

Till stress do us part: the causes and consequences of expatriate divorce

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Abstract

Purpose – International relocation is undoubtedly a source of stress for families, and in particular for married couples. Yet, despite familial challenges and the fact that “family concerns” remain a top reason for assignment refusal and assignment failure, including a growing body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that many expatriate marriages fail often at huge cost to organizations, there is not one academic study yet published on expatriate divorce. The purpose of this paper is to empirically examine the causes and consequences of expatriate divorce.

Design/methodology/approach – In this exploratory case-based study, the author uses respondent data from 13 face-to-face interviews and 25 online survey participants.

Findings – Findings demonstrate that expatriate marriages end in divorce for two main reasons: first, a core issue in the marriage that exists before going abroad (e.g. alcoholism, mental health problems) and which continues while abroad; and second, when one or both spouses is negatively influenced by an expatriate culture to such an extent that a form of “group think” results in polarizing behavior that is counter to how they might behave “back home” (e.g. infidelity, sexual misconduct). The consequences of divorce for expatriates are immense and include bankruptcy, destitution, homelessness, depression, psychophysiological illness, alienation from children, and suicide.

Research limitations/implications – Data are cross-sectional and findings are limited by single-response bias. Future studies would do well to research matched samples of couples engaging in global work experiences over different points in time in order to track longitudinal changes in marital quality, including why some go on to divorce while others recover from marital breakdown and stay married.

Practical implications – One of the strongest pieces of advice offered by most of the respondents is for spouses, and trailing spouses in particular, to know their legal rights and entitlements in each country where they are living in the event of divorce.

Originality/value – This is the first study to empirically explore the lived experience of expatriate divorce.

Keywords Expatriate, Divorce, Family challenges

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Most women don't think much beforehand about the impact a [international] relocation is going to have on their marriage. No one tells us the complete truth, either. It's like the having-a-baby secret. Women don't tell each other how painful childbirth really is, because who in their right mind would do it if they knew the truth? The same can be said about moving a marriage (Pascoe, 2003, p. 2).

For at least the past 30 years, a substantial body of literature has focussed on expatriate families, particularly the challenges of family adjustment (Black and Gregersen, 1991; Caligiuri *et al.*, 1998; Fish and Wood, 1997; Fukuda and Chu, 1994; Haslberger and Brewster, 2008; Howard, 1980; Lazarova *et al.*, 2010; Rosenbusch and Cseh, 2012; Tung, 1986), willingness to expatriate (Brett and Stroh, 1995; Dupuis *et al.*, 2008; Harvey, 1983; Richardson, 2006; Mincer, 1978; Noe *et al.*, 1988; Tharenou, 2008), the work-family



interface (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2005; Schutter and Boerner, 2013; Shaffer *et al.*, 2001; Tung, 1987), premature return (Black and Stephens, 1989; Harvey, 1985; Shaffer and Harrison, 1998), relationship stress among couples (Brown, 2008; McNulty, 2012; Sweatman, 1999), and dual-careers (Harvey, 1995, 1998; Harvey *et al.*, 2009; Moeller *et al.*, 2013). Yet, despite the progress in research on this important topic, and the fact that the familial challenges of international relocation remain a top reason for assignment refusal and assignment failure (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2014), including a growing body of anecdotal evidence suggesting that many expatriate marriages fail often at huge cost to organizations (Farrar, 2009; Numan and Vittorio, 2009; Sullivan *et al.*, 2013; Swaak, 1995; Wilkinson and Singh, 2010), there is not one academic study yet published on expatriate divorce. Much like Pascoe suggests in the opening quote, the case may be that expatriate divorce is too much of a “taboo” subject where few researchers dare to venture.

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The current study contributes to the literature on expatriate families by being the first to empirically examine the causes and consequences of expatriate divorce, of which the field of expatriate studies knows little about beyond only assumptions and possibly over-stated claims. By this I do not mean to imply that the divorce rate among expatriates is higher or lower than that among the general (non-relocating) population, but rather to illustrate that when marital breakdown occurs abroad there may be more serious implications and outcomes than divorce that takes place in one’s home-country (as the case studies will show). Use of the term “expatriate” includes assignees across a range of assignment types involving international relocation (e.g. long-term, short-term, and extended business travel (EBT) assignments, among others); and the word “divorce” as one that includes those expatriates about to go through, or having already been through, a divorce, as well as those that are currently legally and/or emotionally separated from their spouse. Importantly, the legal act of divorcing a partner is not a criterion for inclusion in this study where, for example, one of the interview participants has been physically separated from her husband for 15 years and has assumed primary physical care of their children during that time but is yet to legally divorce him. The distinction is important given that expatriate divorce can be extraordinarily complex, particularly when children are involved (e.g. Elrod, 2010). “Marriage” in this study is defined as a legally binding union between two heterosexual and consenting adults, including de-facto partnerships (Franklin, 1990-1991). I exclude from this definition those in same-sex partnerships (whether married or unmarried) for the purposes of legal and policy simplicity.

In heeding the call for papers in this special issue, the paper adopts a predominantly case-based approach by re-telling the lived experience of 38 respondents (13 face-to-face interviewees and 25 survey participants) via three detailed vignettes. In combination with selected quotes from other participants, the vignettes illustrate the challenges faced by expatriates and their families in relation to divorce. Using polarization processes (PP) as a theoretical lens to explain polarization behaviors, the aim of this paper is to: first, address the gap in research that has largely ignored this aspect of family expatriation; second, explore how expatriate marital stress manifests over time; third, understand the unique context of expatriate marriage that often leads to divorce; and finally, propose a future research agenda to guide more scholarly work on this topic.

