retaining ‘the best employees in the most important roles worldwide’ (Cascio and Boudreau, 2016: 12).

Global talent is defined as ‘high-performing and high-potential incumbents’ (Collings et al., 2019: 5). Such talent is expected to be globally mobile as part of their personal development, sharing best practice across business units and increasing functional flexibility (Tansley and Kirk, 2018). In short, these individuals are expected to be globally mobile in order to meet the strategic objectives of international firms and this is often a ‘condition’ of being part of a ‘leadership talent pool’ (Collings, 2014: 253). The latest PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Mobility Survey (2016) reveals demand for global talent remains a priority for businesses. Limited attention at an individual level, however, has been paid to the impact of identifying or naming (Hough, 2016) individuals as ‘talent’ or indeed ‘global talent’.

Onomastics is the study of names, whereas socio-onomastics is an emerging field that offers a deeper understanding of the meaning of names and how they are ‘born’ through the interaction of people with their sociocultural environment (Ainiala and Östman, 2017). Naming Theory has been applied to the gendered power relations in organisations (Collinson and Hearn, 1994), in education and learning (Boud and Solomon, 2003), in the branding of organisations (Fox, 2011), the naming and shaming of organisations in pursuit of human rights (Scheper, 2015) and with respect to violence in feminist political campaigns (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020). There is scant research into other uses of naming in organisations, a notable exception being the work of Ospina and Foldy (2010: 298) into the naming of women as leaders and ‘potential authority figures’.

Naming is central to the construction of identity (Valentine, 1998); however, there is limited research bringing together naming and identity studies (Aldrin, 2016), especially within the workplace. In combining and building on extant literature in naming, identity and global talent, the article offers a greater understanding of the lived experiences of individuals named as global talent. The theoretical contribution offered here is twofold. First, by highlighting how names do not merely mirror identities, but are negotiated and resisted through a process of identity work, a contribution is made to the field of socio-onomastics. Second, by drawing on socio-onomastics, a greater understanding of the meaning and connotations of being named as global talent is offered, thus contributing to the field of identity studies and global talent management.

Drawing on the findings from a qualitative study of those named as global talent in a large multinational, the question is asked: how do individuals cope with the demands associated with names and related identities that are conferred upon them in the workplace?

Research to-date in the field of global talent has tended to focus almost exclusively on expatriation (see McNulty and Brewster, 2017; Mao and Shen, 2015; Nowicka and Kaweh, 2009). This study is distinctive as it encompasses numerous forms of global mobility – namely, global commuting, frequent international travel (globetrotting), short-term assignments, flexpatriate and inpatriate assignments, and virtual global employees – rather than the usual focus on traditional expatriate assignments of 3–5 years. This is important, it is argued, as it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the working and personal lives of these global talents.

This article is structured as follows: first, the relevant literature in relation to naming, talent and identity work are examined. The research approach adopted for this study is then reviewed, followed by the findings, analysis and discussion of the key contributions offered.

Names have both associative (or connotative) and emotive meanings and can be used to 'identify or characterise the name-bearer' (Van Langendonck and Van de Velde, 2016: 32). Naming is central to questions of identity as 'names can be considered as (semantic/verbal) labels which both identify and distinguish an individual from other individuals' (Watzlawik et al., 2016: 3). Names are 'identificatory practices' (Pilcher, 2016: 766) that may positively or negatively influence the identity and self-esteem of the name-bearer. This is because 'the name-giver, name-carrier and name-user may hold different views of identities connected to a certain name' (Aldrin, 2016: 383). The process of naming is thus 'an act of placement or classification of self and others' (Strauss, 2017: 13).

Naming is also an exercise in power (Valentine, 1998) that takes place in a particular societal and cultural context (Ainiala and Östman, 2017). This process can be a source of pride or conflict as naming is 'a political act of ascribing identities to ourselves and others in ways that may liberate, maintain or dehumanize' (Rivera Maulucci and Moore Mensah, 2015: 2). Membership of a named category is linked to particular actions and/or characteristics and individuals may seek to associate or distance themselves from the implied 'rights and obligations' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2012: 39). In the light of on-going global competition and the so-called 'war for talent' (Chambers et al., 1998), those named as global talent are subject to high demands in fulfilment of their roles.

