

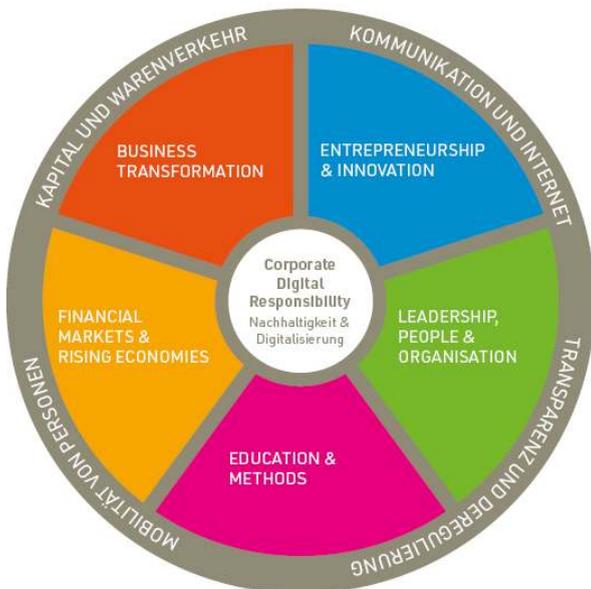
Nataliya Buettner-Wobst, Gabi Dorner, Martha dos Santos Dörholt,
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Adjustment of Expatriate Spouses and Children during and after International Assignments:

Three Qualitative Investigations

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Executive Summary

This working paper presents and discusses the results of three final theses written by bachelor's, master's and MBA students at the Cologne Business School (CBS) under the supervision of Ihar Sahakiants, Professor of International Human Resource Management at the CBS, and in cooperation with Gabi Dorner, Senior Manager Global Mobility Services at PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). The student theses focus on different aspects and factors of adjustment of expatriate employees' family members during international assignments and in the course of the repatriation process after the termination of expatriate contracts. By applying the qualitative methodology, the student researchers analyze interviews they conducted with spouses and children of different nationalities who accompanied expatriates abroad.

The findings of the studies are generally in line with the extant literature on the adjustment of expatriates and their family members during and after international assignments, however, they provide additional insights on issues such as coping strategies of spouses of different nationalities, factors that contribute to a successful adjustment process or adjustment challenges faced by both spouses and children.

From a practical standpoint, the results of the studies summarized in this working paper contribute to the understanding of the importance of organizational support during and after expatriate assignments which was reported by expatriate family members to be often insufficient. Based on these findings, a number of recommendations for the practice can be outlined such as the necessity to provide cross-cultural trainings not only in the case of a relocation to culturally distant but also to culturally quite similar countries as well as increased support in administrative or career-related matters. Moreover, assigning companies can effectively facilitate the adjustment of expatriate family members by assisting expatriate spouses in practical issues such as the acknowledgement of education degrees abroad, setting up mentoring programs or creating and maintaining social networks. It is imperative that such support should be provided not only during the expatriate assignment as such but also during the repatriate stage, for instance, to mitigate the adjustment problems experienced by expatriate children as described in one of the studies of the present working paper. Finally, given the importance of information and communication technology (ICT) for a successful adjustment in a foreign country, we recommend multinational enterprises to focus on providing technical support for expatriate family members with respect to a variety of digital applications that can facilitate cross-cultural awareness, learning, social interaction and professional collaboration.



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Nataliya Buettner-Wobst, Gabi Dorner, Martha dos Santos Dörholt, Elisa Hüttchen and Ihar Sahakiants

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Abbreviations

BGRS	Brookfield Global Relocation Services
CBS	Cologne Business School
HCN	Host-country national
ICT	Information and communication technology
IHRM	International human resource management
IP	Interview partner
IT	Information technology
LTA	Long-term assignment
MNE	Multinational enterprise
PCN	Parent-country national
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers



1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, the issue of expatriate adjustment during international assignments has gained much attention from the part of both the academic community and practitioners. This steady interest in the related topic is resulting from the fact that both multinational enterprises (MNEs) and non-for-profit organizations still to a large extent rely on expatriate employees assigned to foreign countries. Indeed, the recent data show that the use of expatriates and the resulting global mobility continue to grow in volume (PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2010), whereby the long-term assignments still remain the prevalent expatriation type (KPMG, 2018). While such long-term assignments are associated with high costs for enterprises, they are also often discussed from the standpoint of a high risk of failure due to the inability of expatriates to adjust to host-country environments (e.g. Andreason, 2003; Garonzik, Brockner & Siegel, 2000).

Furthermore, a number of studies demonstrated that family issues in general and the spouse adjustment in a host country in particular have a direct impact on the adjustment of expatriate employees and thus on the overall success of international assignments (Black, 1988; Black & Stephens, 1989; Brett & Stroh, 1995; Caligiuri, Hyland & Joshi, 1998; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). For instance, according to a recent report of the Brookfield Global Relocation Services (BGRS, 2016), family-related issues constitute an important reason for assignment failures. Moreover, spouse adjustment-related issues are among the main reasons to refuse to relocate abroad (Harvey, 1998; Harvey, Napier & Moeller, 2009). Spouses are often forced to put their careers on hold and to leave their social network behind, which might lead to adjustment difficulties to a new environment (Copeland & Norell, 2002). There is also a considerable amount of evidence about problems related to the adjustment of accompanying expatriate children resulting from their leaving friends behind and interruptions in schools (Lazarova, Westman & Shaffer, 2010). Importantly, the stress experienced by family members might potentially lead to spillover and crossover effects and thus negatively influence the adjustment of an employee on an expatriate assignment (Takeuchi, Yun & Tesluk, 2002).

The present working paper summarizes the results of three student studies conducted in the course of the completion of bachelor's, master's and MBA studies at the Cologne Business School respectively and related to different aspects of adjustment of the family members during different stages of expatriate assignments: the on-site (expatriation proper) and the repatriation stages.



The studies were conducted under a supervision of Prof. Dr. Ihar Sahakiants, one of the co-authors of this working paper, and were supported by Gabi Dorner, Senior Manager Global Mobility Services at PricewaterhouseCoopers, who also contributed hereto. Although these studies were conducted independently from each other, had different objectives and partly varying theoretical backgrounds, the results of the corresponding research complement each other and jointly provide a comprehensive evidence of the importance and mechanisms of expatriate family adjustment. All three of them especially underscore the importance of considering the contextual differences between the countries and the social aspects of expatriate family adjustment.

A common feature of the student studies summarized in this working paper is the method used to investigate the related research questions. In all three cases, semi-structured qualitative interviews with spouses and global mobility experts (studies 1 and 2) as well as expatriate children (study 3) were conducted and subsequently analysed by using content analysis techniques. The interviewed expatriate family members had both positive and negative experiences they shared with the researchers: experiences of expatriate spouses with different cultural backgrounds during international assignments and those of expatriate children upon their return to Germany from an expatriation.

In order to present the results of the student research in a consistent and comprehensible manner, the remaining part of this working paper is structured as follows. Firstly, an overview of the theoretical backgrounds for all three studies is provided. Furthermore, each of the student investigations is presented by briefly describing the objective and methodology of the research as well as by providing a detailed overview of the results. In the first study, Elisa Hüttchen (Master of Arts in International Business) examines the importance of the cultural distance between the parent and host countries for the adjustment of German expatriate spouses during international assignments. The second study by Nataliya Buettner-Wobst (Master of Business Administration in International Management) is dedicated to the analysis of the adjustment process of Russian-speaking expatriate spouses, while Martha dos Santos Dörholt (Bachelor of Arts in International Culture and Management), the author of the third study, investigates the readjustment of German expatriate children returning from foreign assignments. The subsequent section discusses the results of the student research from both the theoretical perspective and the practical standpoints. The limitations and implications for both the theory and the global mobility practice as well as avenues for further research are presented in the concluding chapter.



2. Theoretical background

The research presented in this working paper builds on a number of theoretical models related to the issue of cross-cultural adjustment during international assignments. According to Black and Gregersen (1991a, p. 463), generally speaking, “cross-cultural adjustment is conceptualized as the degree of a person’s psychological comfort with various aspect of a host country”.

In the following subchapters, the extant literature on different aspects of expatriate family adjustment during various stages of international assignments will be presented.

2.1 Spouse adjustment process

Although originally the main interest of research was associated with the expatriate adjustment process (e.g. Andreason, 2003; Black, 1988; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991), an increasing body of literature has been dedicated to the issue related to different aspects of family adjustment, in particular, spouse adjustment, over the last few decades.

Examples of studies dedicated to expatriate family issues are manifold, for instance: dual-career couples (Harvey, 1998) or female expatriates accompanied by male spouses (e.g. Caligiuri, Joshi & Lazarova, 1999; Harvey & Wiese, 1998; Punnett, Crocker & Stevens, 1992). The related issues were analysed in different cultural and institutional environments, e.g. Korean expatriates and spouses in Australia (Cho, Hutchings & Marchant, 2013), spouse adjustment issues in India (Gupta, Banerjee & Gaur, 2012), adjustment of western expatriates and their spouses in Saudi Arabia (Jackson & Manderscheid, 2015) or dual-career issues on the example of Finnish expatriate couples (Känsälä, Mäkelä & Suutari, 2015).

A number of studies primarily focused on the identification of antecedents of spousal adjustment (Mohr & Klein, 2004; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), with several examples of research with a special emphasis on different aspects thereof, such as social and professional issues of adjustment (Kupka & Cathro, 2007) and organisational support provided (Kupka, Everett & Cathro, 2008; McNulty, 2012).

Although the adjustment process of expatriates and spouses is very similar, the spouses’ adjustment process cannot be explained with the concepts used for the expatriate adjustment. Indeed, expatriates, unlike their spouses in most of the cases, go on an assignment with a defined job role, a set of responsibilities, and usually with an established organisational support (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001).



Shaffer and Harrison (2001) proposed and tested one of the most widely applied models that describes spousal adjustment during international assignments. Here, the authors developed the model proposed earlier by Black et al. (1991) by adding to the initial two dimensions of expatriate adjustment – interactional and cultural adjustment – one more dimension, namely personal adjustment. Interactional adjustment refers to communication and relationships with host-country nationals, while the cultural adjustment relates to the adaptation to different environmental and situational circumstances. The personal adjustment was described as a “sense of becoming part of, belonging to, or feeling at home in a foreign environment” (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001, p. 239).

According to the resulting model, spouse adjustment is affected by individual antecedents (personal identity), by interpersonal relationship antecedents (social identity), and by environmental antecedents (situational identity) with the following factors included into each of these main groups (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001, p. 245):

- personal identity (change in employment status, language knowledge, general and social self-efficacy);
- social identity (support by the extended family, expatriate adjustment, parental demands, social network size and breadth of support as well as the depth of support provided by host-country nationals (HCNs) and non-host country nationals);
- situational identity (cultural novelty, living conditions and assignment duration certainty).

In their investigation of the spouse adjustment process, Mohr and Klein (2004) proposed another dimension – role adjustment that implies that even if spouses had not been employed before the assignment, the realities still enormously differ from the situation in the home country (Mohr & Klein, 2004). The authors propose to concentrate on the following antecedents of spousal adjustment: age, children, knowledge of the host-country language, previous international experience, motivation, openness, degree of participation in the company decision-making process, perceived cultural distance/cultural novelty, pre-departure cultural training, interaction with HCNs, length of stay, and adjustment of the expatriate employee (Mohr & Klein, 2004).

In the following subchapters, the main antecedents of expatriate adjustment and the corresponding studies are described.



2.1.1 Spouse career-related issues

In their home countries, spouses may today significantly contribute to the family budget and have the role of a co-breadwinner. That gives them not only financial independence, but – more importantly – means a set of rights and expectations. The financial status and self-perception contribute greatly to their personal identity, understanding of their role in family and society, and self-esteem (Kupka & Cathro, 2007).

After the relocation, the most common problem for expatriate spouses is the impossibility to find the desired job position. The most common obstacles are the following: impossibility to get a work visa, insufficient knowledge of the host-country language, lack of available jobs, lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, preferences to hire local employees, sufficient amount of qualified local staff, and cultural issues (Cole, 2011).

Loss of a job and inability to find it in the host country leads not only to a loss of income, but also results in a loss of status, above all, outside of the family, and may lead to difficulties in adjustment (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001).

Punnett (1997) studied trailing female and male spouses separately and confirmed that for male spouses work outside of the home country is enormously important, and that male spouses strongly expect organisational support with this respect. It can be much harder for male spouses to take a break in their careers and to accept the role of a homemaker, as social norms dictate a breadwinner role for men (Caligiuri et al., 1999). Furthermore, nowadays, female employees often realise that in order to make a next professional step in their home countries, international experience is required. Additionally, organisations underscore the importance of diversity and encourage females to go on international assignment (BGRS, 2016).

2.1.2 Knowledge of host-country language

The ability to speak a host-country language is one of the most important factors of spouse adjustment. Typically, spouses more often than their working partners use the local language in their daily routines such as shopping or bringing children to doctors (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Poor language skills represent an important obstacle during the job search. Moreover, in many countries local language plays a crucial role for social network development and is essential for communication with the local people. Indeed, a number of studies proved that language barriers create difficulties for spouses (Cho et al., 2013; Mohr & Klein, 2004).



On the other hand, language fluency gives spouses a sense of power and freedom in the host country (McNulty, 2012).

However, there is some evidence of some circumstances when both expatriates and spouses believe that there is no need to learn the host-country language as they will not have any chance to use it either at work or in their daily life. Saudi Arabia can be an example of such a country as expatriates rarely leave the expatriate compound and seldom interact with the local people (Jackson & Manderscheid, 2015).

2.1.3 Social support provided by the family

After the relocation an expatriate family becomes physically separated from its extended family members, friends, colleagues, and the whole home country community, which means a loss of one of the channels of social support (Takeuchi et al., 2002). In particular, it has been suggested that such social support is beneficial not only in general, but it is especially important in stressful times (Bolger, Zuckerman & Kessler, 2000). Here, cultural differences play an additional role. Depending on the culture of their home country, individuals can be more independent and less relying on the other people or, conversely, can be highly interconnected with their social group (Taylor et al., 2004). This lack of social support from the family or friends underscores the importance of the interaction between the spouses, especially shortly after the relocation: the couple will find each other to be the main source of interaction, support, and experience sharing. In the following, the roles of partner adjustment of that of the parental status are discussed.

Unlike the case of spouses in most of the cases, the adjustment of expatriates includes one more dimension – adjustment to work. Indeed, expatriated employees have a job position in a company, expectations related to a new job role, and a new working community (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Takeuchi et al. (2002) examined how expatriate adjustment to work influences his or her adjustment outside the work (spillover effect), and how it effects the spouse's adjustment and vice versa (crossover effect). The above authors have found reciprocal relationships between expatriates and spouses. The resulting effects in terms of adjustment process can be either positive or negative. If one of the partners experiences great difficulties with adjustment, this makes the adjustment of the other partner even more complicated. However, on the other hand, there is a potential for a positive effect: if the partners have positive experiences or at least the level of stress is manageable, they will have more emotional and psychological resources to support each other.



In this case, the social support may include different aspects and is not limited to emotional support.

For instance, by establishing relationships with colleagues, expatriates get information about the host country, including interesting places to visit, nice restaurants to go, cultural events and so on. This information can be provided to the spouse. Additionally, an expatriate may introduce the spouse to colleagues and their spouses. Similar actions can be taken by the spouse, e.g. providing information about the best transportation systems or about different communities or expatriate clubs found (Takeuchi et al., 2002).