The paper begins by examining the nature of expatriate marriage. I then review the very limited industry literature on expatriate divorce and move on to theoretically position the causes and consequences of divorce through the lens of PP and behaviors (see Figure 1), including a discussion of risk factors for divorce and the nature of international relocation stress. Next, the method is discussed, followed by presentation of the three

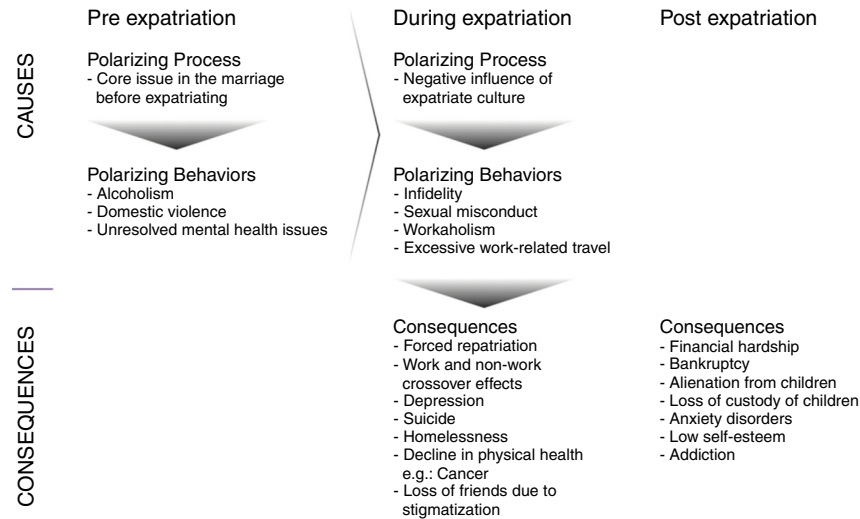


Figure 1.
Causes and
consequences of
expatriate divorce

detailed vignettes during which key findings are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the main findings and recommendations for future research.

The nature of expatriate marriage

Recent statistics show that 71 percent of expatriates are married and 47 percent of relocated couples do so with their children (e.g. Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2014). Yet international assignments can be inherently problematic for families leading to the widely held belief that stress is a central component of international relocation (e.g. Ammons *et al.*, 1982; Anderzen and Arnetz, 1997; Arkin, 1993; Brown, 2008; Lynem, 2001; Moyle and Parkes, 1999; Munton, 1990; Sweatman, 1999; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2007; Walton, 1990; Wilkinson and Singh, 2010). Undoubtedly, when marital breakdown occurs during international assignments, there are likely to be crossover effects in the family-to-work domain, and spillover effects between spouses and children (Lazarova *et al.*, 2010). While the expatriate family bears the brunt of the emotional and psychological toll that an impending divorce may bring, often without access to adequate support mechanisms (e.g. legal counsel), the sponsoring organization where one or more spouses is employed is also at risk of being impacted in terms of providing unplanned HR, repatriation and legal support, and potential decreases in productivity for employees distracted by ongoing divorce proceedings. While these side effects are also common among non-divorcing families where high levels of family conflict or low-quality spouse-family relationships exist, I argue that, because expatriate divorce almost always involves separation and custody disputes across geographical boundaries, the legal act of engaging in divorce proceedings produces higher levels of stress and psychological trauma and results in more serious outcomes (e.g. bankruptcy, destitution, homelessness) than most high-conflict/low-quality spouse-family relationship families would normally encounter.

In spite of these challenges, the majority of companies do not offer spouse/partner assistance support across a range of assignment types, including long-term, short-term, and permanent one-way moves, beyond only language and cross-cultural training

(Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2014; Dickmann, 2014). Of those that offer more, the most common support is a one-time cash allowance and the use of a specialist provider in addition to assistance with education/training and career-planning assistance. Notably, no study or survey in the literature provides evidence that the support offered to expatriate families extends beyond their cultural and career needs. These figures consequently paint a bleak picture of marital support for global employees.

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Marital stress

While family stress is a major factor in international relocations, only three recent studies in the international HRM literature examine marital stress. Brown (2008), in a study of 152 expatriate couples, investigated the dominant sources of stress for employed expatriates and their accompanying partners, finding that insufficient time together and uncertainty about their future after the assignment were causes of stress for both spouses. However, whereas at-home spouses were more stressed by identity and isolation issues, only employed spouses were more stressed by strains on the relationship, suggesting significant crossover effects between home and work.

In another study by McNulty (2012), in which 264 trailing spouses were surveyed over four years in relation to organizational support provided by their spouse's company, it was found that professional support to address the dual-career issue and social support to alleviate marital stress were perceived by the participants as having the greatest impact on identity re-construction and, in turn, their adjustment, yet both types of support were lacking. As one spouse in the study explained (p. 429):

The breaking up of marriages is dealt with like an embarrassing individual failure and the more than 50% separations and divorces is simply ignored. The rest of these marriages is having affairs or uncontrolled eating, shopping, drinking, suicidal attacks, depression or drug abuse. After two different support groups I have seen it all.

However, while McNulty's study was focussed on organizational support, female at-home spouses also blamed their husbands for contributing to marital stress, for example, where many felt their marital needs were trivialized because they were perceived by their spouses to be on holiday, having "a cook, a maid, and a driver and you get to do whatever you want at any time of the day" (p. 429). To alleviate marital stress, McNulty (2012) suggests that counseling sessions for couples during the selection process, and after relocation if required, can be helpful in terms of outlining possible areas of future conflicts, as well as providing advice on how to deal with problems in a foreign location. Having in place an Employee Assistance Program, an outsourced and confidential service that offers counselors to assist employees and their household members with personal issues, can be particularly useful in many locations.