The genealogy of the word 'talent' is derived from the Bible (Matthew 25: 14–30) and in Hebrew the word for talent was *Kikkar*, denoting a flat, round gold or silver disk. Talent therefore has a positive associative meaning which, in theory, should evoke an affirmative emotive response (Nyström, 2016). However, in the contemporary working environment, naming an individual as global talent, is assigning an identity to that individual which has connotations intended to characterise that person (Strauss, 2017). These connotations are linked with expectations that the person will be globally mobile in fulfilment of his/her role.

The relatively scant research into being identified as talent has tended to ascribe positive outcomes and is held to include increased commitment to organisational demands (Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011; Björkman et al., 2013), increased loyalty (Festing and Schäfer, 2014), more positive attitudes and behaviours of those selected (Gelens et al., 2014) and improved employee motivation (Khoreva et al., 2017). In comparing attitudes of those identified as talent compared to those who are not, Swailes and Blackburn (2016: 124) concluded that the identity of those selected is 'buoyed by talent pool membership'.

The less positive consequences, such as high stress levels (Dries and Pepermans, 2008), personal sacrifices that have to be made (Tansley and Tietze, 2013) and the anxiety and insecurity caused by what is expected of these talented individuals (Dries and De Gieter, 2014) has, until recently, received far less attention. A few studies exist, such as Daubner-Siva et al.'s (2018) article analysing the experience of being identified as 'talent'. They explore what they call 'The Talent Paradox', defined as 'the odd mixture of power and powerlessness experienced by individuals identified and celebrated by

management as talents' (p. 75). The personal and political consequences of being named as 'talent' are highlighted by Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2017) and how talent management practices may result in unethical behaviour is explored by Painter-Morland et al. (2019). Dubouloy (2004) asserts that some labelled as talent may develop a 'false self' and Tansley and Tietze's (2013) study reveals some of the identity struggles of those identified as talent. Kirk's (2016) article goes further, highlighting how talent can be seen as an 'anti-identity' (i.e. a label that individuals may actively resist or reject); however, there has been scant work on the relationship between being talent and identity. This has led to calls for further research into this aspect (De Boeck et al., 2017).

Individuals may select names they perceive to be desirable and thereby reflexively impose identities on themselves (Brown, 2015). Talent or global talent is one such name and associated identity. However, equally, names and identities can be forced onto people by others. Naming an individual as global talent prompts identity work as individuals respond to attempts to regulate their identity construction.

Managerial attempts to regulate identity (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), such as naming individuals as talent, can provoke positive or negative reactions. The function of a name is therefore important as it is 'an efficient way to individualise an object (the referent)' (Nyström, 2016: 41) and to assign an identity to the name-bearer. Cooley's (1902) concept of *The Looking Glass Self*, suggests we live in the minds of others; however, we also have a self-concept and the two may overlap or stand in sharp contrast to each other. Therefore, in their identity work, expressed through their talk, individuals may seek to associate or distance themselves from perceived connotations of such naming and identity categorisation (Benwell and Stokoe, 2012).

Identity work is the process of developing, maintaining, repairing and re-forming identities, enabling individuals to maintain a positive sense of self when faced with complexity and contradiction (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). However, identity work is not a conscious process of selection from an established list of discursive resources, it is an exercise of social power (Brown, 2015; Watson, 2008) and, as such, can be thought of as a 'struggle' through 'a jungle of messiness and contradictions in the pursuit of a sense of self' (Alvesson, 2010: 200).

This article focuses on the identity work and lived experiences of individuals, named as global talent. This study was designed to answer the question: how do individuals cope with the demands associated with names and related identities that are conferred upon them in the workplace? Drawing on socio-onomastic theory, a greater understanding of the meanings and connotations of name conferral within organisations is offered, thus contributing to identity theory. By illuminating how names are negotiated and resisted through identity work, a contribution is made to the field of socio-onomastics. Finally, by highlighting the tensions inherent in being named as global talent, a contribution is made to the field of global talent management.

## Research design

### Research site

The case organisation is a large multinational firm, covering five key international customer segments, with a presence in 68 countries worldwide. Willingness to be globally

mobile is deemed essential for those identified as talented leaders in order to ensure the management of global operations. So-called *Talent Declarations* were developed within the organisation to link the identity of talent with the requirement to be globally mobile. Individuals are selected by their line managers and named as talent. They are categorised into different talent pools; namely, High Impact Performers and emerging talent classified as Next Generation and Corporate Next Generation Leaders. The frequency and form of mobility required varies depending on the business unit and operational requirements. All matters related to expatriation are handled by a central team, with the management of other forms of mobility being devolved to line managers.