The literature on family adjustment during international assignments suggests that couples with children are most likely to have different experiences than single couples. For instance, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) found out that preschool-age children were an important predictor of adjustment for non-working spouses. As the children at this age are very dependent on their guardians, the parents feel highly responsible for them and at the same time feel more comfortable at their new home in a host-country environment.

In his study of stress experiences by couples during international assignments, Brown (2008) found that couples with children feel happier and experience significantly less stress than families without children. Moreover, children provide a good opportunity for spouses to get acquainted with local communities through the usual daily routines and social activities related to the children, such as bringing kids to kindergarten or spending time at a playground. In a similar vein, Mohr and Klein (2004) found that with the existence of children, spouses are forced to interact with local people since children go to local kindergartens and schools, which leads to a higher level of interaction with HCNs and adjustment. Thus, the parental status can significantly help to reduce spousal adjustment problems. At the same time, children of school age might perceive relocation as a penalty and struggle with the loss of the social network (Kupka & Cathro, 2007). Thus, families need to be ready to face the related challenge and both parents need to provide their children with the necessary support.

2.1.4 Social support provided by host-country nationals

Interpersonal relations with HCNs constitute another channel of social support in addition to those mentioned above. Building a good interpersonal network with local individuals is essential for spouse adjustment during expatriate assignments.

Communication with host-country nationals is beneficial in many ways.



Spouses, who established relationships with HCNs reported a faster adjustment and better understanding of the local culture. Local people perform the role of guides who share their personal experiences and can explain cultural nuances (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001).

Moreover, if spouses are not able to find friends among HCNs, they look for support in expatriate communities or from parent-country nationals (PCNs). Belonging to different groups, formal and informal organisations, such as charity clubs, fitness clubs, expatriate clubs, helps spouses not only to adjust to a foreign culture, but also to have a fulfilled social life. A lack of communication leads to a very high dependence on the expatriate employee with respect to the attention and assistance, and potentially leads to tension in family relationships (Kupka & Cathro, 2007).

Mohr and Klein (2004) stated that local people can actively facilitate the adjustment process, for example, by assisting with administrative procedures. By interacting with HCNs, spouses can learn cultural norms and how to behave appropriately. Similarly, such interaction might help spouses to adapt to new roles they have to play. However, Copeland and Norell (2002) point out that interaction with HCNs is not the decisive factor for spouses to feel well-adjusted and underscored the primary importance of social networks instead.

2.1.5 Culture novelty

According to Shaffer and Harrison (2001, p. 244), cultural novelty is the “difference between various commonplace features of everyday customs of the host and home cultures”. There are several theories and approaches that describe national culture. One of the most famous one is the approach developed by Geert Hofstede (1980), whereby the proposed cultural dimensions and related measures for different countries are frequently used to explain cross-cultural differences in management practices.

However, Mohr and Klein (2004) claim that the perception of cultural novelty is individual and depends on how spouses perceive the difference of norms and values in home and host countries. This assumption is based on the evidence that spouses with the same cultural background differently evaluate culture of the same host country. Other personal factors such as a change in career or change of social status can additionally influence spouses' perceptions (Mohr & Klein, 2004).

Expatriates are often assigned together with their families to culturally distant countries and thus, when exposed to an unfamiliar culture, require support in the adjustment process (Teague, 2015).



The culture of Saudi Arabia can be one of the illustrations of the importance of considering cultural novelty. There is evidence that spouses from Western countries experience problems in adjusting to the local culture, as many rules and traditions are very different to those in their home countries.

Similar to local women, female spouses of expatriate employees are exposed to a number of restrictions, have to follow special dress-code rules, and experience the segregation of sexes (Jackson & Manderscheid, 2015).

Overall, the evidence on the impact of culture novelty on adjustment is varied. In general, research in this field indicates that perceived culture novelty influences spouse adjustment (e.g. Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Takeuchi et al., 2007). However, it is important to consider further related factors. For instance, Wiese (2013) found that culture novelty does not influence the intention to stay in a foreign country, but social support seems to play a major role with this regard. She examined expatriate spouses' personality traits and concluded that those who are extraverted and open-minded may seek and receive more support, thus contributing to adjustment. In this case, culture novelty may even be an advantage for spouse adjustment, which allows to receive more support from HCNs. Additionally, the advancements of technology and access to the information have minimized the influence of cultural differences and make it easier to stay connected with family and friends. The internet might also help a spouse to engage in and thus experience more the new culture. In addition, globalization facilitates the access to familiar food and resources, which consequently could lead to less importance of culture novelty as a determinant for spouse adjustment. On the other hand, culture clash can happen when expatriates are assigned to similar cultures because of the small nuances of differences between the countries. While the awareness of dissimilarities is higher during assignments to distant cultures, expatriates in similar cultures report as many adjustment issues as expatriates in more distant cultures (Selmer, 2007).

2.1.6 Organisational support

Organisational support provided to spouses is one of the most important antecedents of spouse adjustment during international assignments. McNulty (2012) proposed to divide such support into three main categories: practical, professional, and social support. Firstly, practical support includes such actions as look-and-see trips to the host country, furniture storage, tax consulting, assistance with documents as well as language courses and cross-cultural trainings.



Secondly, various activities directed towards successful professional integration of a spouse, including career counselling, assistance with work permits, seminars on job search, local legislation, and job application assistance are related to the professional support. Finally, the company may provide help with social integration of spouses by providing information about different clubs and memberships, expatriate clubs, clubs for expatriate spouses and other platforms for communication (McNulty, 2012).

Overall, the organizational support provided to expatriates and their families is generally considered to be among key success determinants of international assignments (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2017). However, only a few investigations focus on the correlation between organizational support and spouse adjustment. Some exceptions are studies that emphasize the relationship between the organizational support and spouse adjustment such as those by Ali, van der Zee and Sanders (2003), Black and Gregersen (1991a), Gupta et al. (2012), Konopaske, Robie and Ivancevich (2005), McNulty (2012) and Punnett (1997).

In their spouse adjustment model, Black and Gregersen (1991a) take into account certain organizational aspects such as pre-departure training provided by the company. Their study confirms that spousal adjustment is influenced by the involvement in the decision-making process and by pre-departure training related to the foreign culture provided by the MNE.

Punnett (1997) found that when excitement about the move has vanished, spouses need a social system, which typically consists of other spouses that can assist with overcoming culture shock. Some spouses may have the need for psychological counselling, especially those who are expected to work but could not find a job or who are not issued work visa. At this point, the company should offer assistance. The author considers different types of spouses and recommends to design the organizational support accordingly. For instance, a male and working spouse may need a different support than a female unemployed spouse who is more likely to have problems adjusting to a culture. The unemployed spouse will tend to isolate herself, especially without an adequate support.

In their study of the support that expatriate spouses obtain during expatriation Ali et al. (2003) found that organizational support influences the extent of interacting with HCNs. Additionally, Ali et al. (2003) confirmed the results of Punnett's (1997) study that showed that organizational support given before and during the assignment significantly influences spousal adjustment. The related support may involve intercultural training and information resources, such as books, or brochures.



Recently, the model originally developed by Konopaske et al. (2005) was confirmed and extended by Gupta et al. (2012) who investigated factors affecting the adjustment process of an expatriate spouse. Based on the case of India, they show that organizational support factors include career support from the expatriate's company, pre-departure training for spouses and time duration of the assignment. These factors influence spouse willingness to relocate and adjust.

2.2. Readjustment of children during the repatriation stage of expatriate assignments

Black and Gregersen (1991b) extended the theoretical discussion of the expatriate adjustment and claim that the readjustment process is also a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the same kind of related yet distinct dimensions as expatriation adjustment. Berry (1997) states that the readjustment affects all life roles and that the repatriate has a high level of control over the success of his or her adjustment. Furthermore, Adler (1981) claims that the influence of the organization as well as the repatriate are the drivers to repatriation adjustment, since both have a synergistic effect.

2.2.1 The reverse culture shock

When expatriates and their families return to their parent country, they are very likely to experience difficulties readjusting to their familiar environment psychologically, culturally and socially (Miyamoto & Kuhlman, 2001). The culture shock phenomenon of the cross-cultural adjustment process during an international assignment is a well-researched topic. For instance, there is evidence that a large proportion of 13 to 18 years old children experience a variety of social issues such as not being able to adjust to a new school, inability to make new friends and missing the old friends (Caligiuri et al., 1998). Moreover, the same authors state that adolescent children tend to feel a sense of loss of control over their lives when readjusting to a new environment. Consequently, they may suffer from psychological issues (Caligiuri et al., 1998). Moreover, it is stated that children from the age of 14 to 16 years suffer from uncertainty and increased social issue concerns (Gaylord, 1979).

With respect to repatriation, Adler (1981) stated that while some struggle with the effects for months or years, others might only experience a few, if any, effects of re-entry. Due to the fact that individuals tend to expect no difficulties upon return, the reverse culture shock is often experienced as being more severe than the one experienced abroad.



While the readjustment process of expatriates and spouses has been researched by several scholars (cf. Adler, 1981 or Andreason & Kineer, 2005 for some examples), there is still a lack of literature related to factors influencing the readjustment of expatriate children. In general, the repatriation research indicates that there are several factors that affect the readjustment process of expatriates and are of high importance for both companies and expatriates when dealing with potential challenges during the readjustment process. The potential maladjustment to the home culture upon return are influenced by a number of factors discussed below.

2.2.2 Factors affecting the readjustment process

The challenges encountered by expatriates during the process of readjustment are, firstly, related to individual characteristics such as expectations, knowledge and duration of international assignment. Secondly, external differences that include factors like environmental changes encountered upon return, the degree of culture distance experienced and the importance of interaction with home nationals need to be considered. It is proposed in this working paper that these challenges might be partially experienced by expatriate children during the repatriation stage as well.

Individual characteristics

The formation of inaccurate expectations is considered a major challenge of readjusting to the home country. Expectations and experiences of an individual vary between expatriation and repatriation. "In expatriate adjustment, cognitive expectations are based primarily on vicarious experience [...] or on simple stereotypes in anticipation of the transfer" (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005, p. 111). Under vicarious experience, cross-cultural trainings and other sources of information are understood, which is expected to be provided by the company's responsible mobility department. Vague stereotypes and storytelling can be considered as indirect experiences. In contrast, a person returning back to his or her home country from a foreign assignment already has a personal experience with his or her home country (Lee & Liu, 2007). Thus, his or her expectations are likely to be more rigid due to the fact that the individual's experience has been direct and real before the transfer.

The confidence of knowing what expatriates and their families can expect is deeply anchored in the believes of each individual based on their prior knowledge and experience. According to Adler (1981) individuals tend to expect that they will settle in quickly and easily just because they are returning home. Lack of awareness or neglecting changes that have occurred in the home country are major obstacles to readjusting (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005).



This explains the fact that people experience more difficulties when readjusting to their home country rather than their adjustment process when living abroad (Black, 1992; Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992).

While returning from an international assignment, repatriates often find their careers in a 'holding pattern', due to the 'out of sight, out of mind' syndrome. It results, for instance, from the feeling of not having been kept up to date with changes occurring in the home country company, such as the promotion of colleagues (Feldmann, 1991), which can lead to disappointment regarding the career expectations of repatriates.

The professional readjustment issue is exacerbated when repatriates receive a job position that is below their expectations. This could be a position with less authority, less autonomy and less responsibility than that they have been used to during the foreign assignment.

As a consequence, repatriates have to adjust to a lower status, which often causes frustration and dissatisfaction (Dowling et al., 2017). Moreover, it is argued that some organizations devalue the newly gained experience of expatriates. This often results in expatriates feeling of being overqualified for a particular job position and at the same time feeling frustrated because they are being underutilized (Kraimer, Shaffer & Bolino, 2009). Building on the above arguments, it could be suggested that the formation of inaccurate expectations affects the readjustment of expatriate children too. Children who expect the life to be as they used to know it before the international assignment, might encounter an unexpected shock.

Moreover, it is stressed that preparedness is another important factor of readjusting to the home country. The more knowledge an individual has about the repatriation process the easier he will adjust and vice versa (Black, 1992). In particular, Sussman (2001) argues that the degree of preparedness influences the amount of distress upon return. For instance, those individuals, who have been least prepared to return, experience more severe problems during the repatriation process than individuals having a certain knowledge about their return. Consequently, it could be assumed that children who have a certain degree of knowledge of what to expect when returning home will face a less severe reentry, than children who have not been prepared regarding their readjustment. Knowledge and preparedness are thus to be considered of high importance for the readjustment process.

Furthermore, the length of a foreign assignment as well as the well-being of the expatriate abroad are stated to affect the process of readjustment as well. Scholars found out that long-term assignees face a more complex adjustment phase upon their return than expatriates after short-term assignments (Foster, 2000).



Individuals who adapt effectively overseas often experience a more difficult readjustment. In contrast, the less successful the adaptation process abroad has been, the easier the readjustment to the home culture will be (Sussman, 2001). Due to the fact that expatriates acquire learning abilities and adjustment skills abroad, they are inclined to experience radical cultural identity changes during the international assignment. As a consequence, they feel a high distress when readjusting, because their beliefs, norms and attitudes have changed immensely and might not fit to the ones given in the home country (Cox, 2004). Expatriate children might face similar readjustment challenges. It is assumed here that the more effectively a child adjusted to the host country, the more challenging he or she will experience his or her return.

External differences

During expatriate assignments, not only changes on the individual level but also changes in the home country occur. Changes in technology, social norms and economic contexts build factors independent from the changes on the individual level (Black et al., 1992). Thus, individuals have “little to no chance to examine the interplay between his or her personal changes and the environmental changes back in the home country” (Black et al., 1992, p. 740). Researches claim that during the expatriate’s absence from the home country, the host country becomes a familiar environment. However, at the same time the home country seems to become a foreign setting (Lee & Liu, 2007). Particularly children develop rapidly and adapt quickly to the new environment of the international assignment (Howard, 1974). Due to the drastic change, their homecoming does not reflect reality as they might have anticipated (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005). Moreover, repatriates and their families experience a decreasing quality of life. Housing allowances, higher salaries, cost-of-living, special education and other premiums and allowances paid at company’s expense will not be provided anymore upon return (Howard, 1974). Apart from changes related to the general living environment, changes in the work environment of an expatriate also need to be considered. Changes in the organizational culture of the home country company are unavoidable (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005) and expatriates have to adjust to these changes gradually. Moreover, scholars claim that the greater the cultural difference between the host and the home country, the more difficult it will be to successfully re-learn and re-familiarize themselves with values of the home country. Additionally, cultural distance is argued to be an indicator of how strong a reverse culture shock is experienced to be (Erogul & Rahman, 2017). Moreover, Caligiuri et al. (1998) argue that in global transitions children face problems with respect to education and network changes.



Furthermore, Black et al. (1992) suggest that the frequency of home visits decreases the anxiety and uncertainty level. In other words, the number of home visits is negatively correlated with the level of distress upon return. In addition to the frequency, the quality of contacts to PCNs is considered to be an important factor as well. Therefore, it can be claimed that maintaining contact with individuals back home reduces the level of readjustment stress as well.



3. Empirical studies

3.1. Study I: Elisa Hüttchen

This study, conducted by Elisa Hüttchen, investigates the adjustment process of expatriate spouses in various host countries. Here, the research specifically focuses on the importance of perceived cultural distance and explores concerns of expatriate spouses related to the host country, problems concerning the cultural adjustment during foreign assignments and necessary support to overcome the corresponding problems.