In a third study by Lazarova *et al.* (2015), based on qualitative data from a sample of 656 respondents (primarily trailing spouses), it was found that considerable marital tension is caused by the absence of expatriate working spouses due to excessive job demands, over-time at the office, and business travel. This leads to stay-at-home spouses feeling resentful, lonely, and anxious, particularly when these types of habits cause longer-term marital problems, as the authors illustrate (p. 20):

A lack of trust in a marriage is a key factor in assignment failure, particularly when there is a change in the working culture for the employed spouse. Changes in some countries include "heavy drinking like in Korea and Japan, womanizing, or even second wives." There are also infidelity-related problems arising from "things that happen when mom and the kids leave for

the summer!" and the "availability of cheap local options!!" that can create longer-term problems for expatriate families. One respondent went so far as to suggest that "men end up having affairs and women end up being lonely."

When families do struggle, family counseling is an option they would like to access. For example, in the above study, while nearly 90 percent of respondents indicated that training/support with regards to family/marriage counseling was "not applicable" to them, nearly 70 percent still said that relocation policies should include the funding of transition counseling or coaching for the family. The question nonetheless remains as to whether some of the causes of divorce run so deep that any form of organizational support would be considered relatively superficial and somewhat "too late" to be of much assistance.

The nature of expatriate divorce

Living and working abroad can take a toll on marriages (see Brown, 2008; Sweatman, 1999). In a recent study, McNulty (2012) found that 6 percent of trailing spouses indicated that they were considering separating or divorcing because of the stress of relocating. In comparison, 99 percent rated "a strong and stable relationship" as the most important adjustment factor during an international assignment. *The Telegraph* claimed that 445 foreign couples living in Dubai ended their marriages in 2011, a 30 percent rise on 2009 (Hyslop, 2012), whereas Sweatman (1999) found among 67 married missionaries on their first assignment abroad that the quality of one's marriage either exacerbates stress leading to increased depression, or buffers stress leading to decreased depression. Lazarova *et al.* (2014) further found that the majority of respondents (92 percent, in their study of more than 650 expatriate family members) believe that relocation-related marital tension filters down to the family, with the authors suggesting that more research is needed to understand the unique needs of expatriate single parents, divorced parents, and new families formed after the separation of prior families.

Marital problems among expatriates undoubtedly result from a divergence of priorities among couples, often as the number of assignments increases and as high-level careers advance (Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; McNulty and Inkson, 2013). While it is impossible to know the true rate of expatriate divorce, with anecdotal stories suggesting it happens to only a handful of the wider population of expatriates and predominantly in "hardship" locations, this study provides some evidence that divorce is more prevalent among expatriates in all geographies than is realized. For instance, collecting data for the study upon which this paper is based was relatively straightforward with 38 respondents participating over a six-month period, of which 13 agreed to be interviewed face-to-face. The remaining 25 participants completed an online survey (at <http://expatresearch.com>) using the same interview questions. Furthermore, the participants went through their divorce while living in 27 different countries (including relatively "easy" locations such as Singapore, the Netherlands, and Australia), illustrating that expatriate divorce can happen anywhere and is not especially prevalent only in challenging locations.

Studies of expatriate divorce

While it is true that "family concerns" and "spouse/partner's career" continue to dominate as the major reason for refusing to undertake an international assignment and "family concerns" remains a top reason for early return (Brookfield Global

Relocation Services, 2014), there is no academic research examining divorce as one of the family issues that might arise for global employees, with only two exceptions stemming from industry literature.

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The first is by Canadian author Robin Pascoe (quoted above) whose book, *A Moveable Marriage: Relocate Your Relationship Without Breaking It*, brings expatriate marriage and divorce into the public domain and delves deeper. She found that trailing spouses are just as likely to be as unfaithful as their employed husbands, but for different reasons: whereas unfaithful men typically have the opportunity to stray “thrown at them” in the anonymity of business trips, unfaithful wives more often seek emotional support in new relationships because of their absent husbands (Pascoe, 2003). In a follow up study, it was similarly found that “marital breakdown” was reported by nearly 70 percent of expatriates and their spouses as the most important reason why relocations fail (see Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; Lazarova and Pascoe, 2013). As Pascoe herself explains, drawing on the experiences of others as well as her own 20-something years as a married expatriate wife:

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The marital relationship, more valuable than any of your possessions, typically journeys in an unprotected fog of exhaustion, its principle guardians two irritable adults sniping at each other over passports, trying to keep cranky children occupied in airport-bound taxis with mountains of baggage. Perched as the adults are on the precipice of frayed nerves, one good gust of wind (a minor argument over a flight time can do it) is enough to plunge them into a full-blown marital storm. This shouldn't come as a surprise (p. 7).

The second is by Anne Copeland at The Interchange Institute whose report “Voices from home: the personal and family side of international short-term assignments” examines the impact of unaccompanied international assignments on the lives of the families of the traveling employees. In her study of 68 at-home spouses of people who were on, or had recently been on, a STA or EBT, Copeland found that when organizations do not address additional financial costs (e.g. childcare) arising from the employed-spouse's absence, and when couples feel coerced into accepting short-term and EBT assignments, there are more negative outcomes for the families involved, including children with more behavior problems, and the at-home spouse being more depressed and more likely to consider divorce. These feelings can increase when the at-home spouse is not living in their home-country and is unfamiliar with the resources and support networks that may be available to assist them in the host-country (Gardiner, 2005). In contrast, Copeland found that when both spouses feel that they are “in this together” (p. 30), the respondents have more positive feelings about their marriage. Other factors found to contribute to marital satisfaction for STAs and EBTs include when the traveling spouse does more housework when home, when levels of worry about safety (at home) are lower, when the fundamental marital relationship and way of parenting is unchanged, and when the at-home spouse realizes potential benefits arising from the assignment.