### *Data collection*

This interpretivist study focuses on how individuals, identified as global talent, cope with the mobility demands they regularly face within the workplace. A pilot was conducted prior to commencement and this informed the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). A total of 38 semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted by the author, of which 12 were face-to-face and 26 by phone. This was due to the widespread geographic locations where participants were based and also to the challenges presented by the frequency of international travel of some individuals. Participants were purposively selected with the help of the case organisation sponsor to identify individuals who were considered to be top talent engaged in the range of different forms of global mobility within the organisation, from frequent business travel through to expatriation. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants (Table 1).

The sample profile was representative of the target population in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. The length of the interviews varied from 1 to 2½ hours, were digitally recorded, with participants' informed consent, and then transcribed.

### *Data analysis*

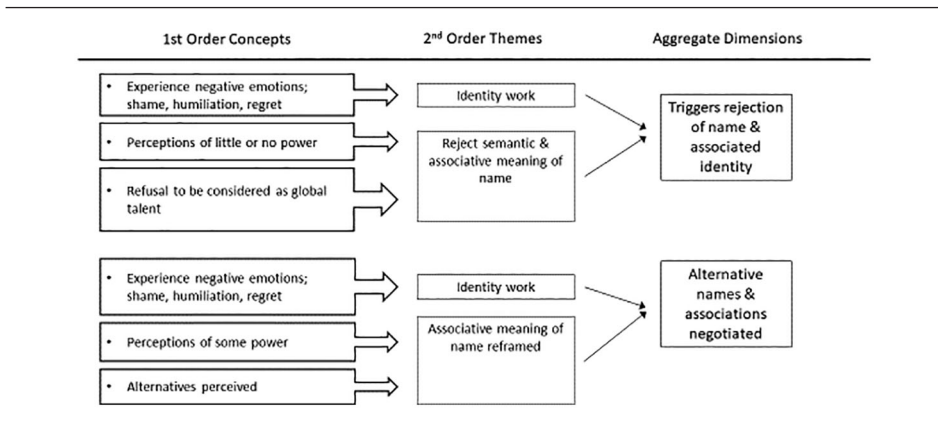
The data were analysed iteratively as preliminary themes were identified and then re-focused as comparisons across transcripts highlighted similarities and differences in participants' global mobility experiences and their identity work. Frequency of recurring themes from transcripts were recorded in order to give an indication of the strength of shared feeling; however, the focus was also on the narratives told by participants which offered *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) reflecting details of the culture(s) in which these individuals work.

Following the approach adopted by Gioia et al. (2013: 18), first-order codes were identified (i.e. those 'informant-centric terms' that seemed to epitomise the lived experiences that the participants were describing). These included: 'shame', 'humiliation', 'regret', 'perceptions of power', 'refusal to be considered as talent' and 'alternatives perceived'. These were utilised to develop second-order 'theory-centric themes' (p. 26), which linked the first-order themes to the key emerging concepts, namely – identity work and rejection or negotiation/reframing of semantic and associative meanings of a name. The outcomes of this are the aggregate dimensions, which show how imposed naming and identity work (and the associated meanings) can result in either a name rejection or the negotiation of alternative names and associations (Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Sample profile.