In the following subsections, the methodology and the results of the study are presented.

3.1.1. Methodology

For the purpose of this research, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were divided into three sections specific to culture-related observations, actual support provided by assigning organizations and necessary support. First, the interview partners were asked about their general status during the assignment (whether they were employed, looked for an employment, housing, etc.). Second, the interviews continued with questions about their cultural and general concerns prior to relocation and difficulties experienced in the host countries. Third, the interview partners were asked about the necessary support they considered important.

In order to understand opinions on spouse adjustment issues and required support, both experts in the field of global mobility and accompanying spouses were interviewed. As shown in Table 1, the overall sample consisted of eight respondents. The participants were all females either in the role of global mobility experts (three employees of PricewaterhouseCoopers and one HR expert employed by a German bank) or as accompanying spouses of expatriate employees (four interview partners).

The spouses interviewed accompanied their partners during traditional long-term assignments across Europe, Asia and the United States of America, each country being different in relation to religion, socio-cultural structure, the status of women in society and other factors. The experts interviewed were asked about cultural distant countries, for example non-English speaking countries, such as Russia, Nepal and India, compared to geographically and cultural closer countries, such as the Netherlands and the US. This was useful for generating interesting insights into several aspects of adjustment issues.



Table 1. Respondents in study I

Nr.	Gender	Employed during assignment	Host country	Assignment duration	Interview duration
<i>Expatriate spouses</i>					
1	Female	Yes	Abu Dhabi	1.5 years	45 min
2	Female	Yes	Singapore Switzerland	2 years	40 min
3	Female	No	Pakistan Italy	4 years 8 years	29 min
4	Female	Yes	USA	2 years	20 min
<i>Experts</i>					
1	Female	Non applicable			29 min
2	Female	Non applicable			42 min
3	Female	Non applicable			39 min
4	Female	Non applicable			21 min

The semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of two months, from March 1, 2018 until April 18, 2018, either via telephone or video calls and were recorded digitally. The duration of the interviews varied from 20 to 45 minutes. In order to validate the interview guideline with respect to the practical relevance, it was discussed first with expert 1, a global mobility HR expert.

All interviews were conducted in German and were translated into English whenever it was necessary for citing purposes. They were partially transcribed with respect to relevant parts of the interviews that were attributed to the major codes.



3.1.2. Results

The following subchapters present the results of the study along the major categories of spousal adjustment identified in the course of the interviews.

Individual factors

This section explores the importance of personality traits discussed by Ali et al. (2003) and Wiese (2013) as important factors of the adjustment process. Analyzing the interviewees' responses, the author could verify if personal characteristics such as, for instance, open-mindedness regarding the host culture were perceived as important for adjusting. The investigation of factors such as language abilities and (change in) employment status were based on the model proposed by Shaffer and Harrison (2001).

Personality traits

Spouses reported that they were not in all cases particularly interested in going abroad but saw this as an opportunity or necessity for their partners. Only spouse 3 indicated a major interest in the host-countries' cultures and languages. She was curious about both assignments, Pakistan and Italy, and looked forward to experiencing the two cultures.

However, spouses 1 and 2 as well as all the experts stated that proactivity is important for gaining information about the country. Proactive spouses are more likely to receive support (Wiese, 2013). Based on her experience in the Emirates, spouse 1 also stated open-mindedness and ingenuity to be of major importance for the planned move. Especially the experts underscore that expatriate spouses should themselves takeover the responsibility to inform themselves and not to expect the employer to approach the spouses with support offers.

Age

Although some studies (e.g. Mohr & Klein, 2004) suggest that more experienced spouses are more likely to adjust faster than younger spouses, this contention could not be verified by the present investigation as all of the spouses reported that they well-adjusted to the new situation. However, expert 3 mentioned that younger employees have almost no concerns about going abroad and less difficulties living in foreign countries. Expert 1 reported that assignments often take place when the couples decide to create families, and spouses are more likely to put their careers on hold for a couple of years. Thus, there might be a link between family planning, age and willingness to relocate internationally. Spouse 2 added that she agreed upon the second assignment because she was on maternity leave, which emphasizes the importance of life stage rather than age as key factor considered when deciding to relocate.



Language abilities

The present study delivered evidence of the high importance of language abilities for a successful adjustment in line with a number of studies (e.g. Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Mohr & Klein, 2004; Lazarova et al., 2010) Especially in non-English speaking countries, such as Abu Dhabi and Italy, the spouses highlighted the importance of some basic knowledge of the local language. They reported that inability to speak the local language can cause a feeling of isolation. For instance, spouse 3 stated that the lack of the Italian language hampers everyday life of spouses. She stated: “*It was difficult to manage daily life without language skills*” (spouse 3, translation by the author). Similarly, spouse 1 emphasized the importance of knowing at least some phrases to get around in the Emirates.

Thus, all the interviews except for that with spouse 2 indicated that the lack of language knowledge led to problems concerning managing daily lives and interacting with others. Nevertheless, all interview partners highlighted that it is important to speak the local language, and thus to undertake language training for that purpose.

Change in employment status

Similar to the results of previous research (e.g. Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), a change in employment was reported to influence the adjustment. The interview partners stated that a possible change in employment was a major issue (e.g. spouse 2 or experts 1 and 3). Spouse 4 even said she would not have relocated if she had not been able to work abroad. Before going to Singapore, for the employed spouse 2, the idea of being unemployed was dreadful. Expert 3 added that the most difficult countries were those, in which women’s rights are limited and where women are not permitted to work. Spouse 2 saw herself as disadvantaged, suddenly having only a part-time employment and being torn out of her social environment. Spouse 1 had to start working from a home office, i.e. remotely. Expert 1 confirmed that the employed spouses’ main concerns are job related, especially with respect to interruption periods in their careers.

Interpersonal relationships

Existing research frequently stresses the importance of social support in the adjustment process of expatriate spouses (Punnett, 1997; Copeland & Norell, 2002; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). The latter are commonly advised against living in the “expat bubble” whereas the interaction with HCNs could contribute to a better adjustment. The results of the present study similarly show that the social support presents an essential need for spouses and that, indeed, interaction with HCNs is crucial.



However, the more distant the country in terms of language and culture is, the more difficult the interaction becomes.

Need for social networks in the host country

Spouses 1, 2 and 3 reported to have been in contact with other expatriate spouses and agreed that social support is a basic need for them. Spouses 1 and 3 have been members of women's associations, spouse 2 also received support from her working environment and reported that *"the social support develops quite quickly and easily, arising from the fact that we are in the same situation"* (spouse 2, translation by the author). Spouse 1 recommended other women to join associations and clubs as soon as they arrive in the host country: *"Via these women, you better understand the Do's and Don'ts in the country, where you should go for the passport, where are the best supermarkets. These associations are perfect for networking, even for just having a talk or coffee with the others"* (spouse 1, translation by the author). Spouse 3 had social support in form of other expatriate spouses and international communities and charities in Pakistan. However, in Italy, she felt a little more isolated. Nonetheless, she and her daughter participated in organized activities with other spouses, and finally got acquainted with other expatriate women.

Expert 2 explained that especially when relocating to exotic places, it is obvious that they usually live in areas where only expatriates reside. She continues that in such cases, children go to international and not to local schools, and they stay amongst themselves.

Moreover, expert 3 explained, that similarities connect people. This is one of the reasons to stay among other expatriates, the other reason is the language barrier: *"Also, here in Frankfurt, expats don't live in our neighborhoods. They often live in compounds, in gated communities, in nice luxury apartments. We usually don't have points of contact with them"* (expert 3, translation by the author).

Interaction with HCNs

The interaction with HCNs and their support is also considered important in spouse adjustment literature (see chapter "Theoretical Background").

However, except for spouse 1, the interviewed spouses had little contact with HCNs. In contrast to Pakistan, where the official language is English and where spouse 3 had more contacts with locals, there was less interaction in Italy. The reason for interacting more with Pakistani is the fact that the parent organization provided expatriates with domestic workers and guards.



Expert 2 confirmed that in exotic destinations, the only contact the spouses have with HCNs are domestic workers, e.g. nannies, cleaners, etc. Language might be important, but it might not be the decisive factor for interacting.

Spouse 2 confirmed that she had more difficulties interacting with Singaporeans than with Swiss people, although the official language in Singapore is English. In Singapore, more than small talk was not possible. She suggested that the reason for that might be that *“Singapore is a country with constant coming and going”*. She added: *“So, if I were them, why should I exert that much effort to get to know someone who might be gone tomorrow?”* (spouse 2, translation by the author).

The importance of spouse willingness to interact and to initiate personal networks becomes clear when looking at spouse 1 who felt well integrated in Abu Dhabi. She was in contact with both locals and other expatriates. She spoke more English than Arabic but was very enthusiastic to learn the language to understand at least something. She was very engaged and curious about knowing and meeting locals. After about four months, they were privately invited by HCNs. Together with a German association, she visited a university for women. She supported the association and spoke in front of the students about job-related possibilities women have. She used the shopping mall for networking with both Arabic and international women. Spouse 1 was also invited to a ceremony of a sheik mother where only female staff worked. She stated that the adjustment of her dress style according to the host-country’s norms influenced her external perception as well:

“As an European woman, when you want to be taken seriously, you should dress accordingly. That means not too openhearted, short and colorful. For some women, this could be quite challenging. For me, it wasn’t. I saw that I wanted to have many contacts and saw the advantages, e.g. not lying at the poolside all day long, but rather being active and productive. Due to this I clearly adapted to the new situation” (spouse 1, translation by the author).

The interviews also showed that interaction is hampered not only by language barriers but also by the host-country’s reticence. In the case of Singapore, the country is in continuous change of its population. Expert 3 also reported that especially in closed cultures with languages other than English, cultural interaction is difficult. *“With the exception of the US, integration is difficult”* (expert 3, translation by the author). In most cases, people look for similar and shared experiences. The expert reported that in Italy, that can serve as an example of such a closed culture, it is more difficult to make local friends and people usually seek for similarities. This is another reason why many expatriate spouses stay surrounded by other expatriates.



She reported that *“there is the language barrier and they are not integrated if they don’t have a job or participate in a course. They cannot learn the language unless their children attend the local school”* (expert 3, translation by the author).

She said that interacting with locals requires personal initiatives, which is rather difficult due to the fact that most expatriate families decide to send their children to adequate and comparable schools, thus, spend more time in expatriate environments.

Expert 1 confirmed that interaction is more difficult in culturally more distant countries, where language and culture are high barriers, for example *“Russia, India, China and countries, which seem to react in a more “closed” way”* (expert 1, translation by the author). She reports that before the assignment begins, many spouses indeed have a wish to gain new experiences abroad and to interact with the other cultures. However, she has the impression that reality teaches them a different lesson. In the US, Switzerland and the Netherlands, countries that are culturally and/or linguistically closer to Germany, interaction issues are not very common. Only expert 4 reported that expatriates have more contact with HCNs in distant countries, in which they are often the only foreigner, the local people know.

In addition to the above factors, the time duration of stay might hamper spouses connecting fully with locals: *“They are in one country today and after three years they relocate again, thus, it is difficult to settle down and make friends with locals, because they know, they will move one day again”* (expert 2, translation by the author).

Children

As was already mentioned by one of the interview partners above, children are assumed to be an important factor for the adjustment process of the expatriate spouse. Several interviewees (spouses 2, 3 and 4 as well as experts 1, 2 and 3) confirmed that through children, spouses come into contact with others more easily. However, since the children in this sample were usually sent to international or German schools, spouses stayed amongst themselves. However, this was not considered negatively, as confirmed by spouses 2 and 3 as well as experts 1, 2 and 3.

Therefore, an access to a social network may be facilitated by the existence of children. However, children are a major concern for spouses regarding safety, schooling and change of school language. Expert 3 added that especially when children have to change the school language, spouses are concerned. She reported from her own personal experience, having changed school languages three times as an ‘expat child’, that adapting to a new language was never a problem.



Spouse 2 was childless during the first assignment in Singapore, while in her second assignment in German-speaking Switzerland, she reported to have more contacts with locals through her children.

However, this could be the case as she has no language barrier, which might hamper making contact with locals in other countries. Spouse 3 reported to have interacted with others a lot, being a volunteer at school, whereas she had problems connecting with HCNs in Italy. This might be due to her child being of older age and not directly connecting her mother with other mothers.

Both the spouses (2 and 3) and the experts (1 and 3) reported that children are a major concern prior to relocation as they have security concerns regarding schooling and living conditions. Organizations could intervene and relieve them from their concerns in pre-assignment briefings, for example.

Environmental factors

This category is adapted from Shaffer's and Harrison's (2001) environmental source which includes culture novelty/ or distance, and assignment duration.

Perceived culture distance

The following subchapters summarize the results of interviews with the respondents about their concerns, experiences and difficulties related to the cultural differences between the home and host countries, and the importance of adequate organizational support to mitigate those problems.

Duration of assignment

The length of the assignment is assumed to be an influential factor for adjusting to the foreign culture (Oberg, 1960; Mohr & Klein, 2004).

Two of the spouses (1 and 2) stated that the duration of the assignments was an important factor influencing their agreeing to accompany their husbands and accepting existing cultural differences. For instance, these spouses reported that the duration is a factor for coping with culture novelty (perceived differences). The time factor might become even more influential when spouses have to put their careers on hold. Nevertheless, as expert 2 reported, the limited time frame also prevents spouses from finding the energy to interact and integrate. This results in difficulties to settle down and to build up friendships with locals, which was confirmed by spouses 2 and 3.



Concerns prior to relocation

When asking about the initial concerns regarding the host country, the author expected to get an idea of the perception of the host country and the related fears.

The interviewed experts (1, 2 and 3) stated that the major concerns related to two categories depending on the family and professional situation: dual-career couples and couples with children. Spouses with children have strong security concerns, for instance, regarding not only living conditions, schooling, the ability to move freely within the host country or being isolated inside guarded apartments, but also the (reduced) role of being “just” a mother: *“There is a fear of mothers to sit each Saturday at a Women’s Club pool and bake cookies for scouts”* (expert 1, translation by the author). However, as spouses 1 and 3 demonstrated that joining women’s associations and doing charity might be a means to facilitate spousal adjustment.

In general, culture was not considered a major concern by the respondents. This was confirmed by all eight interview partners even though spouse 2 was nervous because she had never been to Asia before. She added that a major concern was her employment status. Spouse 3 was concerned about the change in language for her youngest child. Expert 3 stated that the major concerns women have are related to their children.

Spouse 4 also said that the major concern was related to the employment status. Therefore, organizations could provide more job-hunting assistance or support for developing professional skills. Expert 2 added that even for just understanding small nuances, a cultural awareness course (online) could be offered.

Observations of differences and difficulties in the host country

This section will illustrate some of the revealed challenges and difficulties the spouses were confronted with in the host countries.

The spouses’ in-country experiences vary, and the perception of obstacles are quite individual.

The interview partners (except for spouse 2) indicate that the lack of language knowledge led to problems concerning managing daily lives and interaction with others. Spouses 1 and 2 had difficulties with the perception of women in patriarchal societies. Spouse 2 reported: *“Often, for instance, in cabs, I asked something, and the answer was directed to my husband. This behavior totally disrupted me. It was so rude, and I felt really angry about it”* (spouse 2, translation by the author). In Switzerland, she did not encounter any difficulties. Spouse 1 worked from home and completed some favors for her husband’s company related to other expatriate spouses. She reported that only in one case she was not even looked at by a male travel agent and had to come back with her husband to book the flight.