Theoretical positioning of expatriate divorce

Prior research on expatriation demonstrates that there are significant family system effects during expatriation (Caligiuri *et al.*, 1998; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002). These include crossover effects between married couples that can influence the attitudes and behaviors of each (Lazarova *et al.*, 2010; Shaffer *et al.*, 2001), and in turn, cause problems during an assignment. One such trait among married expatriate couples that may have serious crossover effects, potentially leading to divorce, is polarization behavior.

Polarization Processes

Polarization Processes (PP) is a construct from the literature on marriage and is defined as behaviors, cognitions, and emotions that spouses use to exacerbate marital distress preceding a divorce, wherein individual differences become more pronounced, conflict is more entrenched, and there is a general lack of tolerance toward each other (Baucam and Atkins, 2013; Jacobson and Christensen, 1996; Wheeler *et al.*, 2001). The outcome of PP is dysfunctional relating between spouses, an inability to work together to create and preserve intimacy, and lack of flexibility to respond to and resolve conflict. As PP is a cyclical and escalating process, it typically results in one or both spouses “feeling increasingly hopeless, separate, and deeply dissatisfied” (Baucam and Atkins, 2013, p. 150). Importantly, PP is a dynamic process that can either magnify marital distress when spouses engage in more extreme forms of behavior over time or it can quell disharmony when spouses engage in accommodation behaviors (pro-social responses to objectionable behavior from one’s partner) as a means of avoiding polarization.

PP is a powerful theory upon which to explore expatriate divorce for three reasons. First, it represents a narrowly focussed conceptualization that describes a particular set of marital distress-producing processes and conflict-producing behaviors, including their related risk factors which, in this case, can result in divorce (Baucam and Atkins, 2013). PP is therefore a theory that can help to determine expatriate divorce antecedents. Furthermore, PP illustrates that it is not simply the existence of differences between spouses that causes relationship stress during expatriation, but rather how spouses react and respond to resolving their differences that impacts on the polarization behavior each chooses to engage in and whether and how these behaviors ultimately end in divorce (Baucam *et al.*, 2005).

Second, because PP is typically theme based wherein one or both partners attempt to change the other around a particular issue (Wheeler *et al.*, 2001), the theory explains quite well the change in dynamics that unfold during expatriation for married couples. For example, expatriation often causes changes for one or both partners in relation to cultural values (monogamy vs infidelity), family values (conflict over the division of labor, e.g. time with children vs time at work/business travel), financial spending habits as a result of a change in lifestyle (saving money vs flashy spending), and/or social activities (e.g. alcohol consumption and where to holiday; see McNulty, 2012). These differences can emerge as incompatibilities that may not be discovered for some time or they may be recognized but the impact is underestimated until it is potentially too late. The typical outcome of the PP is “the trap” wherein one or both partners feel helpless about the situation and futile to change it (Wheeler *et al.*, 2001). In instances where behaviors become too offensive, one partner invests considerable effort in avoiding or escaping from the relationship, either through unhealthy psychological or emotional distractions (extra-marital affairs, shopping) or by physically leaving altogether (divorce).

Lastly, in their study of 182 couples, Eldridge *et al.* (2007) contend that polarizing behaviors can be influenced by gender, with wife-demand/husband-withdraw behavior being greater than husband-demand/wife-withdraw patterns. For expatriates, this suggests that when wives become intolerant of their husbands behavior and attempt to change it (i.e. demand), husbands increase their polarizing behavior (i.e. withdraw) in response to holding the burden for change. In the opposite scenario wives are proposed to engage in polarizing behaviors less often. While this finding may be explained by the disproportionate number of wives undertaking international assignments as the trailing spouse (compared to husbands) for whom relationship problems and distress

are often more keenly felt due to isolation, vulnerability, and loneliness, and whose husbands are able to simultaneously use the “excuse” of excessive work demands to avoid dealing with issues that are raised by their wives (see Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; McNulty, 2012), it must also be noted that international assignments take couples away from their “normal” (home-country based) support networks. Thus, an alternative explanation for husband’s withdrawal patterns may be their limited access to, and knowledge of, solution-focussed couple activities (e.g. therapy) in the host-location. Importantly, gender polarity may explain among expatriate couples whose behavior (husband or wife) is “blamed” for the divorce, whether it is the husband or wife that files for divorce, and which of the partners might agree to speak openly about their divorce experiences in a study such as this (e.g. it is worth noting that 97 percent of the participants in this study are wives).

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Risk factors associated with expatriate divorce

One of the risk factors associated with PP includes that the forces that initially bring spouses together (e.g. going abroad, a desire for personal adventure) can also end up tearing them apart (e.g. living abroad, lack of independence; see Sweatman, 1999). Thus, the tendency to simplify expatriate marital stress as arising from one-off events that precipitate thoughts of separation and divorce (e.g. an extra-marital affair) can be inaccurate. Additionally, PP takes into account expatriates’ interpersonal variables across many levels of family ties and other relationships that represent risk factors impacting on marital functioning; this includes the absence or presence of children and/or step-children; family role models in the form of parents and extended relatives in the home-country; and local citizens (particularly women in Asia and Africa) that are attracted to foreigners. These variables may be mediated by discrepancies in shared values and poor conflict management skills of the expatriate couple (Baucam and Atkins, 2013).