Pseudonyms of participant	Age	Dependants	Job title	Forms of mobility
Derek Mann	46	Y	OE Consultant	GT; COM; FLEX
Ivan Stewart	48	Y	OE Manager	EX (T); GT; IN
Malcolm Evans	56	Y	HR Manager	EX (T); COM; GT
Sarah Blest	48	N	Leadership & Talent Management	GT
Gerald Howe	43	Y	Regional Manager	EXP; GT
David Brown	33	Y	Supply Chain Manager	COM; GT
Tim Graham	44	Y	OE Consultant	EX (T); GT; COM
Jean Williams	56	Y	HR Manager	GT
John Briar	62	N	Corporate Vice President	GT
Carl Lang	45	Y	Project Tartan Manager	EX (T); FLEX; GT
Jim Rock	57	N	President	GT
Oswald Kirk	52	Y	Platform Leader	COM; EX (T); GT
Edward King	56	Y	Corporate Vice President	EX (T); GT; VGE; IN
Katie Singer	38	Y	Global Diversity & Inclusion Manager	GT
Brian Earl	58	N	Global Mobility Consultant	GT; STA
Nina Shelton	49	Y	Director	GT; FLEX; STA
Paul Vander	54	Y	Corporate Vice President	GT; COM; EX (T)
Rita Rogers	44	Y	Head of HR	GT; STA
Hayley Smith	35	Y	Global Mobility Specialist	GT; STA
Stina Howitt	56	Y	Lead Human Resources	EX (T); GT; STA
Geraldine Gill	47	Y	Tartan Manager	GT; STA; FLEX
Graham Silver	47	Y	HR Director	EX (T); GT
Jean Morpeth	49	Y	Regional Director	GT; STA
Lucy Wray	46	Y	Global Leadership Talent Manager	EX (T); GT
Alan Peters	53	Y	Vice President	GT; STA
James Veness	46	Y	Manager	COM; GT
Mary Stevens	55	Y	Vice President	Ex (T); FLEX; STA
Ria Leverment	54	Y	Vice President	GT; STA
Oliver Malpass	39	Y	Supply Chain Manager	COM; GT
Raymond Bryman	40	Y	Supply Chain Lead	COM; GT
Stephanie Bell	46	Y	Global Mobility Manager	EX (T); GT
Diane Neil	44	Y	Vice President	GT; STA
Gary Zimmer	40	Y	Head of Human Resources	EX (T); GT
Jonathan Zeal	46	Y	HR Director	EX (T); GT; FLEX; STA
Philip Charmaz	57	Y	Commercial Director	EX (T); GT; STA
Carl Crisp	41	Y	OE Consultant	Ex (T); GT; STA; FLEX
Tina Green	45	Y	Global Diversity & Inclusion Manager	GT
Irene Child	36	N	Business Unit Manager	EX (T); GT

Notes: HR: human resource; OE: Organisational Effectiveness. Forms of mobility – COM: commuter; EX (T): expatriate (T); FLEX: flexpatriate; GT: globetrotter; IN: inpatriate; STA: short-term assignee; VGE: virtual global employees.

**Figure 1.** Coding and themes.

The analysis of the findings in the next section reveal the complex interplay between naming and identity work described by the participants named as global talent.

## Findings and analysis

### *Refusing or resisting naming*

The *Talent Declarations* within the case organisation were designed to regulate global mobility by making explicit links between the conferred name and associated identity of ‘talent’ and global mobility. Here, for some of those named as talent, the demands for them to be mobile were perceived as excessive. Some reacted with an element of fear and anger, rejecting the name and associated identity they felt had been imposed on them, as James, a senior manager explained: ‘I mentioned that by taking this decision to be commuting, I refused to be considered as a talent guy’. Opting out of the talent pool is not without cost. James explained that, by choosing to engage only in business travel rather than relocation, he had been effectively demotivated:

I am not participating in the management group because of my mobility issue; second, because people may be much better prepared than me, and because the company maybe believes that still James is needed in managing the operation business. So, on the other hand, they gave me more sales responsibility and less organisational responsibility.

In disavowing the characteristics or ‘rights and obligations’ associated with being named global talent (Benwell and Stokoe, 2012) and distancing himself from his imposed social grouping of ‘talent’, James is seeking to reduce his identity conflict (Croft et al., 2015). His might be seen to be a ‘moral anger’ (Lindebaum and Gabriel, 2016) driven by an ethical concern to protect others, in that his refusal is linked to the associated global mobility requirements which, he believes, will negatively impact on his family. This suggests that in situations where naming is perceived to have wider consequences than for the individuals themselves, reactions can be more extreme.

However, in the case organisation, rejecting the name of global talent comes with perceived negative career consequences.

A supply chain manager stated that when he refused to accept an expatriate assignment, choosing instead to commute for the duration of the project concerned, he was passed over for promotion. These stories were not uncommon. Philip, a commercial director, described how if he refused to be mobile then he perceived that his 'file' would be 'marked'. Tina, a senior global diversity and inclusion manager, admitted that although individuals who rejected a mobility opportunity would not be less likely to be regarded as talent, nevertheless it would 'have ramifications for their careers going forward'.