But she continued: *“This happened only once in one and a half years. Abu Dhabi is the most liberal and well-advanced country of the Emirates”* (spouse 1, translation by the author). Spouse 4 confirmed that these kinds of experiences often happen in Arabic countries.

Spouse 1 also saw ethical violations related to conditions of workers from neighboring countries critically. She experienced difficulties with local authorities and wished to have had assistance with government offices.

In Italy, the lack of a social network was difficult for spouse 3. It was difficult for her since she was used to having many tasks and acquaintances in Pakistan. On the other hand, in Pakistan, she was confronted with completely different difficulties. She and her family lived in Islamabad where she could drive alone and walk the dog, and where she did not feel very constrained. Later on, however, her family was evacuated due to safety reasons and she was anxious after a terror attack where acquaintances and friends from school were hurt or killed. She was very concerned about the security. During the first two years, she felt secure following religious and social rules, afterwards living in Pakistan became harder. *“In the beginning, I had a feeling of security when fulfilling religious and social rules. Of course, as an European woman, you are looked at differently, but I had no problems regarding the differences between men and women. I was concerned about the security”* (spouse 3, translation by the author).

Spouse 2 had no difficulties in Switzerland. Spouse 4 did not experience any difficulties, the only differences noticed were job-related (e.g. working culture).

Influence of perceived culture distance on adjustment

The perceived differences did not hamper the adjustment process (spouses 1, 2 and 3). All three spouses in distant cultures said the duration of the assignments was of importance for accepting certain behavioral patterns. *“It was annoying, but I could accept it. Probably, it would be different if I had to live there forever, but it was only for two years. These situations didn’t happen so often, but I certainly noticed it coming from the West. My attitude towards the country and people did not change and I didn’t feel bad”* (spouse 2, translation by the author).

Organizational support

The author decided to merge the pre-assignment and on-site phases, due to the temporal overlap of provided organizational support and the need for spouses to be supported before and during the assignment.

Respondents were asked to assess the information they had obtained about the destination; the amount of cultural training that was provided; the support they had obtained in finding a job, and if the company provided any other assistance.



Differences emerge between spouse and expert perspectives regarding the offered support from companies.

When conducting the interviews, the spouses criticized the lack of involvement before the assignment and, during the early period, the absence of provided contacts while on assignment. This section outlines the standards of provided support mentioned by the experts for international assignments and reports the provided support offered to the spouses.

Training usually begins before the assignment (pre-departure training) and involves preliminary visits, language training, security briefings and cultural awareness programs (Dowling et al., 2017).

Experts 1, 2 and 3 reported that cultural and language training is usually offered at least for distant countries, but not necessarily for US or Swiss assignments. Expert 3 reported that language training also involves phrases and basic knowledge. However, the interviewed spouses, except for spouse 3, did not attend language courses even though all spouses confirmed that language abilities are important. Expert 2 reported that culture awareness courses are usually provided before the assignment begins. These courses are organized either by relocation providers or spouses can complete such courses online via online tools and learn about what they need to know, how to behave, how to dress and get safety advice. This support continues in the host country, usually when spouses have gained some impressions. Expert 3 reported that in those courses dos and don'ts are discussed as well.

Interestingly, none of the spouses participated in cross-cultural or pre-departure trainings which are recommended by the interviewed experts (for distant host countries) and commonly found in the literature, especially when the culture is very different to the parent one.

Experts 1 and 2 reported that after an agreement to accept an assignment and before the assignment begins, many firms offer pre-visits organized by relocation companies. Depending on the country, these trips are two to five days long. The assignee goes into the subsidiary, introduces himself or herself, and the family looks at the local area, schools, kindergartens and apartments. Usually spouses, and frequently school-age children, join these trips.

Expert 2 said that pre-assignment visits including visits to schools and apartments should be provided to destinations such as Arabic countries. However, spouse 1 was not offered a pre-visit. It was offered only to spouse 3 for the assignment to Pakistan, which she rejected because she was familiar with the host country prior to relocation.



Spouse 1 and 2 received support both in house hunting and relocation, spouse 3 only relocation support.

Spouse 3 was the only one who was provided with information material and safety instructions about the countries. The family had the same package for both Pakistan and Italy. In the host countries, official matters (residence, driving license, etc.) were organized and dealt with by the partner's organization. House hunting had to be organized by the family, but hotel accommodation up to one month was provided as well as financial support for the home furnishings. Spouse 3 reported that her children's education was paid by her husband's organization. The organization also provided 24-hour guards for the family's safety in Pakistan. Spouse 1 received hotel accommodation upon arrival. Spouse 4 also enjoyed administrative support, and accommodation was provided for one month.

Tax and compliance assistance are usually provided as well, and spouses are invited to participate in pre-assignment briefings, as was reported by all the interviewed experts and spouse 4. Spouses 1, 2 and 3 reported that often taxes and social insurance topics are discussed, and internal visa-immigration teams take care of resident and work permits. The administrative support for all spouses included visa regulations and residence permits. However, spouse 2 had to organize the work permit by herself.

Sometimes, even vehicles are provided, however, this is mostly reserved for executives and in countries where it is considered necessary (expert 1). Further support also includes house hunting, showing supermarkets and good schools (expert 3). Job hunting assistance is often provided (expert 3) as well, however, this was not offered to the interviewed spouses 1 and 2.

Moreover, budgets are often provided as a form of spousal assistance (mentioned by experts 1, 2 and 3). Furthermore, expert 2 reported that budgets are offered not only by their consulting clients but also by her former employer in the insurance sector. According to expert 1, those budgets can be used in several ways, but many firms link them to certain criteria, either linked to country and people, e.g. language training or linked to career planning, i.e. the budget is used for outplacement and for reorientation. In many cases, these budgets can be used up to six months after return including re-integration in form of, for instance, training activities (expert 3). Spouse 1 added that budgets are regularly provided to US spouses, but it is also common in German companies, although she was not offered it.

The provided support for repatriation was satisfying to a limited extent. All the spouses reported that the company provided flights.



Additionally, the companies of spouses 2, 3 and 4 organized the relocation process, including customs matters. Spouse 1, moving from Abu Dhabi to Cologne, had more difficulties.

Flights were organized by her partner's company, but she had to organize the liquidation of the household by herself and had to deal with customs matters as she and her husband had to transport the remaining household. Spouse 3 had the same packages both for Pakistan and Italy. Her husband's organization arranged and financed outbound and return flights, shipment of personal property and household as well as customs matters. She was very satisfied with the provided service. The organization of spouse 4 provided a two-weeks accommodation upon return. For instance, as stated by expert 2, furnished flats are often provided.

Necessary organizational support – Spouse perspective

In order to reduce the negative impact of factors that might hamper the spousal adjustment process, for example, alien experiences in the host culture, a different quality of life, language issues and career concerns, spouses were asked about the necessary organizational support.

Unrelated to the host country

Career support

Spouse 1 addressed the career issue by mentioning that more flexibility from the part of the companies would be desirable, as in their turn, companies expect an enormous flexibility from their employees. Spouse 1 had to arrange the working conditions by herself. Likewise, spouse 2, who shortly before assigning found a part-time employment by herself, requested more job-hunting assistance.

Introduction to social networks

The introduction to social networks is important in every host country. The spouses believe that the need for social support is fundamental. Organizations should provide them with necessary assistance, introducing them to a social community and enabling them to start having a social life. Especially when the spouse is not employed (anymore), this seems to be even more important.

Spouses 1, 2 and 3 emphasized the need for social support. A contact person who gives some advice at the beginning, "*who facilitates the introductory phase and who diminishes perceived novelty*" (spouse 2), connecting them with other expatriate spouses in order to facilitate the adjustment process, was wished by spouses 1, 2 and 3. Spouse 4 reported that organizations could organize events for the assignees and families at the beginning, which would be important especially for the unemployed spouse.



Spouse 3, who lived in an expatriate enclave in Pakistan, missed this type of community in Italy. In Pakistan, she was actively involved in charity and homework supervision at school.

She wished the organization had offered informative events and more activities in order to connect expatriates, such as a get-together, thus facilitating the introduction to a social life. In Zurich and German-speaking Switzerland, there is a group of companies that organize get-togethers for women, not necessarily to find a job, but to create a network to exchange and come together (expert 2).

Spouses 1, 2 and 3 stated similar preferences. Spouse 1 explicitly wished courses to take place directly, *“where, for instance, spouses are introduced to women associations, and these women could give recommendations on how to dress, where to go and don’t go. They could point out some phrases that are necessary even for going to the supermarket”* (spouse 1, translation by the author). Spouse 4 added that events could be held at the beginning of an assignment. She further mentioned that apps and social media for spouses exist, however, older spouses may not use these devices for interacting with others. Nevertheless, this could serve as a support and may be communicated at the beginning.

Related to distant host countries

Language training and information material

Spouses 1, 2 and 3 stated that language training and information material about the country was important. Spouse 1 said: *“Many Germans cannot imagine being foreigners somewhere else”* (spouse 1, translation by the author). For spouse 1 language training was important, so she prepared sentences she needed in the form of carrying cheat sheets in phonetic transcriptions: *“Everything I needed, I transcribed phonetically, and then I shared it with other women. Women should mutually support themselves”* (spouse 1, translation by the author). Spouse 1 also reported that at the beginning, many locals took advantage when she did not understand a word. She assumed that the reason was the fact that she was one of the first spouses who were accompanying their partners since *“many spouses just came down for vacation and to visit their partners for a couple of weeks, maybe they did not have any guidelines for it”* (spouse 1, translation by the author).

All of the spouses and experts considered language abilities important. However, in Abu Dhabi, Pakistan, Italy and Singapore basic language courses were not offered. Consequently, spouse 3 attended courses which she organized by herself.



Assistance with local authorities

Spouse 1 also thinks that in order to facilitate bureaucratic procedures, employers should help with local authorities.

“I was multiple times at local authorities, and they missed a point here, a seal there I really missed the employer’s support. Nobody knew who was responsible in the office. This was bad”
(spouse 1, translation by the author).



3.2. Study II: Nataliya Buettner-Wobst

The present study by Nataliya Buettner-Wobst is dedicated to the adjustment process of Russian-speaking spouses, a currently under-investigated area in the field of expatriate research. As in the investigation by Elisa Hüttchen presented above, the author concentrates on the particularities of spouse adjustment in different countries and under consideration of various impact factors. Additionally, the expected or necessary organizational support to facilitate successful adjustment of spouses during expatriate assignments is discussed.

3.2.1. Methodology

Qualitative research was selected to study the spousal adjustment issues and organisational support required for the successful spousal adjustment. The semi-structured interviews with Russian speaking spouses were conducted as stated in Table 2 below.

To find Russian speaking individuals, who accompanied their working spouses during the long-term international assignments, personal connections and social media were used. A post with an invitation to take part in an interview posted on Facebook personal page and in closed group on Facebook for Russian speaking women living abroad got around 30 responses from potential interview partners. Afterwards, a more detailed description of research was sent either through Facebook messenger or per email to explain the objectives of the research and to ensure that potential interview partners meet the requirements. Several of the future participants requested to provide them a list of key interview questions. All the potential interview partners were assured that the study is anonymous, and personal information, as well as the name of MNCs will not be mentioned. Each interview began with demographic questions: age, marital status, number of children, country or countries of assignment. In addition, interview partners were asked whether they could speak the language of the host country and English language. Five of the interview partners were from Russia and two from Ukraine. All of them were females, were officially married before the assignment and had children. Five of the spouses became mothers during their husband's international assignments. Three of the spouses had an experience of being on one assignment and in one foreign country accordingly. Other four interview partners had experiences of several relocations. The wives accompanied their husbands to the following countries: UAE, Kazakhstan, Great Britain, Russia, Austria, Germany, India, Saudi Arabia, USA, Sweden, Malaysia, Northern Ireland, Netherlands, and Poland. The characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 2.



All the interviews were conducted in the Russian language and afterwards translated into English. Interviews were conducted per Skype, WhatsApp, or Facebook Messenger. They lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes and were digitally recorded. The difference in the length of the interviews can be explained by the variations in the communication style, personal experience of interviewees, including the number of assignments, and their openness.

Table 2. Sample characteristics in study II

Interview partner	Demographic characteristics (sex, age)	Marital status	Home country	Number of children	Country of assignment	Interview duration
1	Female, 35	Married	Ukraine	4	UAE, Kazakhstan, Great Britain, Russia, Austria	1 hour
2	Female, 41	Married	Russia	4	Germany, India, Saudi Arabia	1 hour 10 minutes
3	Female, 45	Married	Russia	2	USA, Sweden, Malaysia, Northern Ireland	50 minutes
4	Female, 36	Married	Russia	1	USA	45 minutes
5	Female, 38	Married	Russia	2	Great Britain	1 hour 30 minutes
6	Female, 33	Married	Ukraine	1	Poland	50 minutes
7	Female, 34	Married	Russia	1	Netherlands USA	50 minutes

The next step in the research included interviews with two experts from PricewaterhouseCoopers. Interviews with them were conducted with the goal to validate the results of this research and get additional input.



The interview with the first expert (expert 1) was conducted in the Russian language and lasted 20 minutes. Afterwards it was translated into English. The interview with the second expert was taken in the English language, and it lasted 40 minutes. In the beginning of each interview a short summary of research results were briefly presented. Afterwards, the key research findings were discussed.

3.2.2. Results

In line with the discussion in the theoretical part of this paper, the following categories were created to present the results of this study:

- spouse career related issues,
- knowledge of the host-country language,
- social support provided by family members and friends,
- expatriate adjustment,
- parental status,
- cultural novelty and social support provided by host-country nationals,
- organisational support.

Additionally, following antecedents of spousal adjustment were identified:

- previous international experience,
- dual-career couples' family life-cycles,
- general living conditions,
- personal characteristics.

Organisational support will be presented in the end of this section, as it is linked with all the other antecedents of spouse adjustment including the new ones. Moreover, the category *organisational support* comprises not only the results related to the actual support provided by the organisations, but also presents the expectations and recommendations of the spouses. These above-mentioned categories are illustrated in Table 3.



