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The Expatriate Spouse
A Study of Their Adjustment to Expatriate Life

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

In today’s global industrial and commercial marketplace, a workforce of expatriates is frequently cited as a competitive necessity. However, upon undertaking an international assignment, the expatriate is often faced with a raft of new challenges and opportunities. Failure of expatriates to successfully adjust to these changes sees international organisations potentially facing a number of direct and indirect costs.

Surprisingly, despite the contributory role that the expatriate spouse plays in the expatriate’s adjustment process, investigation into the unique adjustment of the spouse themselves has, to date, received little empirical attention. This thesis has therefore sought to further bridge this conceptual gap and provide additional knowledge for enhancing the outcomes of international assignments by examining two key areas of association, namely the unique relationship between spouses’ adjustment and (a) their perceived availability of social support, and (b) their subjective well-being. Seventy seven expatriate spouses successfully completed an online questionnaire which asked participants to think about their available social support, their adjustment to their host country, their life satisfaction, and their recent feelings and emotions. Qualitative data was also collected around what spouses found to constitute stressful and satisfying aspects of expatriate life.

The results of this study indicated that spouses’ perceived availability of socio-emotional and instrumental support is important for their general adjustment outcomes, irrespective of the influence of personality and socio-demographic variables. The study also endorsed the proposition that expatriate spouse adjustment holds positive significance for affective balance,
even after controlling for the contribution of support and personality variables. Findings from the content analysis revealed the need for more research into the relevance of current organisational initiatives and their effects on adjustment outcomes, such as, foreign language training, employment assistance/career maintenance, and the processes surrounding relocation and resettlement.
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“Ask me, what is the greatest thing of this world?
And I will reply, it is people, it is people, it is people”

I now understand that to work on, and write a thesis, requires support from many other people, with this in mind I would firstly like to thank my supervisor Dianne Gardner for her assistance and advice.

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