A third set of risk factors relates specifically to the context in which expatriation unfolds for married couples, namely the foreign environment. Here, it is common for one spouse to “hold all the cards” in terms of rights of residency, work permit, sponsored employment, housing, bank accounts, and an in-built professional and social support network, with the trailing spouse having fewer, if any, of these entitlements and benefits (see Barling and MacEwan, 1992; Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; McNulty, 2012). This then creates a situation where the rewards vs costs of staying in an unhealthy relationship while abroad may be mitigated by the power each spouse perceives they have to act as an “agent of change” to leave the relationship without incurring further hardship (i.e. legal recourse via the courts system re loss of assets or custody of children by leaving the host-country; Eldridge *et al.*, 2007).

While the theoretical rationale behind divorce is one where “leaving a relationship with a surplus of benefits would only be considered when there are feasible and more attractive life choice alternatives” (Demo and Buehler, 2013, p. 267), this may not always be the case for expatriates. Rather, because of the power imbalance that expatriation frequently creates for expatriate couples (where one spouse is often required to give up their career, and along with it their earning power and independence; see Tichenor, 1999), the decision to leave a marriage while abroad becomes not only one of costs vs benefits, but also of choosing between the lesser of two evils – incurring financial hardship and/or losing custody of one’s children vs tolerating an unhealthy marriage. Access to social support, financial resources, and legal advice for one or both spouses while abroad may therefore impact on the decision to divorce more than any other.

International relocation stress

A fourth risk factor related to the foreign environment in which expatriates live is that expatriation is a uniquely, and inherently, stressful way of life which, in many cases, cannot be prevented. International relocation stress is defined as:

[...] a psychological state that develops when an individual faces a situation that taxes or exceeds internal or external resources available to deal with that situation (Lazarus, 1966). There are three major components of stress: uncertainty concerning outcomes, lack of control over situations, and ambiguity concerning expectations. By their very nature, overseas assignments are characterized by uncertainty, lack of control, and ambiguity (Wilkinson and Singh, 2010, p. 169).

Consider, for example, that of the 40 most stressful life events, at least half can be directly or indirectly associated with the international relocation of a family, including a change in financial status (ranked 15th), a change or new line of work (17th), wife starting or stopping work (25th), and changes in residence (31st), school (32nd) and social activities (34th; Holmes and Rahe, 1967). Consider further that, even without engaging in international relocation, divorce and marital separation are ranked second and third as stressful life events, as is marital reconciliation (ninth).

Beyond the stress of one-off and unexpected events during an assignment, such as the death of a child or a close relative in the home-country, fears of kidnapping in the host-country, or job loss while abroad, expatriates typically live with a level of daily stress to which they have to become accustomed in order to live abroad (e.g. stressors related to cultural, social, legal, religious, and political adaptation, among others). As noted above, the uncertainty, lack of control, and ambiguity that characterizes international relocation represents a level of stress that can easily shape marital interactions that, over time, can lead to varying degrees of marital quality. For example, some studies (e.g. Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Sweatman, 1999) show that marriage can serve to protect against the distress of everyday life, including hardships, and to lessen the threat of external events, whereas other studies show that when people experience too much stress there can be psychological (mental health) or psychophysiological consequences (e.g. addiction, illness; McNulty, 2012; Patterson, 1988; Wilkinson and Singh, 2010) causing a decline in marital quality. Thus, the degree to which expatriate couples are able to develop a strong “risk and resilience” framework to enhance marital quality can explain why some couples fare better than others in coping with international relocation stress (see Hetherington, 1999; Patterson, 2002). Furthermore, such an approach involves more attention on the context within which expatriation unfolds as a way of better understanding variations in expatriate couples’ resilience.

An understanding of the link between international relocation stress and expatriate divorce has nonetheless been largely absent from expatriate family studies, in large part because the broader subject of expatriate marriage as a topic of enquiry has been inadequately researched. The choice of the case method for this study has, within this context, therefore been deliberate in order to allow the lived experience to provide a more holistic perspective of expatriates’ journey through the marriage, separation, and divorce process. Importantly, each of the 13 interview-based case studies included in the study has been approached from the micro-context, seeking to explore “the immediate, concrete, local conditions of daily life” that typifies the respondents’ lived experience as assignees and which situates their experience in “highly local contexts” (Doucerain *et al.*, 2013, p. 688). In doing so, the findings are intended to move beyond only the prescriptive (i.e. a list of the causes of divorce), to instead explore the

actual behaviors that expatriates acquire or adopt that lead to divorce. In other words, how does international relocation stress translate into reality, i.e., outcomes that impact on a marriage? This fundamental question is not fully addressed by existing expatriate family research largely because few studies engage in the case method thereby allowing researchers to take into account the environment that expatriates navigate in their daily lives while living abroad.