Table 3. Illustration of categories in study II

Categories	Illustrative comments
Spouse career related issues	<p><i>I realised that I need my personal life and have personal activities to do. I wanted to be sure that I am professional, that I am in a society and my brain is still working. If you do not have that, you stop functioning (interview partner 2, translation by the author).</i></p> <p><i>I could start my own coaching practice there. There were also many very important charity activities. I felt that I was doing things, which were important for the society (interview partner 1, translation by the author).</i></p>
Knowledge of the host-country language	<p><i>After the relocation I had difficulties to use it (English language – author) in the beginning, especially with locals. I understood them, but it was not enough to make common jokes for example (interview partner 1, translation by the author).</i></p> <p><i>I know English perfectly and I had a good knowledge of German, now my German is fluent as well (interview partner 2, translation by the author).</i></p>
Social support provided by family and friends from home countries	<p><i>After the relocation I have realised that I have the best friends ever. Despite of the time difference, my friends from Moscow supported me a lot. They called me and asked me how I was doing. It was an enormous help (interview partner 4, translation by the author).</i></p> <p><i>We did not want to stay in London, so it was important for us to stay connected with our friends and relatives. I talked to my family every day...We missed each other a lot. I stayed in contact with all my friends. We flew to Russia for important family events as well (interview partner 5, translation by the author).</i></p>
Expatriate adjustment	<p><i>For my husband and his colleagues, it was always fine, as they went directly to work (interview partner 1, translation by the author).</i></p> <p><i>Luckily, he had a very international team and he did not experience any communication problems at work (interview partner 5, translation by the author).</i></p>



Table 3. Continued

Categories	Illustrative comments
Parental status	<p><i>We became parents after our relocation to Los Angeles. That is why I did not think about the career before, but now I do. I am currently searching for a study programme and think of what to do next (interview partner 7, translation by the author).</i></p>
Cultural novelty	<p><i>We lived in one of the harbour cities. It is different compared to the other cities in the country. The culture and traditions are not so strong. Women must wear abaya in public places and follow other rules. But there are exceptions (interview partner 2, translation by the author).</i></p> <p><i>We are in the Northern Ireland now. The Irish are so warm-hearted, they are very similar to my Russian friends. The culture is very close as well, and I can call them soulmates (interview partner 3, translation by the author).</i></p>
Social support provided by HCNs (including national and expatriate communities)	<p><i>In Kazakhstan I was directly invited to a club for expatriates' spouses. I was told that I could go there even with my kids (interview partner 1, translation by the author).</i></p> <p><i>In Sweden it was the expatriate community, and a lot of Russian speaking people as well. My husband introduced me to his colleagues and their spouses (interview partner 3, translation by the author).</i></p>
Organizational support	<p><i>The biggest support I got was: tickets to the home country and different type of courses (interview partner 1, translation by the author).</i></p> <p><i>They have always helped us with the relocation, including documents, containers, medical insurance for all family members. We could go on look-and-see trips before the relocation to make a decision. After the relocation we had excursions, a huge brochure with information about culture, doctors, emergency numbers and so on. The company always helped us to find schools and flats and provided detailed information about regions (interview partner 3, translation by the author).</i></p>



Table 3. Continued

Categories	Illustrative comments
Previous international experience	<i>After several relocations, one knows where to go and what to look for (interview partner 3, translation by the author).</i>
Dual-career couples' life cycles	<i>We became parents after our relocation to Los Angeles. That is why I did not think about the career before, but now I do (interview partner 3, translation by the author).</i>
General living conditions and personal characteristics	<i>Vienna is a very nice destination for our kids. It is very safe and calm. This is very convenient (interview partner 1, translation by the author).</i> <i>I enjoyed living in our own house with a nice garden. I tell you that to describe things that gave me a feeling of safety and happiness. The weather and the ecological situation are different (interview partner 5, translation by the author).</i>
Personal characteristics	<i>I am 100 percent extraverted and I need to communicate (interview partner 4, translation by the author).</i>

In the following subchapters, the results of the interviews with spouses will be presented for different categories.

Spouse career-related issues

The interviews showed that for all spouses (except for interview partner 3) the ability to work or to study during the international assignments was extremely important. All spouses worked before the international assignments, four of them (interview partners 2, 3, 4 and 5) worked in MNCs in managerial positions. Interview partner 1 worked in a managerial position in a Ukrainian company, interview partner 6 worked as a specialist in a Ukrainian company, and interview partner 7 worked as a child psychologist in Russia.

The interview partners had different motivations to work. The spouses were talking about professional and personal development, desire to have their own life, and some of them indicated that they did not want to lose time during the assignments by doing nothing.



Moreover, the work gives them an ability to have social life, to communicate with other people in the host country, and to build an interpersonal network:

“Mainly for self-actualisation... I want to communicate, I want to dress nicely, to go out. So social life is necessary for me” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

“I am sure that work will help the expatriate spouses to stay in the society and it is important for self-esteem” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

They clearly stated that employment helped them with the adjustment.

“The positive moment was that I found a job in a Russian school. It helped me a lot” (interview partner 7, translation by the author).

“In two years I could find a job. After I have re-established my professional life, I have calmed down” (interview partner 6, translation by the author).

One of the spouses (interview partner 7) mentioned that money is one more reason to work. She felt too dependent on her husband, she compared it with the loss of rights after she stopped to contribute to the family budget. Interview partner 2 identified loss in income as one of the problems as well.

“The dissatisfaction rises, as it is less money in total, as the wife stopped to work. The compensation provided by the company does not cover that. Companies do not offer you as a spouse to work in their office or any other option, and then dissatisfaction increases even more” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Job search for the spouses was associated with several difficulties. Basically, none of them could proceed with their careers in the same areas as it was in their home countries. Some of the difficulties were related to family issues such as like small children that needed physical presence or the duration of the assignments, like in the case of the interview partners 4 and 5.

Interview partner 3 stated that the decision not to work was made with the goal to spend more time with the children. During the assignments, she brought them to schools and hobby clubs. She is the only interviewee who thinks that the main motivation for spouses to work is money.

Based on her experience, expatriates' spouses do not work as their families usually have a good income, and the second reason is a lack of time for a full-time job. However, her opinion was in minority. This is how she described that:



“Usually, wives have a good higher education, but they do not work because they do need to, and they have no possibility to do so. There are no parents and relatives who are close and who can help with kids. You are alone during the assignment. I have a hobby, which brings me income. My daughter does rhythmic gymnastics. So, I sew costumes and sell them all over the world. Maybe when my children will grow up, I will think about some office work, but not now” (interview partner 3, translation by the author).

However, other spouses, especially those who have accompanied their husbands during several long term-assignments faced several common difficulties. One of the most important is a lack of recognition of the home country education degree certificates, especially in Western European countries and in the USA. One of the spouses (interview partner 1) could not find a job in her first assignment location in Dubai. She stated:

“It was my first country and I did my best to find a job there, but it was impossible. I had friends, they were the wives of my husband’s colleagues. They told me to stop looking for a job, they were really laughing and telling me it was unreal. I did not believe them and continued searching. And unfortunately, it was true” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).

She decided to study coaching during the assignment in London and afterwards she was successfully working in Moscow and Kazakhstan.

“I could start my own coaching practice there. There were also many very important charity activities. I felt that I was doing things, which were important for the society” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).

Now in Vienna she cannot work again, as according to the recent regulations, she needs to have an Austrian diploma and pass exams in the related field. The same situation faced interview partner 7. She cannot work in the USA as a child psychologist. She needs to study for several years and take an exam, which is not possible, because of the duration of the assignment.

Interview partner 2 stated that she directly decided not to look for a corporate job in Germany, as it was hopeless. She spoke English and German languages fluently and she had a previous work experience in a well-known MNC, but it would take her too long to achieve the same position in Germany. Nowadays she runs her own business in Germany.

“A start-up makes sense, because in the host countries it will take ages to get the position of the same level in the corporate world” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).



Knowledge of host-country language

Another common problem experienced by the interview partners was the knowledge of the host-country language. It was an obstacle for interview partner 6 during her job search in Poland, and it was mentioned by interview partner 1 as well, when she said that to offer coaching in Austria the knowledge of German at level B2 was not enough.

An ability to speak the host-country language and English was found to be very important. Six of the interview partners evaluated their knowledge of English as good or fluent; three spouses knew other foreign languages before the relocation. Only one of the interviewees (interview partner 7) did not speak neither English nor the language of the host country before the relocation to the Netherlands. She said that it was very hard, as even after she learnt English, she could not use it in the Netherlands in a small town where they lived, which was one and a half hours from Amsterdam. For the interview partner 6 it was hard to communicate with the host-country nationals and to find a job without a knowledge of Polish. In several cases the knowledge of the host-country language was an essential part of work, for instance in the case of coaching and child psychology.

During the interviews, it was directly communicated by the spouses that the knowledge of foreign languages is something extremely important for adjustment. They could not imagine how it would be possible to relocate without it. One of the comments about the life in the USA without English was:

“I have couple of friends here who do not speak English well. I do not imagine how they can live without it” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

Apart from career issues, the interview partners described many other issues essential during international assignments, for example, searching for apartments, kindergartens, and schools or communication with doctors. Moreover, an ability to speak one or several foreign languages gave them an opportunity to communicate with expatriates from other foreign countries. It is also important to mention, however, that a knowledge of the host-country language was not essential in all the countries: for instance, interview partner 3 did not learn Swedish as everyone in the town where they lived could speak English.

Social support provided by family members and friends

The support provided by family members and friends was discussed during six interviews (except for interview 1).

“In my home country, my mother would help me” (interview partner 3, translation by the author).



The spouses provided examples of communication with their friends and family members:

“After the relocation I have realised that I have the best friends ever. Despite of the time difference, my friends from Moscow supported me a lot. They called me and asked me how I was doing. It was an enormous help” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

“We did not want to stay in London, so it was important for us to stay connected with our friends and relatives. I talked to my family every day, I communicated per Skype and showed my kid to her grandparents. My daughter was their first grandchild and they were very excited. We missed each other a lot. I stayed in contact with all my friends. We flew to Russia for important family events as well” (interview partner 5, translation by the author).

Spouses described stress that they have experienced from being isolated from their usual social network. However, it is difficult to make a certain conclusion whether it was because of a separation with their extended family members and friends or because of the loss of social support. For example, interview partner 6 said that the second relocation from the Netherlands to the USA was even more difficult than that from Russia to the Netherlands, because she lost her social environment for a second time. Quite the same description was given by another interviewee.

“I experience communication problems with other people. It is very difficult when you are taken out of the environment. I miss my friends from the previous assignments. My best friend lives in New Zealand now, and I do not know when I will see her again” (interview partner 3, translation by the author).

Expatriate adjustment

During the interviews, the spouses talked a lot about stress or negative feelings they have experienced. It is not easy to determine where it comes from, for instance, whether this stress is because of relocation or whether it is marital stress. However, it is an important antecedent of their adjustment and should be taken into consideration. The statements of the interview partners are presented below.

“In the beginning I could cry for the whole days and nights. I was at home alone; my husband was at work and our child was in the kindergarten. Compared to me my husband was fine. He likes his job, and he is happy with his ongoing interesting projects” (interview partner 6, translation by the author).

“It was very difficult in the beginning. I wanted to return home” (interview partner 7, translation by the author).



“After my first relocation I have experienced a huge stress, mainly because I had to quit my job” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Interview partner 1 gave a very detailed description of this issue:

“In general, an expatriated family should be ready for challenges. Stress can be significant. It is also about the work of an expatriate and changes, which may happen there. This is something what other people do not see. People usually think that the life of expatriates is always full of positive emotions. The life of expatriates is difficult and people who want to live abroad need to know that it is important to learn how to manage stress and behave in unpredictable and conflict situations” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).

During the interviews, the spouses did not want to talk a lot about the adjustment issues of their husbands. They confirmed that the adjustment of expatriates is different. The husbands go to work directly after the relocation. The spouses were sure that they had interesting work to do and nice people to communicate with. However, four spouses talked about how emotional and psychological resources are important for the stability in the family and adjustment in the host country. Two wives gave examples of how their husbands helped them during the first months. In the case of interview partner 4, her husband helped her to get some project work at his company, and it was very important for her. She also stated that the husband helped her emotionally, as it was very difficult for her after the relocation.

“In the beginning, my husband worried about my mental condition, because it was extremely difficult” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

The husband of interview partner 5 was emotionally supporting her a lot. He also recommended her some concrete actions such as taking a taxi to see a person she met during her first days at a kids’ playground. They lived in the different parts of London, and she was reluctant to go with a small child anywhere. Later they became friends and with their help acquainted with the other Russian families with whom they communicated during their assignment.

Interview partner 1 said that it is extremely important to support the husband during an assignment.

“Spouses need to have enough energy to support husbands. They should manage their emotions to keep peace within the family. This is something what is often discussed between the spouses of expatriates” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).



Interview partner 2 told that it is important to support the partner as well, but it is not always possible because of stress experienced during assignments.

“The husbands are all the time at work. The wife should support the husband, but she cannot, because she does not have any emotional resources” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Parental status

As already mentioned above, all interview partners had children. Some of them went on an assignment already with children and some became parents during the assignment. In total, around 30 percent of time during the interviews were dedicated to children issues during the assignments.

The first important aspect is that children help building social networks during assignments. All interview partners confirmed that they could establish contacts with other parents at the children’s playgrounds, kindergartens, and schools. For one spouse (interview partner 5) this was a happy accident, as afterwards through such a contact she established contacts with other several families with kids. For interview partner 1, it was quite the same, as she got acquainted with a woman, who later became her close friend and helped her with her coaching practice. One of the spouses (interview partner 3) met another Russian lady at a children’s playground in Sweden to find out later that their husbands worked for the same company. Afterwards they became family friends and spent a lot of time together. Thus, no one denied the role of children in their socialisation and adjustment.

The second important aspect spouses talked about was how children react to the relocation. The key conclusion is that it is easier to relocate with preschool aged kids. After that age it becomes more difficult. One of the spouses (interview partner 3) said that her school aged children reacted very emotionally to the last relocation. They missed their international school in Malaysia, friends, good weather, and they were just sad.

The third important aspect is that nowadays there are different school systems, and the decision regarding the education of the children influences the decision whether to go on an international assignment or not, and which countries are suitable and which are not. Interview partner 2 described it in detail as follows:

“Our kids are growing up. It is very important for us which schools or kindergartens our children attend. We decided that we do not want that they study in Saudi Arabia, for example.”



Our decision was made based on expectations in which culture kids should be raised. Kids are influenced by their friends a lot. I can give you an example. A lot of kids in the international schools in Saudi Arabia have service staff. Other people clean kids' rooms and do a lot of other staff for them. I have seen how my kids absorb this culture. It does not mean that other kids will not study well. They will do and most probably in very good universities. But we believe that our children should have knowledge how to pack the backpacks themselves, how to clean their rooms, and how to buy tickets for metro. Also, I think we will not be able to send kids to study somewhere far from us" (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Cultural novelty and social support provided by host-country nationals

The wives have accompanied their husbands to the following countries: UAE, Kazakhstan, Great Britain, Russia, Austria, Germany, India, Saudi Arabia, USA, Sweden, Malaysia, Northern Ireland, Netherlands, and Poland. During the interviews, spouses were asked about their perception of the local cultures and some possible examples of what they liked or disliked.

Based on the results of the interviews it can be proposed that the assessment of local cultures was largely driven by personal experiences and adjustment of spouses in the countries. For instance, interview partner 1 said that the assignment in London was a big disaster, mainly because she had no one to communicate with. Interview partner 3 also did not want to describe the Malaysian and US-American cultures, because they were not close to her. She also said that the expatriate community in Malaysia was not as good as in Sweden, so she did not like the country neither.

During the rest of the interviews and conversations about other countries, the spouses were very positive describing cultures and host-country nationals. Some of the examples are presented below.

"We are in the Northern Ireland now. The Irish are so warm-hearted, they are very similar to my Russian friends. The culture is very close as well, and I can call them soulmates. It is very comfortable to live here, there are no fences, and children have many activities.

On the second day I knew all my neighbours and had coffee with them" (interview partner 3, translation by the author).

"The English people are very polite everywhere. We once were at the police station to register, they were very attentive, they even played with our kid and they even brought a box with toys" (interview partner 5, translation by the author).



None of the spouses stated that they had friends or built a decent interpersonal network with the host-country nationals. Mostly, they accounted about expatriate communities and their cohesiveness. One of the interviewees told that the more “difficult” the country, the better and closer expatriates’ communities are (interview partner 1). Under “difficult” she mainly understood the cultural difference. For example, in Kazakhstan, India, Saudi Arabia, the members of expatriate communities were closer than in Dubai, European and US cities. In Saudi Arabia the expatriate families lived in a compound for foreigners protected by armed security, so they had to interact with each other from the beginning more often than in the European countries or the USA. Interview partner 2 gave an example about how the culture and the countries’ rules, in this case those of Saudi Arabia, may force expatriates to spend even more time together.