Brian, a global mobility consultant, asserted: 'It's not sustainable. I mean, not just that it's emotionally and physically draining but it's also placing a strain on the home.' A number of other participants echoed this sentiment, offering examples of negative consequences, such as families becoming splintered. The emotional and physical 'burnout' (Lutgen-Sandvik and Davenport-Sypher, 2009) experienced by participants in the study can result in the individual becoming alienated from their conferred name and associated identity (Costas and Fleming, 2009). The final step for many in such cases is to exit the stressful occupation, as Derek, a very mobile organisational effectiveness consultant, defiantly explained: 'I don't negotiate on my core values. I've had a great career, but in August I'm going to be heading – I haven't really figured out what I'm going to do yet.'

This may be construed as illustrative of Derek's struggle to reconcile himself to the imposed name of global talent, revealing that names do not 'merely mirror identity' (Aldrin, 2016: 386). During the interview, he announced his decision to leave the organisation, citing his other, more positive identities as 'father' and 'husband' as being instrumental in his choice. Here, Derek as the name-bearer and name-user, prioritises his other names over the one assigned to him by the name-giver. Derek might be seen here to be doing 'remedial identity work' (Winkler, 2018: 3) in that he is prioritising his other names and identities over his given name of global talent. He spoke passionately, making constant reference to his 'DNA'; implying there was an element of his identity that he was proud of and that he perceived to be unchanging; an embedded identity (Kohonen, 2003) which endures despite attempts at regulation.

Like James, there is an element of moral anger in his statements in that they are driven by his concern that his family would not suffer due to his work-related choices. On this occasion, the identity work for Derek appears to be both self-questioning (Beech et al., 2016: 507) and self-affirming. Questioning in the sense that he is rejecting the conferred name of global talent, but affirming in that he feels that he is, in some way, being authentic (Westwood and Johnson, 2011) or true to himself. This notion of perceived authenticity in a conferred name is currently overlooked in the study of names (Aldrin, 2016); however, it is clearly a strong influence on identity as Derek, an organisational effectiveness consultant, stated assertively: 'I'm not going to stay in [case organisation]! My DNA won't allow me to stay!' Even for those who do not openly resist, there are consequences for them and their families of being named global talent.

A number of participants explained how being named as global talent had caused problems for their family and described the emotions they experience as a result. Oliver, a platform leader, explained how he feels about relocating for his career and the negative effect this had on his wife's career:



I have been married a long time, with someone who I screwed up their career. I mean, my career screwed up her career; so, we did it willingly, but it was distressful, and something I will take in the grave as being the failure.

Carl, a project manager, recalled how ashamed he felt about the consequences of being named as global talent and the subsequent demands to expatriate that he and his wife faced. He explained how this impacted on his wife's career and her identity work:

I think self-worth . . . what are you doing for work . . . if you're a housewife or you don't have a great job, you have a lower value placed [on you] by society, . . . my wife has struggled with it when we moved. Her saddest moment were this.

Being named as talent appears to be a mixed blessing (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018), not only for the individual concerned, but also for his/her family and/or friends as it is not only the identity work of the employee that is affected, there is also an impact on the sense of self of others. Being identified as talent carries expectations of global mobility and this can result in extreme consequences; for instance, Derek stated: 'We will wear people out or kill people. There are several people, including myself, just travelling way too much.' Lucy, a global leadership talent manager, said: 'We had another expat who's lived around different countries and his son hanged himself'. While there were perceived consequences of declining to be named as global talent, there were also seen to be penalties in accepting the name and associated identity. Such consequences have not previously been recognised in identity studies, where the focus tends to be confined to the person in employment, rather than those associated with them, such as family.

Participants reflected on the regret they and their colleagues experience due to the demands of their globally mobile careers. Tim, an organisational effectiveness consultant, said: 'I've heard stories where people have regretted that parents have passed away and they've had some big regrets about not adjusting something in their lives to spend more time with them. You can't turn the clock back.'

Shame, embarrassment and regret are painful social emotions that have become dominant 'in modern societies'. Shame is distinguishable from embarrassment in that there is held to be a moral dimension to it. Embarrassment is the discomfort of being placed in an awkward situation (Scheff, 2016: 2). In describing their globally mobile careers, participants frequently identified these emotions. A sense of shame generated by living, albeit unknowingly, in the minds of others (Cooley, 1902) was particularly prominent. This was frequently linked to the impact their decisions would have on their friends and families (as opposed to their work colleagues or themselves) and how this might influence the way in which they would see them. Grey (1994) observed that those in the higher echelons of the hierarchy increasingly sublimate their lives to their careers; however, in this article, it is argued *the lives of their families are sublimated too*. However, even those without dependants, such as Brian, a global mobility consultant, stated: 'There is stress and strain on families depending on where people go – there can be divorce issues, chemical abuse issues and that's difficult'.