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Method

The study utilized a qualitative, inductive approach to draw on expatriates lived experience of a divorce while living abroad. In total, 15 participants who identified as expatriate divorcees were invited to interview for the study, with 13 agreeing to do so. A further 25 respondents completed an online survey. It is not possible to assess how large the expatriate divorce population may be from which to determine a non-response rate given that many divorcees do not wish to make their status known and are therefore not easily identified. As such, a sample of 38 can be considered a very good result, on the basis that the online survey facilitated anonymity for those who felt uncomfortable with being identified. For the purposes of this study, expatriates are defined as those who are currently company assigned as well as self-initiated (for key differences, see Tharenou, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a six-month period from May to October 2014, with online survey respondents participating over the same period. Both approaches allowed for core themes to be explored with enough flexibility to allow participants to identify issues that they considered important and to elaborate on critical incidents (i.e. by asking respondents to either “tell me more” or by inserting in the online survey a “further comments” box after key questions; Creswell and Clark, 2007).

A case-study approach to the study of expatriate divorce is justifiable on several grounds. First, it addresses the need for more research such as that of Brown (2008) and Sweatman (1999), whose ratings of the dominant sources of stress on expatriate couples while on assignment are clear examples of conceptualizing marital stress as an integrative and progressive process. This means that the antecedents of divorce are likely to be cumulative and to escalate over time (both pre and during an assignment), and that the legal reason for divorce (e.g. an extra-marital affair) may not represent the true cause of marital breakdown. A second benefit is that a case-study approach recognizes a range of internal and external factors that may precipitate expatriate divorce thereby establishing a clear conceptual link between a variety of risk factors and a decline in marital quality (see Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; McNulty, 2012; Sweatman, 1999). Third, the dynamic nature of PP as a theoretical framework to explain expatriate divorce is an important approach that takes into account the constant state of change in marital quality that occurs during expatriation that assignees are dealing with at any given point in time (Hetherington, 1999).

Interview questions

As there are no published empirical studies on expatriate divorce, the interview and survey questions (see the Appendix) were developed from a review of academic studies on expatriate marital stress and expatriate marriage surveys from industry literature. The interview guide and online questionnaire are structured into three parts. As this is a case-based study, the first part borrows from Lazarova *et al.*'s (2015) approach by asking respondents to explain in as much detail as they wish their “divorce journey,”

including when and where they met their ex-spouse, where they had lived together, when they went abroad, and when the relationship ended (either formally or informally). This part typically takes a considerable amount of time (both verbally and in respondents written answers) to allow participants to recount their lived experience. In the second part, I borrow from Brown (2008), Sweatman (1999), McNulty (2012), and Copeland (2009) to ask specific questions related to: first, factors contributing to the divorce, including the role of expatriation (or not) in causing their divorce; second, consequences of the divorce; and finally, the capabilities of successful expatriate marriages. The third part asks two reflective questions that allow the interview/survey to end on a positive note.

Sourcing participants

The 13 interview participants were invited to join the study via personal invitation, being identified as a divorcee through my personal network[1]. This involved inviting two divorcees in Singapore whom I knew through professional networks to participate in the study (which they did). These participants then contacted other expatriate divorcees in their network to suggest they also participate leading to a snowball approach (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). The 25 survey respondents were sourced using a combination of personal networks, snowballing, and social media. Once I had developed the survey instrument using the same questions I used in the interviews, I created the questionnaire using online survey software (at www.surveymonkey.com) and placed a link online at <http://expatresearch.com>. I then posted an invitation on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google Plus to source participants.

Each participant was advised that the research was conducted in accordance with the participating university's ethical protocols, that their participation was voluntary, and that all responses would be treated in confidence, with anonymity assured by pseudonyms to be utilized in any published research. All participants were provided with an assurance that any published research arising from their interview would be made available to them for "member checking" prior to submission to a conference or journal.

Interview procedure

Interviews typically ranged from 30 minutes to three hours in length and most were conducted in private (usually in the participants home or office) where they felt comfortable and relaxed. While the interviews were relatively simple to organize in terms of a date and time, the process of conducting them, based on the personal and sensitive nature of the topic, often proved to be challenging. For example, seven of the 13 interview participants cried while recounting their story subsequently needing to take time out to collect themselves before continuing, whereas others admitted to feeling ashamed and foolish particularly for those who had been divorced multiple times. This then led to situations where nearly all of participants were unsure at different points during each interview how much of the intimate details about their experiences they should reveal, for fear of embarrassment or judgment by outsiders (i.e. by the author or readers of any published studies). To overcome this, I provided: first, re-assurances of anonymity in any published papers arising from the study; second, promises that they would have the opportunity to engage in "member checking" of manuscripts prior to submission to journals and other outlets; and third, "member sharing," i.e., I used my insider status as a long-term member of the expatriate

community to carefully assess when to share some of my own marriage trials with the participants as a means of building rapport and empathy (Miller and Crabtree, 2005). All of these approaches proved to be highly effective in overcoming feelings of stigmatization and putting participants at ease, while ensuring neutrality to improve response quality and reduce response effects (Fontana and Frey, 2005).

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To facilitate member checking, I adopted a storytelling approach for each case by transcribing the interview in full and then writing up the case as a narrative account (see Gertsen and Söderberg, 2010; Holt, 2010; Peltonen, 1998 for similar approaches). The value of member checking was evident when each participant provided small, but detailed, corrections and amendments to their “story” to ensure accuracy and integrity of data and to overcome issues associated with convenience sampling (see Brewis, 2014; Charmaz, 2005).

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While my insider status proved to be highly advantageous as a means of attracting participants (particularly through snowball sampling), it also required that I be diligent in acknowledging when the insider “showed up” (Mirvis and Louis, 1988, p. 231). When this occurred, I actively engaged in confidential debriefing sessions post-interview with a small number of trusted (and experienced) academic mentors. Part of this process required that I take frequent breaks from the interviewing schedule to: first, create distance between myself as the researcher and the subject matter at hand; second, process my thinking in order to maintain objectivity; and finally, engage in iterative analysis before proceeding on to the next interview.

