



# Does the ‘non-traditional expatriate’ exist? A critical exploration of new expatriation categories

David S.A. Guttormsen

Department of Communication and Culture, BI Norwegian Business School, N-0484 Oslo, Norway



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## ABSTRACT

Non-Traditional Expatriates (NTEs) are rapidly increasing in the global talent pool, but remains a ‘black-box’ in the Expatriate Management and Global Mobility literatures. This article advances the conceptualisation of NTEs, due to the nascent research field is lacking construct clarity in terms of the meaning of the term as well as an operationalised conceptual framework. Five underlying assumptions in the scarce extant literature are identified and discussed, as a means to responding to the following research questions: (i) how credible is the NTE term as an expatriation typology?; and (ii) how can the conceptual framework of NTEs be operationalised? If these key issues remain unsolved, there is a risk of establishing flawed research design which can negatively affect researchers’ credibility when providing policy advice on global staffing and talent management to international managers and Multinational Enterprises (MNEs). This conceptual article draws upon key social anthropological and sociological theories, and proposes a relational research design for investigating NTEs, as well as propositions for future research.

## 1. Introduction

As a social phenomenon, Non-Traditional Expatriates (henceforth, NTEs) began attracting scholarly interest as a new ‘black-box’ in Expatriate Management and Global Mobility literatures – and within the International Human Resource Management (IHRM) discipline more broadly – as recently as mid-2010 s (e.g., Kang, Shen, & Benson, 2017; McNulty, 2015a, 2015b, 2013; McNulty & Hutchings, 2016). There are several reasons why achieving a better understanding of NTEs are increasingly important for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs), international managers and other international work organisations. With reportedly more than 8.5 million corporate expatriates world-wide (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2014); the composition of the expatriate population is changing at a fast pace and arguably with a record-high number of NTEs. Thus, NTEs are also increasing in the global talent pool. Consequently, MNEs might lose out on sourcing crucial talent if overlooking NTEs in the job-market, possibly as a result of global employers not knowing how, or through what channels, to communicate with NTEs in the most effective and meaningful manner. Additionally, there is also the risk of mismanaging NTEs already hired if not appreciating their particular training and development needs (Al Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014; Anderson, 2005; Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007; Forster & Johnsen, 1996; Harvey, Speier, & Novecevic, 2001; Schmitt & Soubeyran, 2006). Thus, employers need to plan for costings and compensation accordingly (AIRINC, 2014; Brookfield

Global Relocation Services, 2014; IMD world Talent Report, 2014). The competition for NTEs is likely to intensify in the increasingly narrowing field of global talent and brain-drain (Deloitte, 2010; Ng & Burke, 2005; Roberts, Kossek, & Ozeki, 1998; Tarique & Schuler, 2010; Tung & Lazarova, 2006) – especially considering the importance of knowledge-transfer between an MNE’s subsidiaries and its head-quarter (Yamao, De Cieri, & Hutchings, 2009) and firms’ increased focus on expatriate Return of Investment (eROI) (McNulty & De Cieri, 2011a, 2011b; Doherty & Dickman, 2012; McNulty, De Cieri, & Hutchings, 2009; McNulty & Tharenou, 2004).

Research to date on NTEs as an expatriation category has been very limited (McNulty & Hutchings, 2016), as with typologisation and classification of expatriates in academic research (Andresen & Biemann, 2013). There is neither a universally accepted definition of NTEs nor has a conceptual framework pertinent to NTEs been devised. NTEs have been defined as:

‘special’ circumstances that standard global mobility policies typically do not address. They differ from traditional expatriates in terms of their family composition (step, single-parent, split, overseas adoption, multigenerational) and family challenges (special needs or gifted children). They also differ in relation to family status (single expatriates, accompanying family members besides children), sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) and gender (female breadwinners with male trailing spouses, single female expatriates) (McNulty, 2015a).

E-mail address: [david.guttormsen@bi.no](mailto:david.guttormsen@bi.no).

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This article demonstrates how current underlying assumptions of boundary condition in defining NTEs have led to conceptual confusion and definitional ambiguity as a result of poor construct clarity (see McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Although recent attempts to achieve more construct clarity has advanced this debate, most attempts in extant literatures to advance conceptualisation on expatriate categories have been limited to proposing new or modified definitions/constructs through altering the boundary condition(s) (e.g., McNulty & Brewster, 2017). The present article, however, draws upon on social anthropological and sociological theories regarding categorisation, to propose a novel conceptualisation of NTEs. This is achieved, in particular, by consulting Bourdieu's notion of 'field' and relationality (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The overt focus on definitions, has led to that the assumptions *underlying* the meanings attributed to boundary conditions have not been contested before. The approach to contest the meanings associated with boundary conditions could also be carried out regarding any social phenomenon or concept/model/framework relating to expatriates and international human resource management.

One of these assumptions relate to that conceptualisation of NTEs takes form as a binary, i.e., categorised as either an NTE or a Traditional Expatriate (TE). NTEs became what the IHRM research field perceived TEs *not* to be (e.g., Andresen, Dickmann, & Haslberger, 2014; Bozionelos, Al Ariss, & Porschitz, 2014; Clark & Altman, 2016; Fischlmayr & Puchmüller, 2016; McNulty & Hutchings, 2016; McNulty, 2015a; McNulty & De Cieri, 2014a; McNulty, 2015a, 2015b, McNulty, 2014, 2013; McPhail & McNulty, 2015; McPhail, McNulty, & Hutchings, 2016; Paisley & Tayar, 2016).