Sometimes sex segregation was difficult for expatriates. When expatriates’ spouses left the country from time to time, the expatriates had to go to the room for men in the restaurants. For some of them it was very difficult, as they were used to the European culture. They did not want to spend time in the men’s room, they wanted to communicate with everyone like always.

Still, a lot depends on personal circumstances and the ability to build a decent interpersonal network. For instance, interview partner 1 told that she had no positive experiences in London, while interview partner 5 could find interesting people to communicate with and gave a very positive overall feedback about the assignment in London. Moreover, for interview partner 1, the assignments in Kazakhstan and Russia were easier, because in both cases, the local people spoke the Russian language and, additionally, the expatriate community in Kazakhstan was very close.

“Countries like Rumania, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan are very good for expatriates. Such countries are good because expatriate communities are very close, the life is interesting, there are a lot of activities, people visit each other very often. All the time there are many activities like painting, hiking, skiing, a lot of charity activities. [They are] very nice countries for socialising, doing interesting things and living in general.

But there is an enormous difference in the quality of life between expatriates and locals” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).

The same spouse stated that during the assignments different type of people became friends that most probably would not be so close in other situations. When expatriate spouses build relationships with the other spouses, they tend to spend a lot of time together.



The same was confirmed by interview partner 3, but she also said that the social and parental status was important, as it facilitated the common interests.

“The life in Sweden was full of fun. We communicated with many other families like ours, we were of the same social status, and a lot of our activities were common. Our children went to the same school, we knew each other very well” (interview partner 3, translation by the author).

Previous international experience

During the interviews, another important antecedent of spousal adjustment was identified: The adjustment depends on the previous experience of relocations, and overall understanding of potential difficulties and the necessary actions to overcome those. Four spouses interviewed for the purpose of this research had experiences of several relocations, and all of them confirmed this view.

“In the beginning it is extremely difficult, after relevant experiences in several countries it becomes easier. Because in the beginning you do not have knowledge, and you cannot imagine what you are going to face, and how you need to act. After two to three relocations you have the required knowledge and skills and you know how to behave” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).

“After several relocations, one knows where to go and what to look for” (interview partner 3, translation by the author).

The spouse who had the experience of just one relocation described her actions in the case of possible assignments in the future:

“In the case of following assignments, I would plan everything better: where kids would go, what I would do, I would find online chats with people from this country, most probably I would establish some contacts, also I would travel with my husband for a look-and-see trip” (interview partner 5, translation by the author).

Dual-career couples’ family life-cycles

Five of the interviewed spouses became mothers during the international assignments of their husbands, and one of the interview partners relocated with a child, who was at this time less than one year old. Importantly, interview partners 4, 5 and 7 stated that it was a good time to become parents or to have small children during expatriate assignments, as this provides an important reason to take a career break.



Additionally, interview partner 1 talked about family life-cycles and their influence on international assignments:

“After several relocations an internal alarm clock starts to work and wondering where we are going afterwards. It becomes a need. After one and a half to two years I expect changes in my life. Sometimes, there are reasons why this alarm starts to work faster or the other way around – it stops. Among these reasons: the age of the “breadwinner”, when the “breadwinner” says it is enough: “I want to achieve this and this goal and then I want to go on pension”; or some family factors like kids, schools of kids, or universities; or when the wife finds a good job and she says that she is not willing to relocate” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).

General living conditions

General living conditions is another determinant of adjustment described by the spouses. They include the weather, food, the ecological situation, available activities, and the positive attitude of local people to spouses and their children.

“I found it very convenient, that it is possible buy everything online. We appreciated the strong culture of organic food. I enjoyed living in our own house with a nice garden. I tell you that to describe things that gave me a feeling of safety and happiness. The weather and the ecological situation are different. It is always green outside. The life does not stop for the wintertime and people are still active. There are many places to visit, especially for families with kids. Everything is well planned – where to eat, where to change clothes for a baby. We have travelled a lot in the country. Also compared to Moscow, my husband did not work 12 hours per day and he went only 20 minutes by car to work, so we still had time for ourselves during the working week. When he returned home from his work, we still had time to spend together, and we could go for a walk, or drive to the centre of London, visit some friends” (interview partner 5, translation by the author).

The descriptions of Los Angeles and Vienna were as follows:

“The weather is perfect, we do not need to buy dozens of warm clothes” (interview partner 7, translation by the author).

“Vienna is a very nice destination for our kids. It is very safe and calm” (interview partner 1, translation by the author).

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the expatriates tried to leave the country once per three months because of the following reasons:



“When we lived in Saudi Arabia, we tried to leave the country at least for one week in three months. Other expatriates also did so and recommended it to us. First, because of the weather. There is always direct sunlight without clouds, and it is very hot. The second reason was the living conditions. We lived in a closed village for expatriates, every day our car was checked. We had a guard to protect the territory. I got very quickly used to that, but at the same time it was tough” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Personal characteristics

During this qualitative study, it was difficult to assess how personal characteristics influenced the adjustment process. However, some of the spouses talked about their personalities, as well as readiness to act and to build a new life.

“A spouse needs to create a new life after a relocation. I am sure that if one does not have any children and has an opportunity to start working directly, it is a different story... My advice is also not to try to live your previous life, especially if it is a long-term assignment. It is useless to write every day an email to your friends in your home country. How long will you do that? One month, two months? But it is unreal. It is not possible to stay every day at home, or to go for a walk alone. A real life is essential” (interview partner 5, translation by the author).

“I am 100 percent extraverted and I need to communicate” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

Organisational support

Expatriates spouses expect a certain level of support and attention. The interview partners provided a number of examples about how organisational support or lack of it influenced their adjustment. The following results will be presented by dividing them into three main categories: practical, social, and professional support.

Practical support

Assistance with documents, tax consulting, and technical support were not seen to be a concern for the adjustment process. Normally, this essential for the relocation support is provided by companies. However, an assistance of a relocation service provider, an availability of language courses, and cross-cultural trainings were found to be important. Conversely, it was found that spouses had lack of information regarding everyday life in the host country, and they found it to be important for their adjustment. In this paper, the corresponding findings will be presented under “social infrastructure”.



Relocation service provider

All the families received housing-related support provided by the companies. In the case of interview partners 3 and 5 it included an assistance of a relocation service provider during the housing search. Interview partners 2, 6, and 7 experienced problems during the search for a place to live. One of the spouses could not find after the relocation someone to leave her small twins with and had to take them with her during the search for houses and nurseries. She mentioned that it was summer, thus it was extremely hot and very inconvenient. This spouse faced quite the same situation later in Saudi Arabia when she was looking for the furniture and described how that effected their family.

“For sure, company did not care with whom or where I could leave my kids. Usually it is a lot of stress during the first 100 days, and, for sure, the husbands’ performance depends on the mood of his wife, because he is the only person to call and to complain that nothing works” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Moreover, this interview partner stated that she could not imagine what families would do, if spouses would start to work directly after the relocation.

Interview partners 6 and 7 faced the situation, when the housing allowance was not enough for the desired accommodation. Additionally, the information about the residential property market was missing. The spouses had to search themselves where the best districts to live were. Interview partners 3 and 5 received a detailed information about the housing market and assistance during the search, and they appreciated it. Interview partner 5 additionally read information on forums in the Internet, as it was very helpful for her family. All the interviewees had children, and it was important for them to know about the social infrastructure around.

Cross-cultural trainings

Cross-cultural training was provided to one family couple only (interview partner 2). The related spouse described the information they got as very useful. However, she did not pay too much attention to it. She was sure that the difficulties described by the consultant would not be relevant to her.

“The consultant told me that I should think about my activities in London. Because otherwise I could get depressed. I thought that it was not about me, because I was always busy with something, I was emotionally stable and at that time we also had our first baby” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).



Despite the fact, that interview partner 2 was the only one, who got such kind of support, it still can be stated that the cross-cultural training is very important. During the interviews, the spouses, especially the ones who had their first experience of relocation, confirmed that they were not prepared for it and no one discussed with them difficulties they were going to face.

Language courses

It was confirmed that the knowledge of the host-country language or the English language, depending on country, is essential. Moreover, the interviewees considered the language courses as one of the opportunities to establish a network with non-host-country nationals.

Social infrastructure

Spouses stated that the knowledge about the social infrastructure is very important. It includes information about the nearest doctors, different hobby clubs, activities for kids, and specialised shops. Interview partners 3, 4 and 5 received such information and partially underscored its usefulness.

“They gave us a big folder where everything was written in detail: where to eat, what to eat, information about the climate, what kind of clothes to wear, where it is better to buy a car and where it is not, and so on. It was full of useful information, I used it a lot” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

Interview partners 2 and 7 stated that this was the type of information they missed after the relocation.

“For families it is a lot about kids. In the beginning, after the relocation, kids often have health issues. Parents need to find doctors. It is important to understand that there is a different language, it could be different diseases than in the home country.

It would be nice if companies could provide some help here. I believe that it is not difficult to collect this information through companies’ connections, or even to ask other expatriates and employees. It is possible to check reliability. Sometimes a host country can be like a different planet” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Large differences in healthcare systems were discussed during the interviews. For instance, the spouses (interview partners 5 and 7) did not know that in Great Britain and Poland doctors normally do not come to a home of a patient. It was stressful for both of them, when they found out that they must bring their ill children to the hospitals. Additionally, the interview partners stated that a general information about kindergartens or schools could be provided as well.



“For couples that relocate from Russia with kids, it will be a big challenge, because kindergartens and schools are different. For instance, in Russia, kids change their clothes before going to sleep during lunchtime, and they sleep in a separate room. In the USA kids sleep in their clothes and in their shoes on the floor for the case of a fire alarm. And this is good, but mothers who come from Russia are shocked, and they need time to accept it” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

Professional support

The professional support is understood as activities implemented by the company to help spouses with their professional integration. Two of the interviewees stated that they did not need such kind of support. Interview partner 3 made the decision not to work and to spend more time with her children, and interview partner 5 studied in two programmes in London.

None of interviewees received compensation for the loss of spousal salary due to expatriation or was provided a job search assistance. Only the interview partner 6 got a career seminar but based on her evaluation it was of poor quality. Later she found a career consultant, who could provide her with the information about the labour market and helped her during the job search. Only one of the spouses could get projects from the company that her husband worked for and she described it as follows:

“I did a couple of professional projects for the company that my husband works for. It was a big deal for me. It helped me a lot to return to life” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

However, the interviews showed that spouses expected some professional support from companies. Their expectations can be divided into two main groups.

Firstly, spouses expected that they could be consulted by a local HR or external service provider about job opportunities on the local market, and that they would be provided information in this case if Russian or Ukrainian degree certificates were valid. Secondly, they wished to have an opportunity to work, including part-time or project work offered by the company.

“Typically, expatriates are senior or top-managers. Usually their wives have a good previous job experience, good education and they know several foreign languages. Companies could offer them some part-time jobs, distant work or at least something. After the first relocation I was non-existent for the company” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).



Interview partners 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7 confirmed during the interviews that in the case of international assignments, part-time work, project work, or even some jobs like fitness instructor could be a perfect match in the situation.

“I have read about an agency in the USA and they offer women on maternity leave something like a package work. They can choose how long to work and when to work. This is a very good idea for assignments as well” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

Moreover, charity projects or other activities can also be attractive.

“It is always nice to look at a corporate website of a company. Companies could have a page with ongoing charity projects or other activities, where spouses or other people could participate as volunteers. Because it would create the feeling of belonging to the company” (interview partner 4, translation by the author).

Social support

Spouses were asked about the social support provided by enterprises. Interview partner 1 said that this is – in her opinion – not the company’s task, and companies support is limited to allowances. In her case, her husband or expatriate communities helped her with the socialisation. However, in London, for instance, she faced a situation, when she had basically no one to communicate with. After the relocation to the USA, interview partner 7 attended an official club for expatriate spouses and found some friends there. In a similar vein, interview partners 4, 5, and 6 would recommend companies to offer clubs for spouses, family events, and some activities, in which spouses can participate. Generally, it is considered essential for a network establishment.

Coaching and mentoring

During the interview, spouses repeatedly stated that it was not easy for them to adjust. They experienced stress, and sometimes it was hard to understand the underlying reason for it. They talked about stressful situations in their families and in the families of their friends. At the same time interview partner 2 said that she would not expect any psychological help from the company.

“I would not expect such kind of help from a company, because you cannot tell them that. A person before the relocation is sure that he or she is ready for the assignment. It is something desired, it is in a good location, and there is no feeling that something may go wrong. This is one of the key reasons why people get disappointed, they expect a fairy tale and get the reality.”



So, this is the mismatch in the expectations and reality” (interview partner 2, translation by the author).

However, interview partner 1 stated that offering a coach or a mentor could be a good solution, and that confidentiality is necessary as well. Interview partner 4 proposed a quite identical solution to have consultations after two-three months after the relocation. The key purpose is to understand what created stress for the spouses after the relocation and how to deal with it.



3.3. Study III: Martha dos Santos Dörholt

The following study by Martha dos Santos Dörholt focuses on a further aspect of family adjustment related to expatriation in addition to the two pieces of student research presented above. She investigates the issue of expatriate children's adjustment during the repatriation stage of expatriate assignments. This study is based on interviews with German expatriate children who account about their experiences, problems and solutions as described on the methodology and results sections below.

3.3.1. Methodology

The data collection for this study started with a smaller sample of expatriate children that was subsequently expanded by applying the snowball strategy. The interviewed children were asked to name other expatriate children, mostly friends. Thus, a sample consisting of nine interview partners, currently between 14-23 years old, was built. They lived at least 2 years abroad and maximum of up to 12 years. During their childhood, all the interviewed individuals lived in up to three countries. The most recent return to Germany was $\frac{3}{4}$ years and the latest was six years ago. The locations of the foreign assignments were in regions such as Asia, South and North America as well as Europe.

For the purpose of data collection, qualitative interviews were performed. Due to the fact, that this study has an exploratory research purpose, the author decided to use semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted face to face in order to build and maintain trust between the participant and the researcher. Interviews were held in the mother tongue of the participants, which in all cases is German. Moreover, all participants gave their permission to capture the data by audio-recording, which enabled the researcher to ensure an authentic and complete record of the topics discussed. Participants who asked for the interview guideline beforehand, were sent it accordingly. All interviews took place in the months of April and May 2018. Table 4 represents the different demographics of each interview partner (IP). The characteristics are listed with respect to gender, current age, host country where the international assignment took place, total time abroad and the time passed since their return.



Table 4. Description of interviewees in study III

IP	Gender	Age	Host country	Total time abroad (years)	Time since return (years)
1	m	18	USA	3	2
2	w	17	China	4	3
3	w	23	Hong Kong, China	6	6
4	m	14	Hong Kong, Taiwan, China	9	3/4
5	m	18	Brazil, China	5	4
6	w	22	China	2	6
7	m	21	China	2	6
8	w	18	Mexico, Spain	12	6
9	m	16	Mexico, Spain	11	6

The interview guideline was adjusted after the implementation of a pilot interview. Due to the fact that the interviews were conducted with children and adolescents, a more detailed structure was necessary to guide interview partners through the interview. The revised version consisted of four main areas. Firstly, the interview partner was welcomed and thanked for being part of this study and was shortly provided with the information about the topic and objectives of this research. Secondly, the interviewee was asked to introduce himself or herself by giving information about their age, countries he or she lived in, how long and since when he/she has been back. The third part covered the experiences of the interview partner in the host country regarding school situation, cultural awareness and general wellbeing. Afterwards, the repatriation was discussed in detail. The interviewee was asked to describe how he or she experienced the return, what his or her reactions were, what expectations he or she had and how the readjustment process worked. If the responses of the interview partner appeared to be too broad, the interviewer asked questions in more detail.