Sample

The overall sample constitutes 38 respondents of which 13 agreed to be interviewed and a further 25 completed an online survey. Of the 13 interviewees, three were conducted face-to-face in Singapore, with the remaining ten conducted via Skype (video or phone). Respondents for the survey completed the questionnaire over a six-month period from May to October 2014. Although 57 online questionnaires were received via SurveyMonkey during this period, thus representing a potentially larger pool of expatriate divorcees than is reported in this study, only 25 surveys were fully completed and useful for the purposes of analysis.

Participant profiles

The respondents represent 35 women and three men, 28 of whom are legally divorced, seven that have re-married, and three that are separated (one with the intention to divorce and two others to remain separated indefinitely). Table I provides a detailed profile of the respondents. The participants work in a range of industries including finance, relocation, training, photography, transportation, hospitality, and education. All but eight have children; of those that do, only three do not have primary physical custody. One of the participants has been divorced three times, with seven having divorced twice. In total, 14 of the participants have repatriated with the remainder still living abroad post-divorce either on a long-term assignment ($n = 4$) or localized in the host-country ($n = 20$). At the time of the divorce, ten of the respondents were employed (breadwinner) spouses, 19 were non-working trailing spouses, and nine were employed trailing spouses.

Analysis

All face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed, with survey data obtained and downloaded from SurveyMonkey. The combined data were then manually coded

Table I.
Profile of
participants

Name	Gender/marital status	Divorce no.	Home-country	Currently living in ...	Lived in ...	Ex/partner(s) living in ...	Assignment type	Child no.	Custody/ care
<i>Interview participants</i>									
1. Anne-Marie	F/divorced	2	England	Hong Kong	Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, South Africa, India, Philippines, Hong Kong	UK, Hong Kong	Localized	No	–
2. Jacob	M/divorced	2	USA	Singapore	Japan, India, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan	Singapore, USA	Localized	2	Yes
3. Jill	F/re-married	1	England	England	Zambia, South Africa, India, Ghana	Zambia	Repatriated	2	Yes
4. Frances	F/divorced	2	England	Hong Kong	Bahrain, Hong Kong	Bahrain, UK	Localized	2	Yes
5. Quinn	F/divorced	1	USA	USA	France, Spain	Spain	Repatriated	2	No
6. Jacqui	F/separated	–	England	Singapore	Hong Kong, Singapore	Singapore	Localized	2	Yes
7. Jessa	F/divorced	1	England	Ethiopia	Ghana, Ethiopia	Ghana	Localized	No	–
8. Didi	F/re-married	2	England	England	Zambia	Canada, UK	Repatriated	2	Yes
9. Charlotte	F/divorced	1	USA	USA	China	USA	Repatriated	3	Yes
10. Hannah	F/divorced	1	USA	Indonesia	Belgium, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia	Indonesia	Localized	2	Yes
11. Molly	F/divorced	1	Czech Republic	Switzerland	Singapore	Japan	Localized	3	Yes
12. Allegra	F/separated	0	USA	Singapore	London, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan	Singapore	Localized	5	Yes
13. Simon	M/re-married	1	UK	Taiwan	USA, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan	USA	Long term	4	2 only
<i>Survey participants</i>									
14. Louise	F/re-married	1	Ireland	China	Portugal, France	Do not know	Localized	2	Yes
15. Xavier	M/re-married	2	USA	Germany	Singapore	Singapore, USA	Localized	2	No
16. Xena	F/divorced	1	USA	Germany	Germany	Do not know	Localized	1	Yes
17. Jessica	F/divorced	2	USA	USA	Austria, Dubai	USA	Repatriated	No	–
18. Emily	F/divorced	2	UK	Spain	Spain	UK, Spain	Localized	1	Yes
19. Milly	F/divorced	1	New Zealand	Australia	England, China	Do not know	Localized	3	Yes

(continued)

Name	Gender/marital status	Divorce no.	Home-country	Currently living in ...	Lived in ...	Ex/partner(s) living in ...	Assignment type	Child no.	Custody/ care
20. Jinger	F/divorced	1	USA	USA	Azerbaijan	USA	Repatriated	1	Yes
21. Sarah	F/divorced	1	Australia	Hungary	Malaysia, Indonesia	Australia	Localized	2	Yes
22. Jenny	F/divorced	1	USA	Thailand	Germany, Egypt, Romania	Germany	Localized	1	Yes
23. Gillian	F/divorced	1	USA	USA	Indonesia, Kuwait, Kazakhstan	USA	Repatriated	2	Yes
24. Yvette	F/re-married	1	USA	USA	China, S Korea	USA	Repatriated	2	Yes
25. Lola	F/divorced	1	USA	Qatar	Puerto Rico	Qatar	Long term	No	-
26. Chloe	F/divorced	1	Canada	Canada	USA, Pakistan, France, UAE	UAE	Repatriated	1	Yes
27. Reeve	F/divorced	1	USA	USA	Germany	USA	Repatriated	1	Yes
28. Kaley	F/divorced	3	USA	USA	Germany	USA, Germany	Repatriated	No	-
29. Lynda	F/divorced	1	Singapore	Singapore	Malaysia, France, China	S Korea	Repatriated	No	-
30. Beinda	F/re-married	1	Germany	Germany	China, Morocco, Finland, Sweden	Germany	Repatriated	2	Yes
31. Maggie	F/divorced	1	USA	USA	Austria, Germany, Japan	USA	Repatriated	3	Yes
32. Chelsea	F/divorced	1	France	USA	Chile, Brazil	Brazil	Long term	4	Yes
33. Elsie	F/divorced	2	Romania	The Netherlands	Germany, UK, Hungary	UK	Localized	2	Yes
34. Liz	F/divorced	1	Oman	The Netherlands	Qatar, Germany	Oman	Localized	2	Yes
35. Ashley	F/divorced	1	Chile	Paraguay	Paraguay	Paraguay	Localized	No	-
36. Christine	F/separated	1	USA	Germany	Hungary, Portugal, France, Sri Lanka	India	Localized	3	Yes
37. Alison	F/divorced	1	UK	The Netherlands	Singapore	The Netherlands	Long term	4	Yes
38. Jill	F/divorced	1	USA	The Netherlands	The Netherlands	The Netherlands	Localized	No	-

