

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

The Expatriate Spouse
A Study of Their Adjustment to Expatriate Life

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

Master of Science

in

Psychology

at Massey University, Albany,

New Zealand.

Clare Wilson

2011

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.

Acknowledgements

“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.

To the distance librarians who always responded promptly to my many requests for reference material- I thank you very much.

To Jeff Porter from the Trailing Spouse Network, special thanks to you and the other members of your group for being so receptive to my research- It meant a lot to me.

To Debra and Charise, the authors of ‘A Portable Identity’, thank you so much for promoting my questionnaire on your website, your kind words were very encouraging.

To all those expatriate spouses who tweeted, blogged and facebooked in an attempt to encourage other spouses to complete my questionnaire, I extend my sincere gratitude.

To the participants who took the time out to complete my questionnaire- without you, this study would not have been possible.

To my family, friends, and all the other people who, in their own unique ways, helped me along the way- thank you!

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my Dad and Mum. No words can express the thankfulness that I have for your unwavering support and encouragement. I know you didn't want a mention in here, but your patience and understanding have made completing this thesis possible.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	I
Acknowledgements	III
Table of Contents	IV
List of Figures	VII
List of Tables	VIII
Chapter 1: Expatriate Assignments	1
1.1 The Expatriate Spouse	2
1.2 Aims of the Present Study	3
Chapter 2: Adjustment	5
2.1 Facets of Adjustment	6
2.2 Adjustment: it's Outcomes for Expatriate Assignments	6
2.3 Spousal Adjustment	9
2.4 Subjective Well-Being	11
2.5 Importance of Subjective Well-Being	13
Chapter 3: Social Support	15
3.1 Social Support and Subjective Well-Being	16
3.2 Social Support in Cross-Cultural Adjustment	17
3.2.1 Social support and expatriation	18
3.3 The Nature of Social Support: Perceived vs. Received Social Support	23
3.4 Types of Social Support	25
3.5 Measuring Social Support	26
Chapter 4: Individual Differences	28
4.1 Personality: an Overview	28
4.2 Personality and Adjustment	30
4.3 Personality and Subjective Well-Being	31
4.4 Personality and Social Support	33
4.5 Previous International Experience, Accompanying	36

Dependents, Gender and Status of Employment as Correlates of Adjustment	
4.5.1 Previous international experience	36
4.5.2 Accompanying dependents	37
4.5.3 Gender	37
4.5.4 Status of employment in host country	38
Chapter 5: Method	40
5.1 Research Approach	40
5.2 Data Collection	40
5.3 Participants	41
5.4 Data Preparation	42
5.5 Measures	42
5.5.1 The index of sojourner social support	43
5.5.2 The international personality item pool	44
5.5.3 The spousal adjustment scale	44
5.5.4 The positive and negative affect schedule	45
5.5.5 The satisfaction with life scale	45
5.5.6 Demographics	46
5.6 Data Analysis	46
5.6.1 Bivariate correlations	46
5.6.2 Independent-samples t-test	47
5.6.3 Multiple regression	47
5.6.4 Content analysis	48
Chapter 6: Results	51
6.1 Descriptive Statistics	51
6.2 Testing of Hypothesised Relationships	51
6.2.1 Bivariate correlations	51
6.2.2 Between-group differences	53
6.2.3 Multiple regression	54
6.2.3.1 Spouse adjustment	54
6.2.3.2 Subjective well-being	56
6.3 Content Analysis	59
6.3.1 Stressful aspects of expatriate life	59

6.3.2 Satisfying aspects of expatriate life	62
Chapter 7: Discussion	65
7.1 Main Findings	65
7.1.1 Adjustment	65
7.1.2 Subjective well-being: the other half of the story of adjustment	70
7.1.3 Supplementary findings	72
7.2 Limitations	73
7.3 Implications for Research	75
7.4 Implications for Practice	76
Conclusion	79
References	80
Appendices	
Appendix A: Questionnaire	98
Appendix B: Coding Schemes	112

List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1. Antecedents/determinants of expatriate adjustment, and the ensuing positive and negative outcomes of expatriate adjustment/maladjustment	8
Figure 2. An overview of the predictors of spousal cross-cultural adjustment	11

List of Tables

	Page
Table 1	Reported Significant Associations Between Spouse Adjustment and Dimensions of Expatriate Adjustment 7
Table 2	A Summary of the Factors Influencing the Effects of Social Support 15
Table 3	Descriptive Statistics and Correlations 52
Table 4	Regression Analysis Summary for Individual Difference Variables and Perceived Social Support Predicting General and Interaction Adjustment 55
Table 5	Regression Analysis Summary for Personality, Perceived Social Support and Adjustment Predicting Life Satisfaction 56
Table 6	Regression Analysis Summary for Personality, Perceived Social Support and Adjustment Predicting Affective Balance 58
Table 7	Frequency Counts for the Categories Identified as Representing Stressful Aspects of Expatriate Life 59
Table 8	Illustrative Comments of Stressful Aspects of Expatriate Life 60
Table 9	Frequency Counts for the Categories Identified as Representing Satisfying Aspects of Expatriate Life 62
Table 10	Illustrative Comments of Satisfying Aspects of Expatriate Life 63