It is argued here that being named as global talent has potentially wider and more extreme implications than identified previously. The segmentation between work–life

boundaries (Kim and Hollensbe, 2017) becomes eroded in physical, temporal and behavioural terms as the demands of being named global talent encroach on all aspects of the individual and his/her family's lives. Conferring a name on an individual in the workplace then, has consequences for those associated with that person, both inside and outside of work. In seeking to mitigate the shame these individuals feel as a result of this pressure, they may attempt to negotiate alternative interpretations and mobility associations with the name global talent.

### *Naming and reframing*

Oswald, a platform leader, described how he declined to accept a request to expatriate to the USA and negotiated instead to become a global commuter, travelling from Geneva to Minneapolis on a monthly basis:

I said, I'm sorry, I can't move. I have lived in Minneapolis before, so for me it's not a big deal, but for family reasons etc. that was not going to happen. So, I said I will help but not in the way you wanted me – which is to be part of the leadership team and be permanent. Then they came back and said, okay, what can you do? So [the case organisation] knows how to negotiate, we're all traders somewhere, so I knew that there was negotiation time open.

Some named as global talent appeared to have more agency than others, as Butler (1997: 35) argued, power 'comes to appear as a name'. These individuals also had the ability to recognise and take advantage of occasions where there was scope to negotiate over the obligations associated with such naming. Those who engaged in negotiations, suggested that they were able to do this by networking among others within the global talent pool to obtain information. For instance, Carl, a senior project manager, explained: 'I have one Irish lady who is working on my staff, she just came from another group, she sat down with another Brit and they just laid their whole pay package and compensation thing right down next to each other and looked at it'. As a senior organisational effectiveness (OE) consultant put it: 'You need to work out – ok – so who do I need to influence, who do I need to have coffee with . . .?'.

Tim, another very experienced OE consultant, described how he networks with colleagues to find out what global mobility opportunities are available. His experience enables him to strike deals which accommodate his needs as well as the organisational mobility demands. He stated confidently: 'I've been down this path before and again, having done a thesis on it . . . I'm familiar with some of the conditions'.

This reveals how the meaning and connotations of a name can be changed or reframed through interaction with other name-bearers and name-givers, something not formerly explored in socio-onomastic studies (Hough, 2016). It also reveals how the conferral of a name, even where there is an implication of agency (such as with the label of 'talent'), does not in and of itself bestow power on the name-bearer. The power of names is leveraged and realised through interaction and negotiation with others. However, such negotiations are not without cost to both the individual named as global talent and their families.

In attempting to mitigate the negative effects on their families and reclaim their self-esteem, those named as global talent may, instead, *further* increase the pressure on themselves, as Oliver, a supply chain manager who commutes from the north of France to Holland on a weekly basis, rather than relocate his family, told me:

In terms of stress, I prefer to take it all on me; to know that my family is at home in an environment she knows. We have an eight-year-old child; he could be in a position to go in a different country, but I still feel much more comfortable myself if I know that my family is not really impacted by work too much.

The ‘fallout’ for individuals who opt to commute or business travel to offset the stress to their families of expatriation is to experience other problems, such as a form of self-alienation, as described by Costas and Fleming (2009). This sense of estrangement comes through quite powerfully in the interviews, as Malcolm, an HR manager, who regularly commuted for 4 years from the UK (where his wife and child lived) to Belgium, explained:

The downside to the person . . . is you become a visitor to your own house. Because the family who are left behind get their own routines; you become an outsider in that when you’re only back for the weekend. I struggled with that sometimes.

Here being named as global talent creates uncomfortable questions for the name-bearer, such as who am I and what is my relationship with others? Ultimately, Malcolm opted to take a role that did not require him to commute to resolve these conflicts, although he remains a frequent flyer on business or ‘Road Warrior’ as they are known in the case organisation.