In terms of categorisation, NTEs have been assumed to include short-term assignees (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012); flex-patriates (Suutari, Brewster, Riusala, & Syrjäkäri, 2013); frequent fliers/international business travellers (Welch, Welch, & Worm, 2007), which is similar to international business commuters (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005; Reiche, 2013); global virtual teams (Welch, Worm, & Fenwick, 2003); and international rotational assignees (Collings & Scullion, 2006; Scullion & Starkey, 2000). NTEs are also associated with various forms of non-standard assignments, such as being relocated for shorter than a year (Tahvanainen, Welch, & Worm, 2005). According to McNulty and Hutchings (2016), previous research has heavily focused on investigating TEs, who typically have been "senior managers, Western, males in their late 40 s or early 50 s, with an accompanying female spouse and children" (p. 699) and being white and expatriated by corporate organisations (Björkman & Gertsen, 1993; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christansen, 2003; Selmer & Laurant, 2012a; Vaiman & Haslberger, 2013; Hippler, 2009; Peltokorpi, 2010; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Nonetheless, they share the claim that NTEs constitute a new expatriate category. Symptomatically, NTEs' lived experiences as individuals has especially been diminutively explored (McNulty & De Cieri, 2014a, 2014b). Following from the lack of a universal NTE definition, there is also a void of a clear conceptual framework and an operationalising approach of the latter. This is an important oversight because of the overly focus on characterisations, socio-biological traits and the labelling of NTEs in the nascent literature.

However, construct clarity has surfaced as a key contemporary debate in broader IHRM research field (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). In a symposium during the 2017 European Academy of Management (EURAM) annual conference (McNulty, Brewster, & Selmer, 2017a; McNulty, Vance, & Fisher, 2017b), panellist David Lepak, Editor in Chief of International Journal of Human Resource Management rightfully uttered that "... to advance any field of research, we have to agree on what we are talking about, otherwise we are just talking past each other". Similarly, Mila Lazarova highlighted that usage of definitions and frameworks are "sloppy" and that new expatriation categories are done as a contrast to other and therefore definitions matter and need to be explored. From this conundrum, the following research questions emerge:

(1) how credible is the NTE term as an expatriation typology; and

(2) how can the conceptual framework of NTEs be operationalised.

The organisation of this article is as follows. First, the importance of establishing a credible conceptual framework based on concept clarity is outlined. Second, NTEs in extant Global Mobility and Expatriate Management literatures are positioned. Third, theoretical advancements in Social Anthropology and Sociology will be deployed as a critique regarding the underlying assumptions of said concept. The fourth section elucidates five limitations associated with current perspectives on NTEs. Contesting the underlying assumptions of categorisation is particularly fruitful when devising a conceptual framework as they scrutinise why certain boundary conditions have been chosen. This type of approach was the foundation of Shenkar's (2010) successful dismantling of the widely used 'cultural distance' construct. Finally, implications on research design as well as global staffing and talent recruitment shall be evaluated by proposing a framework of relationality to grapple with non-traditionality. This approach moves beyond adding new definitions which inevitably does not escape the issue of boundary conditions (see McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Managerial implications and proposed contributions will also be proposed.

## 2. Advancing NTEs in the global mobility and expatriate management literatures

This section highlights three emerging perspectives to study NTEs from the very scarce studies scattered across different subject-fields in extant literatures. Due to aforesaid limited research on NTEs, it makes sense to also include Call for Papers (CFP); this because CFP portrays underlying assumptions when it categorises and defines NTEs and, thus, indeed performs the function of materialising how a fuzzy phenomenon should be studied (Bridgman, 1927; Campbell, 1920). Therefore, time is at essence to offer a conceptual critique, before this materialising of the NTE research field becomes a meta-narrative and, thus, dictating the nature of the research in the area regardless of already highlighted risks. When portraying NTEs in current research, its conceptual use is confusing and contradictory, and the operationalisation of the concept is largely non-existent. Construct clarity is needed. Furthermore, it is not clear if scholars are promulgating NTEs as a typology, or rather if the non-traditionality relates to only certain aspects of an NTE.

### 2.1. Emerging perspective 1: 'socio-biological characterisation'

In terms of the first emerging perspective, McNulty and Hutchings (2016; McNulty & De Cieri, 2014a) made an important contribution to the nascent research agenda on NTEs. Their initiative represents what is possibly the first attempt to establish a research agenda regarding NTEs (for additional work, see McNulty, 2013). The authors define NTEs to include "(...) the following types of arrangements (noting that this may not be an exhaustive list)" (summarised in Diagram 1, below). In a similar vein, McNulty (2015a) provided the following definition of NTEs: those with "special" circumstances that standard global mobility policies typically do not address". This approach arguably features an orientation of 'socio-biological characterisation' of the individual NTE, including Clark and Altman (2016); Fischlmayr and Puchmüller (2016), McNulty (2015a, 2015b, McNulty, 2014), McPhail and McNulty (2015); McPhail et al. (2016); Paisley and Tayar (2016), which collectively address – but limited to – women, marriage and sexual orientation aspects. When scrutinising the boundary condition of such ontological assumption, another revelation emerges; that the assumed characterisations of an NTE appear to be constrained to only three (but overlapping) spheres (see Diagram).

The singling out an individual expatriate's characteristics has led to a wealth of expatriate research during the past four decades concerning TEs. Noticeable examples encompass, for example in regard to relationships between personal characteristics and various antecedent variables (Banai & Reisel, 1993; Black, 1990; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2014; Mamman, 1995; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2014; Selmer, 2004; Shen &

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