Subsequently, the recorded interviews were partially transcribed to include only those sections of each recording that were used for the research.



The audio recordings lasted from 13 to 47 minutes and all of them were analyzed thematically in detail and coded. The identified codes are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. Coding framework in study III

Code number	Description: Factors affecting the readjustment process during repatriation
Code 1	Social network challenges
Code 2	Opposing worldviews
Code 3	Educational differences
Code 4	Lack of mother tongue practice
Code 5	Preparedness

3.3.2. Results

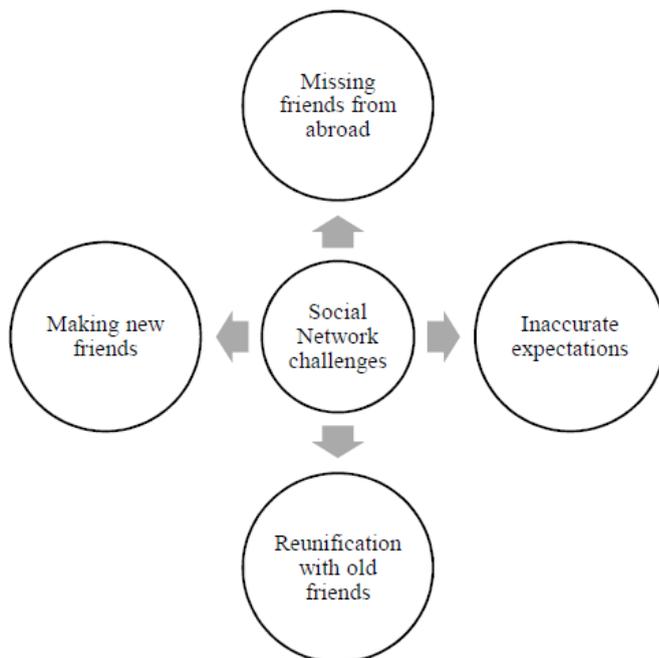
In this chapter, the findings of the primary research will be presented according to the order given in the coding framework (Table 5 above).

Social network challenges

All nine interview partners stated that friendship played an important role in their readjustment in the home country. Five participants (IP 1, 2, 5, 6, 7), who have lived at maximum four years abroad, indicated problems related to establishing a social network. Figure 1 illustrates the major difficulties encountered by the interview partners.



Figure 1. Social network challenges



Source: Own illustration

According to Caligiuri et al. (1998, pp. 315-316) children face social issues during an international relocation. Missing friends when moving abroad proved to be a key obstacle. The same phenomenon occurs when children relocate back to their home country. To begin with, IP 2, 5, 8 and 9 stated that leaving behind friends that they made abroad proved to be a challenge upon return to the home country.

For instance, interview partner 6 stated: *“I miss the friendships. Now all the people are spread across Germany”* (IP 6, translation by the author). This shows that the distance is perceived as an issue that impedes the possibility to maintain constant contact to friends. At the same time, this concern exacerbates the readjustment of children at home because they miss their friends.

The second problematic issue encountered by some children was the formation of inaccurate expectations concerning the reunion with friends. IP 2, 5, 6, and 7 claimed that they expected to connect to their old friend circle in their home country. In the case of IP 2, inaccurate expectations led to unexpected difficulties in terms of establishing a social network. IP 2 expressed it as follows: *“I expected that my friends would receive me well [...] but that was not the case. I was disappointed and felt hurt”* (IP 2, translation by the author).



In addition, IP 6 supported this view by saying: *“Very close friends stay. [...] I quickly noticed who are my real friends and who are not”* (IP 6, translation by the author).

Abroad, the children are surrounded by people sharing the same situation of adjusting to a new culture, exchanging cultural values and are in constant contact with a diversity of people (IP 7). The process of making friends abroad was described to be a different scenario than in the home country by interview partners 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7. For instance, IP 7 explained:

“On my first day of school I knew the people for about ten minutes and got invited to do something together. That was totally new to me. It was the opposite to what happens in Germany when someone new joins. That was perfect, I got accepted right away, I felt safe” (IP 7, translation by the author).

Upon return, IP 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7 assumed that they would encounter the same welcoming culture as abroad, because they were simply returning to their old friends. However, IP 7 provided evidence, that this is generally not the case. He stated:

“No, not at all. Of course, I tried in the beginning, but due to individual changes and having a different view, it was very difficult to ‘get in’ again. Especially because one has missed a lot. Clique formation is very strong, which makes it even more difficult to ‘get in’ to the old clique” (IP 7, translation by the author).

Therefore, challenges with the reunification with the old friends can be stated as the third factor impacting the establishment of a social network. Besides, IP 5 and 7 argued that personal changes made the establishment of the old and/or new social network difficult. IP 5 claimed:

“My old friends made new friends, different cliques were formed, some friends went to a different school or moved away and individual interests changed over the years” (IP 5, translation by the author).

The fourth challenge is the process of making new friends upon return, which was highlighted by IP 6, 2 and 3. Interview partner 6 claimed that she experienced acceptance issues as in the following example:

“In Shanghai, one could make friends very easily, because everybody was in the same situation, and here it’s not like that. It was really hard to get accepted in a clique. [...] Open-mindedness is not given here” (IP 6, translation by the author).

Interview partner 2 further claimed that the strong bond of cliques was an issue:



“At the school here in Germany everybody knew each other. Groups existed and thus I had to decide to become part of either the one clique or the other” (IP 2, translation by the author).

This lack of open-mindedness and welcoming atmosphere was also experienced by children that lived in a foreign country for at least six years and up to twelve years. Interview partner 3 affirmed that she was better accepted by people abroad than in Germany:

“I had an issue with German cliques. I didn’t understand them. They were strange to me. I experienced a lot of rejection, because I didn’t feel to be part of them and I could not identify myself with them. When the school started, I was very frustrated and disappointed because I had to integrate myself completely on my own, which was extremely difficult. It took a lot of energy. Overseas it was always like ‘hey, you are new, come with us’, that is not the case in Germany” (IP 3, translation by the author).

Thus, some expatriate children experienced the home country friends as less welcoming than those abroad. Not feeling welcomed by their peers revealed to be a stressful and challenging period for some interviewed children. Hence, social network concerns should be regarded as an important influencing factor during the readjustment process of expatriate children, which needs to be given a sufficient attention in order to ensure a smooth re-entry for all family members.

Opposing worldviews

Apart from some children that experienced social network issues, the interview partners indicated further challenges concerning the general social environment and society. Being on an international assignment means getting out of the own comfort zone, adopting to a different social and cultural environment. During this process, most individuals develop an international worldview, become curious about different cultures and have the privilege to travel and to experience other cultures (Howard, 1974, p. 22). Interview candidates 2, 3, 6 and 7 stated that the attitude of parent-country nationals was an issue.

“What stood out a lot was the people’s attitude. People just do not look outside the box. In our town for instance, people live their whole lives in this town without any drive to see something different. That annoys me especially when watching the news from all around the world. They seem to have a limited worldview. I always think if they had seen certain situations, they would have thought differently about it. Today, I still have an issue with it” (IP 6, translation by the author).



This provides evidence for Lee and Liu (2007, p. 122) stressing that individuals return from an international assignment with different beliefs and values due to the intercultural experience they made. Upon return they are confronted with a society that was once familiar to them and has now turned to a foreign setting. IP 3 elaborated this point by saying the following:

“I had a problem with the people here, not with the culture. [...] The people have a different worldview. It did not fit to mine. I realized I had problems with people who lived their whole lives in the same place and wanted to stay there. I mean, that is fine, but I cannot understand it, because I didn’t grow up like this” (IP 3, translation by the author).

Moreover, interview partner 9 shared his experiences after a repatriation from Mexico as follows:

“The people in Mexico were more open, had a different attitude and were not as closed-minded as Germans [...] In Germany I noticed that it takes a long time to talk to someone openly” (IP 9, translation by the author).

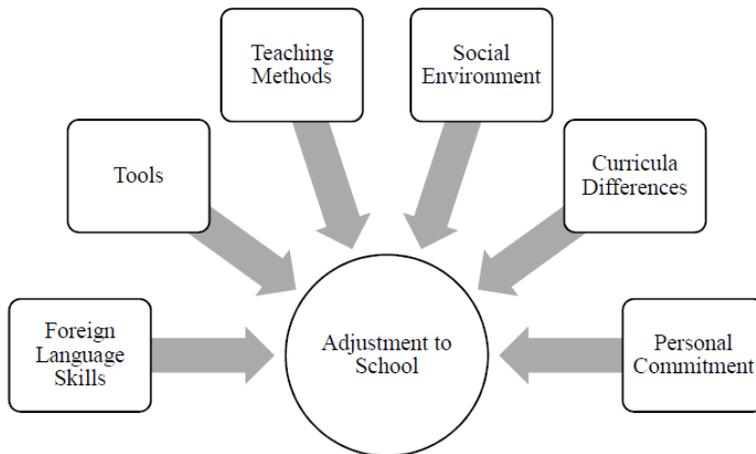
Facing a social environment that is not as open-minded and not as international as abroad proved to be another key influencing factor impeding the readjustment of some expatriate children. Here, an important problem is related to the difficulties expatriate children experience when interacting with parent-country nationals back home.

Educational differences

Apart from one interview partner who did not return to school after the international assignment, all interviewees indicated that educational differences had a great impact on their readjustment process. Overall, six factors proved to affect the adjustment process in the home country school. These main challenges are illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. School adjustment problems



Source: Own illustration

The expatriate literature shows that some repatriates are not able to utilize their international experience gained during foreign assignments at their work back home. As consequence, they feel overqualified for their position (Welch, 1994, pp. 139-164). The present research indicated that similar to repatriate employees, their children also show signs of overqualification due to the devaluation of gained skills. The interviewed expatriate children who have lived more than four years abroad have gained improved foreign language skills. They felt overqualified especially in English. Interview partner 3 said that she often knew the words in English, but not in German. Interview partner 4 stressed:

“I miss speaking English. The English class is very simple here. [...] In Shanghai, we performed Shakespeare, read it and interpreted it. English classes are boring here” (IP 4, translation by the author).

The second adjustment impediment concerned the facilities and tools provided by the school. IP 4, 5 and 7 accentuated the differences between the schools abroad and in the home country, as described by the following statement:

“Here, the school is very different. Pretty outdated. In Shanghai, for instance, we had iPads for every school class” (IP 4, translation by the author).

In addition, interview partner 5 said that the technological equipment was very good compared to Germany. Having to accustom oneself to a school system with a poor technological equipment proved to be a certain barrier to some interviewed candidates. The skills obtained through technology offered at a foreign school cannot be used upon return to the same extent as it was the case abroad.



Getting used to less advanced equipment reveals to be part of the adjustment process and should be regarded as factor influencing the smoothness of readjustment.

Thirdly, diverging teaching methods showed to be a challenge for expatriate children. For instance, interview partner 7 stated the following:

“The teaching staff was completely different. It was old fashioned, frontal teaching, almost no electronic equipment. For instance, we were not allowed to take out our mobile phones. In Shanghai, we were allowed to take out our mobile phones and to drink water during the class. At my first day of school, I put my water bottle on the table and took a sip. At this point the teacher already looked at me critically. Then I took out my mobile phone to put it on the table. Seconds later, my mobile phone was collected and I was sent to the school director” (IP 7, translation by the author)

Additionally, he added:

“We had school until 5:00 pm, afterwards a voluntary activity until 7:00 pm. It did not feel like a school. We met with school colleagues and ‘worked’ a bit. [...] The material was taught in a way that I enjoyed learning at school. The school in Germany was until 1:30 pm, we had six hours of class that were a catastrophe because of the teaching style” (IP 7, translation by the author).

Based on the results of this study it can be proposed that, similar to repatriates adjusting to their new work environment, children have to adjust to the teaching methods of their new teachers, the different tools provided to learn as well as the different atmosphere in classrooms. Besides, coming from a private school back to a public school means getting used to different types of children. To their surprise, the social environment at the school abroad was very different to the one encountered upon return.

Consequently, the fourth challenge is the social environment at school. For example, IP 5 stated:

“I did not really like the school here. [...] I applied for three schools and two of them rejected my application. Unavoidably I had to go to the third choice, which I did not like. I experienced the school as very antisocial. Fights were on the agenda every day” (IP 5, translation by the author).

A similar description was provided by interview partner 2:

“The way they treat each other here, was not the case in Shanghai. [...] There are worlds in between” (IP 2, translation by the author).



Furthermore, interview partner 4 elaborated this point by stating the following:

“Also the kids are very different. Here, some make jokes about China, because they do not know what it is like over there and that was different in Shanghai. That annoys me a bit” (IP 4, translation by the author).

Interview partner 9 described his experiences in the following manner:

“I was at the German school of Barcelona, which was a private school. [...] There was a different circle of people. For instance, the children of the former president of Catalonia attended the school” (IP 9, translation by the author).

Apart from above mentioned issues, some interview partners also mentioned different school curricula as another problem. Interview partner 1 indicated that he had difficulties in specific subjects upon return. Moreover, he had to repeat a year.

“First I was on a public middle school and then on a high school. The schooling system was completely in English. In addition, I had to visit a German school, to secure a possibility to reenter the same school in Germany as I did before. [...] Due to the fact that I missed some subjects during my time in the USA, I particularly had difficulties in math and social science subjects” (IP 1, translation by the author).

The final factor impeding the readjustment process turned out to be emerging from the individual willingness to adapt. Interview partner 2 expressed this issue as follows:

“It actually should be easier here, but it was not. I was just too sad about having to leave Shanghai and therefore I was totally distracted” (IP 2, translation by the author).

Interview partner 3 added that her motivation to study at school also lacked due to the fact that she was not unhappy about returning back home. She described this situation as follows:

„I think my parents were more stressed with us than with the job or the new environment. They definitely noticed that my brother and I did not want to do anything for school. Sometimes my father was pretty angry with me, because he did not understand my behavior” (IP 3, translation by the author).

Lack of mother tongue practice

Moreover, although the majority of interview partners visited German schools abroad, the daily practice of the native language was not always given.



Four of the nine interviewed persons (IP 3, 4, 8, 9) underwent almost all their school education abroad. Especially children who had lived only the first few years in their home country indicated issues with the German language upon return, as described in the following example below.

“The German language was a problem. [...] I sometimes missed words. I had a discussion with the school director regarding the use of the English-German dictionary for my A-Level exam of German, because I often knew the words in English but not in German” (IP 3, translation by the author).

Another example was provided by interview partner 9:

“The language was a bit problematic. I am not the best one in my German class” (IP 9, translation by the author).

Preparedness

Out of nine interviewed candidates, three children experienced an unplanned return. Analysis shows that the fact of knowing when to return back to the home country is interconnected with the readjustment process. In the case of interview partner 3, the return was unplanned. This impacted her view towards returning home:

“It came all of a sudden. I was pretty sure that we would not move to another country again, because I was in my final years of school [...] I cried a lot. I only thought of what I could possibly do to stay in Shanghai” (IP 3, translation by the author).

As a consequence, her willingness to adopt to the home culture was marginal. She further added:

“I had no interest in getting to know my environment, which annoyed my parents a lot. The same goes for my brother, we did not want to move back. [...] We had to, but it was not our choice” (IP 3, translation by the author).