The sometimes-contradictory emotions felt by some participants showed how they struggled to reconcile being named as global talent with their other non-work identities. Lucy, a global leadership talent manager, ruefully told me the following story:

My husband went away for a couple of days and he works from home so he’s at home with my son, so he rarely leaves. And when he was away Kyle [pseudonym] was saying that he didn’t like daddy travelling, he wants him back and not to travel again and he missed him. And I said, do you miss me when I travel, and he goes, no. Yeah, so I kind of got, oh okay, I’m glad of that answer but I’m not glad of that answer [laughs].

Emotions such as guilt and regret permeated many participants’ talk, as did notions of dependability and reliability. Jean, a regional director, summed up the impact of being named as global talent on her personal life: ‘There’s tons of drawbacks, it’s very difficult on families; you can’t be dependable. So you can’t join things here, like be a room mother for my kids at school.’

The challenges of maintaining a good work–life balance for those who are required to engage in frequent travel for business have been highlighted (e.g. Saarenpää, 2018); however, it is argued in this article, for those who have to engage in other forms of global mobility at the same time, the problems are magnified. Several participants explained

that, even when on expatriate assignment, they were still expected to travel or even regularly commute for a period of time to other business operations.

The careers of global talent present the challenge of more or less frequent periods of insecurity and change, both for the individual and, potentially, for their family and friends. Unlike other workers in precarious or uncertain roles, those who are named as global talent face a continual *interregnum* or 'transitory phase' (Tabet, 2017: 120) as they and those close to them are expected to cope with the anxiety associated with an unpredictable future. As Oliver, a supply chain manager, said: 'And I've stopped asking anyway where I will be in three years' time'. The stories told suggest that raw emotions are an integral part of these named individuals' identity work and are linked to their perceptions of their own agency in their working lives. For those who perceive they have less control over their careers, the feelings of isolation and helplessness engendered by global mobility demands can negatively affect both the employee and his/her family, as Carl, a project manager, explained:

If you move too many times, there's a sense of dread because . . . you say goodbye . . . you come in a new country, you've got to get your energy up to go out and meet people and a third of them leave every year. And after three years they're all gone . . . so you're just deflated . . . had to say goodbye to the people we'd just invested 18 months getting to know in Barcelona. So we felt ourselves just closing down.

This excerpt reveals how being named as global talent demands the ability of the name-bearer (and his/her family) to invest energy in engaging in relatively transitory relationships as they travel from place to place. Then, when required, they need to be able to distance themselves from those relationships and move on. Carl declined to accept any further expatriate assignments after this, in what might be seen to be an 'identity-preserving' strategy (Glynn, 2000: 290) designed to protect himself from the more extreme connotations of being named global talent. The demands of such globally mobile lives, it is argued, differentiate them from other careers in that they are all-consuming, for both the individual and those close to them.

## Discussion

Naming is central to the construction of identity as names hold semantic meaning (Hough, 2016) and associations that influence identity work, and, in turn, behaviour. In the so-called 'war for talent' (Chambers et al., 1998) being named as global talent has particular connotations with respect to mobility as firms seek to establish a competitive advantage in the global market. Although the word 'talent' has positive associative meaning, the name-bearer may have different interpretations of the identities connected with a name than the name-giver, in this case, the employing organisation.

Furthermore, as the findings from this study show, name-bearers, and indeed name-users, can prioritise other names (as husband, wife, daughter, etc.) over the one assigned to him/her by the name-giver by engaging in 'remedial identity work' (Winkler, 2018: 3). This is exemplified by those individuals who either declined to be part of the talent pool/to be named talent or exited the organisation. The analysis shows how the meaning and connotations of a name can be changed through interaction with other name-bearers and name-givers, which

is not something that has been previously examined in socio-onomastic studies. It also reveals how a name can be rejected if it is perceived to negatively impact on others and/or when the connotations of the name are seen to contradict an individual's sense of self, again not something that has been highlighted in studies of naming (Hough, 2016). This insight adds to the debates surrounding the extent to which being named 'talent' can be viewed as a blessing (Daubner-Siva et al., 2018).

The findings from this study offer a deeper understanding of the lived experience of those named as global talent as they adapt to, negotiate, resist, or even reject the challenge of on-going mobility demands. As this case illustrates, conferring names to influence identity work and behaviour may have profound effects. This is particularly so where naming is perceived to have wider consequences than for the individual themselves and includes those associated with that person, both inside and outside of work. Indeed, it may result in repairing identity work for these individuals (not just the name-bearer), something not previously highlighted in identity studies. Resistance ranges from outright rejection, or dis-identification, with associated emotions of anger, shame, etc., to depression, divorce and even suicide. More passive, but nonetheless conflictual outcomes manifest in efforts to negotiate alternative forms of mobility. This shows how names do not necessarily mirror identity (Hough, 2016), but influence identity work, either positively or negatively. The key argument presented in this article is that, for those individuals who perceive being named as global talent as an imposition, the processes of enacting global mobility choices trigger intense identity struggles and emotional fallout.

Paradoxically, the findings also reveal how rejecting the associations of being named as global talent can have a liberalising effect on some individuals, who may perceive that in doing so they are being in some way authentic or true to their selves. This is shown in the case of Derek, who chooses to leave the organisation and be free to be true to what his 'DNA' tells him. This notion of perceived authenticity in a name is currently overlooked in the study of names (Hough, 2016), although it is clearly a strong influence on identity.

Those who had expatriated and were now involved in high levels of business travel, were seen to be comrades in the 'fight' against too much mobility and dubbed 'Road Warriors'. Interestingly, these were names that the global talent (the name-bearers) themselves used to self-categorise, as opposed to ones imposed by the organisation. Thus, as a form of resistance, the name-bearers can also become the name-givers, a factor not previously identified in either identity theory or socio-onomastic studies.

The question posed was how do individuals cope with the demands associated with names and related identities that are conferred upon them in the workplace? The answer is, as the evidence in this case organisation demonstrates, those who feel the name global talent has been imposed on them experience intense identity struggles that impact on both their work and personal lives. This has implications for workplaces, where little space is made for employees to engage in 'contradictory feelings' (Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015: 1858).

## Conclusion

This article focuses on tensions created by being named as global talent in an organisational attempt to 'encourage' aspirational identity work linked to global mobility. Through an exploration of the stories told, the lived experience of those named as global talent is illuminated.

By drawing on the field of socio-onomastics, a deeper understanding of the meaning of names and how they are 'born' through the interaction of people with their sociocultural environment (Ainiala and Östman, 2017) is offered. This is particularly pertinent considering the on-going demand for global talent. Although naming and narrative is central to the construction of identity (Valentine, 1998), there is scant research bringing together naming and identity studies (Hough, 2016), especially within the workplace. In combining and building on extant literature in naming, identity and global talent, this article highlights how individuals named as global talent, construct and re-construct their identities in an on-going cycle (Musson and Duberley, 2007).

The theoretical contribution offered here is twofold. First, a greater understanding of the meaning and connotations of being named as global talent is offered, thus contributing to the field of identity studies and global talent management. Second, by highlighting how names do not merely mirror identities, but are negotiated and resisted through a process of identity work, a contribution is made to the field of socio-onomastics.

These findings have implications for the working lives of global talent. From an ethical perspective, it is argued there is a moral obligation on employers to consider the impact that demands for global mobility have on their employee *and* on their employees' dependants. Identity work can, to some degree, enable these individuals to craft and re-craft an acceptable sense of self as they navigate their working lives. However, there are limits to the extent to which this can help them to reconcile the tensions and conflicts inherent in such challenging careers.

Methodologically, as Beech et al. (2016: 520) note, 'one-off interviews' may not encourage as much in-depth self-questioning among participants as other approaches designed to create a greater rapport, such as ethnographic studies. Furthermore, as identity work is an on-going process, it would be useful to conduct a longitudinal study of those named as global talent to explore how they make sense of the mobility choices they face at different stages in their lives. It would also be interesting to examine how names and identities play out in other work settings, such as healthcare, where the renaming of some senior nurses as advanced nurse practitioners may be seen to challenge the power of doctors.

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## **Appendix I**

### *Interview guide*

What types of global mobility are required from you?

How frequently are you required to be globally mobile?

What do you believe are the (dis)/advantages of global mobility for (a) the individuals themselves and (b) the organisation?

What factors attracted you to a career that involves international travel?

What factors do you take into account when deciding whether or not to accept an assignment?

Can you give me an example of an assignment that you have accepted and explain the issues that you believe you faced?

Have there been any opportunities for an assignment that you personally have not taken up? If so, why?

What, if any, career 'help' is offered to employees making decisions about being internationally mobile?

To what extent, if at all, do you believe it is the responsibility of the individual employee to manage their career path and mobility choices?

To what extent do you see a logical career path/s for yourself? Will this involve international travel?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me that we have not yet discussed?