This can be linked to Sussman’s theory of preparedness that states that individuals who are well prepared will face less distress upon return. The more unexpected the move back to the home country appears, the more severe will the readjustment be (Sussman, 2001). Moreover, Sussman (2001) claims that an effective adaption abroad typically impedes the adjustment to the home culture. Interview partner 5 for instance, had experiences different to those described above. He expressed:



“When I came back it was actually very easy for me, because I was looking forward to move back. I could try out a new school, I would see my old friends again, I would go back to my old club [...]. My family always knew that I did not like Shanghai and that I am glad to move back. Not all of my family members shared the same excitement as I did. Nevertheless, we already decided in advance that we would only stay there for three years. Therefore, it was clear to me that we go back.” (IP 5, translation by the author).

His move back was a release, since he did not adapt successfully in the host culture.



4. Discussion

Although the studies presented in this working paper represent student research and thus feature a number of limitations outlined in the 'Conclusion' section, the qualitative data collected and analyzed during the related investigations offer interesting insights in the process of family adjustment during expatriate assignments and at the re-entry stage of expatriation. While the related findings are generally in line with the main spouse adjustment models such as the one developed by Shaffer and Harrison (2001), these studies further contributed to the understanding of the family adjustment issues in a number of ways, as described below.

Several common factors were mentioned by interview partners in the first two studies dedicated to the issue of spousal adjustment and that were in line with the extant literature on the topic (cf. for instance Harvey, 1998 or Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). For instance, spousal unemployment was stated in both these investigations as one of the crucial problems. Interesting here are the coping strategies that were applied by the interviewed women. These included accepting teleworking arrangements or part-time work offers, spending time on hobbies, self-employment, involvement in community life and charitable activities as well as undergoing education.

Another general common feature of first two studies was the reported importance of social support, which is also underscored in the related literature on expatriate adjustment (see for example Kupka & Cathro, 2007). Primarily, the interviewed spouses relied on support from family members, above all, by the expatriates and their relatives back home. Furthermore, trailing wives reported the high value of social support either by their compatriots living in the host country or other expatriates and their family members. An interesting finding of study I is that the contacts between expatriate spouses were more intensive in culturally more distant countries. Russian expatriate spouses analyzed in study II generally sought contact and support from the other Russian-speaking females in host countries. However, the support from HCNs was experienced to be less relevant with some exceptions when spouses proactively sought contact and interaction with the local people and were interested in overcoming the language and cultural barriers.

Moreover, the interviewed respondents underscored a smoother adjustment process and an increased readiness to accept expatriate assignments in the case of newly created families and when relocating with small children:



on the one hand, females on maternity leave were less exposed to the negative effects of the unemployment, on the other hand, through children, spouses could get acquainted with the other parents and thus build social network that would support them during the expatriation period.

The importance of language skills was further emphasized in all the studies. During expatriate assignments, it was the mastery of foreign languages – either the host-country tongue or English as the language of international communication – that facilitated or hampered adjustment of spouses. However, similar to problems associated with a lack of foreign language skills, the limited mastery of the mother tongue was reported as an important constraint to adjustment to the home country in the last study: the lack of proficiency in the German language was stated as a barrier to a successful readjustment of expatriate children in their home countries.

Furthermore, the third study presented in this working paper offers an interesting perspective on the expatriate children adjustment process during the repatriation stage of their parents' expatriate assignments: It is proposed that the readjustment of children to the home-country schools can be compared to the professional readjustment of expatriates (see Andreason & Kinneer, 2005 for an analysis of assignee and expatriate family reintegration problems). Indeed, the interviewed expatriate children reported similar problems such as disappointment with their progress, inability to use their advanced knowledge and experiences back home or differences in the teaching methods or technological equipment. Additionally, personal disappointment such as perceived lack of open-mindedness in their home countries was underscored.

An important contribution of all the student studies presented here is that they provide a snapshot of current issues related to family adjustment during various stages of expatriate assignments. An important topic with this respect is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in expatriate management. Indeed, today, many aspects of expatriation are expected to be facilitated and supported by advanced technology, for instance, in the field of transportation or – especially – ICT. However, the evidence and research on the use of digital applications in international human resource management (IHRM) is still very limited (Farndale et al., 2017). The related practical developments – although they were not building the focus of investigations – were reflected by the interview data, above all, with respect to the use of digital technology and its potential role in the adjustment process. While the interviewed spouses and children did not specifically underscore the importance of such applications as specific influencing factors, the ICT uses were mentioned in a number of instances.



For example, the interviewed spouses mentioned that they used video conferencing tools or emails to communicate with their families and friends in their home countries. An important implication of this increased use of digital technology, including commonly used social networking, online communication and collaboration tools, is the potential higher reliance of expatriates and their families on social support provided by friends and relatives in their home countries as well as other individuals separated by distance and times zones. In the case of repatriated children, the differences in the technological equipment of schools was mentioned, whereby an international school in a developing country was reported as being better equipped than the public school back home. Hence, in this very case, the differences in the technology use could be considered as a factor hampering readjustment process.

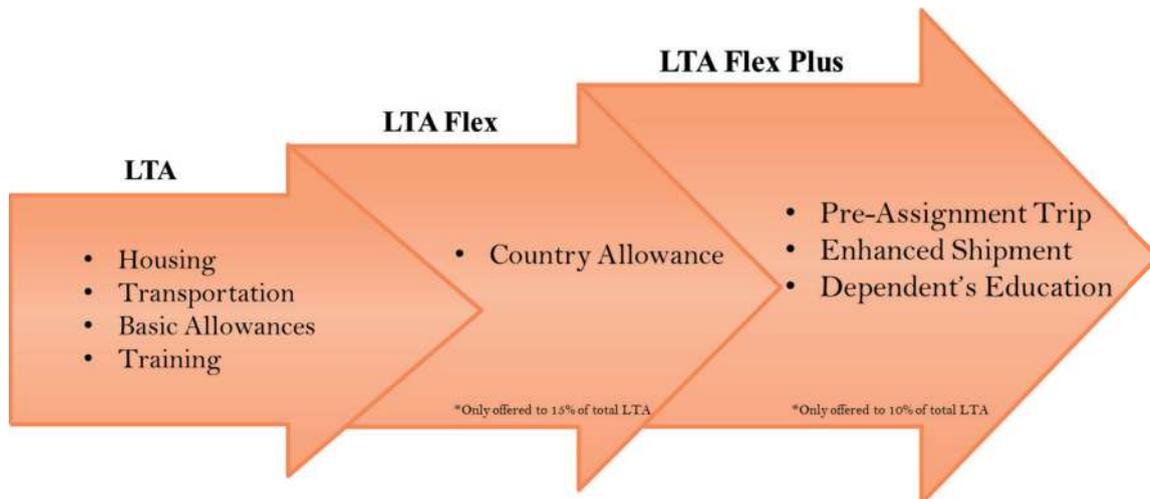
The research presented in this working paper has not only a potential to inform the academic community of further aspects of family adjustment during and after expatriate assignments, but also an important implication for the expatriate management practice as well.

In all the studies, lack of organizational support was reported. For instance, cross-cultural training was not provided to spouses, even in the case of assignments in culturally distant countries. However, considering the reported problems that spouses experienced in foreign locations, such support was necessary. An interesting finding that has a high practical relevance is that adjustment to culturally similar countries such as Italy might be perceived even more difficult to cultural environments that are more different to the home country (in this case, Germany). This implies that cross-cultural trainings related to the understanding of the local social rules and traditions need to be offered for all destinations, even those that are considered culturally very similar.

It should be mentioned however that providing support to expatriate and their family members has become standard part of expatriate management process. For example, PwC differentiates its internal long-term assignment (LTA) policies into three categories: LTA, LTA Flex, and LTA Flex Plus. Each policy offers more extensive support than the one before depending on business's need and expatriate's family situation. Figure 3 below describes different types of support programs provided by PwC during LTAs.



Figure 3. PwC policies for LTAs



Source: PwC (internal presentation, 2019)

Such extensive assistance offered to expatriates and their families during different stages of international assignments is regarded as a solution to potential family concerns related to expatriation. The importance of such concerns is reflected by a recent trends survey by Brookfield Global Relocation Services (BGRS, 2016), according to which, family issues constituted the major reason for both refusing to accept an expatriate assignment and expatriation failure.

There are various examples of support that can be provided to assignees and their families at different stages of expatriate assignments. For instance, the latest KPMG report (2018) states that the majority of surveyed organizations provided tax consultations for both home and host countries, pre-assignment visits, including the so-called 'look-and-see' and 'house hunting' trips, language and cross-cultural training offered not only to the assignee but also to their spouses and children, temporary living assistance, a large number of services provided by designated destination vendors such as school search for children as well as established mentoring programs for expatriates. In addition, expatriates typically enjoy a whole array of benefits such as housing or rest and relaxation trips. Frequent assistance provided to spouses or partners of expatriates include administrative support such as work permit and visa assistance, job search or education reimbursement. The costs for primary and secondary schools are usually covered for expatriate children, while a large proportion of surveyed companies compensate for the pre-school education as well.



At the repatriation stage of expatriate assignments, the majority of companies offer shipment or tax consultation services; on the contrary, assistance related to repatriation counseling or pre-repatriation trips back home are not frequently provided to assignees and their families.

Currently, many of the above-mentioned services are outsourced to specialized vendors (AIRINC, 2017). Indeed, the assigning companies have a choice of a large number of such specialized service providers, to which they can outsource expatriate support activities.

Table 6 summarizes support activities provided by two vendors that cooperate with PricewaterhouseCoopers in providing assistance to expatriate spouses: Impact Group and NetExpat.

Table 6. Spousal assistance services offered by IMPACT Group and NetExpat

		IMPACT Group	NetExpat
Company information	Service locations	78 cities outside US	150 cities
	Number of clients (spouses / companies)	10,085 participants per year	Over 92 MNC
	Main offerings	One-on-One career coaching Transition guidance	Life coaching Outplacement service Integration service
Types of services	Main service areas	Job search assistance Global career continuation Integration assistance Repatriation	Job search assistance Intercultural training Integration service Life coaching service
Service packages	Duration of the coaching (on average)	9 months	6 months
	Scope of service	Full family members (Spouse acts as spokesperson)	Spouse (Family members only receive cultural training)
Feedback	Spouse satisfaction	97%	95%

Source: IMPACT Group (personal communication, 2019); NetExpat (personal communication, 2019).



The core strategy of the above service providers is to assist spouses in finding jobs where they can make use of their skill set. In most cases, spouses would try to search the same occupation as they had in their home country. However, due to lack of compatibility between home and host country certificate, spouses seldom succeed in working in an identical position.

To solve this problem, specialized spousal assistance services are provided. Instead of offering the same job, a service provider helps with finding a job that demands similar expertise and experiences as the spouse's former occupation. This is carried out by a coach who is an expert in a host country labor market and culture.

For instance, according to IMPACT Group, one of the spouses was working as a nurse in a home country. Since the host country did not accept her home country nurse certificate, she could not find a corresponding job. However, after an in-depth interview with the spousal assistance coach, she realized that she could use her experience in clinical trials and was assisted in getting a clinical tester position in a pharmaceutical company. Such customized career strategy can aid spouses to broaden the view in job search as well as to integrate more easily into the host country (IMPACT Group, personal communication, 2019).

Concerning the digitalization of expatriate management, according to a recent report by AIRINC (2019), only 43% of respondents reported that they regard technology solutions as top priorities related to managing their global mobility programs. However, even those who implemented new mobility technologies were found to be inefficient in fully optimizing their information technology (IT) assets. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers Modern Mobility Survey (PWC, 2014), only one of four respondents stated that their company mobility technology met their business needs.

Thus, from the practical perspective, the results presented in the student studies reflect the current practice, when assigning organizations provide various support to accompanying expatriate family members. However, in their majority, the interviewed spouses reported that they received administrative assistance, but – as has been mentioned above – were missing cross-cultural or language trainings. Often, they had no opportunity to go on a pre-assignment visit. However, such support was perceived as very important in a number of ways, for instance, in order to facilitate the social contacts in the host country or get all the necessary information on assignment destination to be able to effectively adjust to a new environment and build new social networks.



In the case of repatriation, the need to support expatriate family members, especially their children who might experience severe readjustment difficulties due to the lack of their mother language knowledge or inaccurate expectations about their home countries, with respect to preparing them for and assisting in the process of the re-entry is particularly crucial. Moreover, the participants of the studies stated that employment concerns played a very important role in their adjustment, and the related support was considered to be of primary importance.

In the case of Russian and Ukrainian expatriate spouses, difficulties related to the recognition of their home-country formal qualifications were stated as important barriers to their employment abroad. These issues should necessarily be specifically focused on by the assigning companies to facilitate expatriate adjustment.

In addition, given the reported difficulties with building social networks in foreign countries and back home, it seems imperative that assigning companies provide additional support to expatriates and their families with this respect, for instance, by facilitating mentoring programs, stimulating engagement in social activities such as clubs or offering assistance in digital social networking and collaboration tools.



5. Conclusion

The presented summary of student research dedicated to different aspects of family adjustment during and after expatriate assignments offers a number of interesting insights outlined in the previous section of this working paper. Notwithstanding the limitations typical to student investigations, such as small samples or lacking opportunity to ensure intercoder reliability of content analyses of qualitative interview data, a number of implications for both research and practice could be suggested.

Firstly, while the existing models of spousal adjustment such as the one developed by Shaffer and Harrison (2001) prove to be still valid today, further investigations differentiating between family members of different ethnic and national origin might be instrumental in further theory development. This could be achieved by designing a quantitative study based on a survey of expatriate spouses from different home countries and by controlling for a number of further characteristics such as age, educational background, number and age of children, knowledge of the foreign language, etc.

Furthermore, all the studies presented here underscore the importance of considering expatriate children in the analysis of spouse adjustment, especially from the standpoint of spillover effects, when problems experienced by expatriate children with respect to social networks or at school might have positive or negative impact on the personal and professional adjustment of their parents. Here, a further in-depth investigation covering the adjustment process of expatriate children during various stages of international assignments could be instrumental in developing the understanding of the above dynamics.

Finally, building on the presented evidence on the use of digital technology to maintain social networks by family members, a further study could be specifically dedicated to the impact of digitalization on adjustment of expatriates, their spouses and children. Here, a number of further theoretical approaches could be applied for this purpose, ranging from the technology acceptance to media richness theories (for an overview see Zhang et al., 2018 as well as Daft & Lengel, 1986). An important implication for the practice is that corporate IHRM functions should specifically concentrate on different aspects of support for expatriate families. While this conclusion is by no means novel and provision of such support is considered normal practice in expatriate management (PwC, 2014), the present studies could offer additional rationale for providing different types of assistance and underscore the need to focus on some specific applications.



For instance, given the evidence that expatriate families might experience severe adjustment problems even in culturally quite similar countries – or even upon their return to their home countries – more flexible, customized support should be provided by assigning companies. According to a PwC Global Mobility Survey (2016), the majority of the respondents agreed that having an option to personally select from a menu of international assignment package benefits would make international moves more appealing. Examples of such expatriate assignment package elements could be cultural and language trainings or job search support provided on demand. Moreover, assigning enterprises should pay more attention to providing ICT support or at least inform or train expatriates and their families in how to effectively use specific social network, online collaboration or artificial intelligence-based applications that could be expected to be instrumental in assisting expatriates and their families in building and maintaining social networks, overcoming cultural and language barriers.



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