Table I.

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using computer-aided qualitative analysis software (NVIVO version 8). Hierarchical categories were used to reduce, sort and cluster the data and derive key themes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), as well as content analysis to determine how strongly themes are manifested (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Although participants provide a single-rater response, they can be viewed as expert informants.

Three vignettes: the lived experience of expatriate divorce

As this is a case-based study, the “lived experience” of the participants in relation to the causes and consequences of expatriate divorce are critical. In this section, three detailed vignettes from the interviews are reported as best representing across the total sample of 38 respondents the issues and challenges married individuals face when relocating their family abroad. From the remaining respondents I draw insights and aggregated data to further convey key themes.

In the first vignette, Jill Harrington (not her real name) represents 40 years of expatriate marriage experience across four hardship locations, with a surprising twist.

Case 1: “I was too subservient, and he took charge.”

Jill Harrington (no. 3) is approaching her 70’s and considers herself happily married to her husband, Donald, despite that she lives alone in her native England while her husband lives and works abroad in Africa. As a seasoned expatriate of over 40 years, having lived abroad in locations such as Zambia, South Africa, India, and Ghana, Jill is philosophical about why some expatriate marriages fail.

“A lot of our problems were programmed by our family background. That dictates so much about how you approach marriage. But going abroad changed my programming, whereas it didn’t change Donald at all. I realized that although I had always wanted kids and I loved mine to bits, I was a lot more independent than I’d realized. I wasn’t the mumsy type. I wanted my life as well. Being the trailing spouse didn’t work for me.”

Meeting at church when Jill and Donald were quite young, they subsequently married and had two children straight away because “that’s what you did in the UK back in the 60’s,” says Jill. “We were a typical young family, with no money, and only trade qualifications. Then one day, Donald saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a job in Zambia. A 3-year contract it said, which upon completing we would get a 3,000-pound bonus, which would have paid off the mortgage when we came back. So we decided to go, firm in the belief that we’d be back in 3-years time. But naively we didn’t have a clue what we were in for, especially in Africa.”

Living out in the wild in a small-mining town in Zambia proved to be a baptism of fire for Jill who had never lived abroad. By now with three children to care for, and with travel in and out of the mining town being difficult, the isolation of their living arrangement began to cause problems. “You couldn’t even phone home, you had to book a phone call to do it! Letters were like gold dust. I only called my mother at Christmas. It was also a very tight knit community of locals and expatriates, but it was the mining industry so it was a boozy kind of life. Alcohol seemed to be the number one choice for coping with the stress,” says Jill. “I have to say, Donald worked very hard but alcohol became an issue – it became the crutch, for both of us. He wasn’t an alcoholic, but he was a binge drinker; he went out and didn’t know when to stop. He went to the pub after work with his mates, and I was lonely at home raising kids by myself. Because I had maids and babysitters, I went partying as well, but without Donald.”

Eventually, their marriage began to crumble, mostly because they lived separate lives, with Jill eventually finding solace in an affair with another man, also an expatriate living in the mining town. "I had the affair because I didn't like Donald anymore. And there was immense frustration on my part. I'd had enough of the boozy life, yet I didn't know what else I was looking for either. And we were living in a place where there was nothing else to do except raise kids and play squash. But I had a brain and it wasn't getting used! Today, it's different, and women aren't willing to stew and do nothing for the sake of their husband's career. Back then that's what was expected of you."

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"Donald and I lost the connection, and the togetherness, and the time to enjoy each other," says Jill. "That went on for a couple of years, and I got fed up. Donald was living in a cloud of his own which I wasn't part of." While telling her husband about the affair wasn't easy, Jill remains adamant that it was only a matter of time before he found out. "He was absolutely gutted. He felt that he'd taken me for granted and caused it, but to be honest there were faults on both sides."

Immediately, Jill returned to the UK with the children in a trial separation, thinking that she could build a new life with the man with whom she had been having the affair, who by now had also repatriated to the UK. "I foolishly thought this guy would leave his wife and join me. But he went back to the UK to put his marriage back together. So, here I was, with a failed marriage and a failed affair, with no job, and bringing up three young children alone in the UK. I found it very daunting. I fell apart. I sobbed and sobbed for a very long time. I was in deep turmoil. I was ashamed. I felt like a failure. I didn't feel like I could talk with anyone. I felt like I had gotten myself into this situation and I didn't know how to get myself out of it."

Eventually, after 13 years of marriage, Jill divorced Donald in 1980. But when their oldest child was in his early teens and struggling with dyslexia and other behavioral problems, Jill asked Donald to move back to the UK to help her raise their son. "We had been apart by then for 5 years, and I had moved on with my life, I now had my independence, but I really needed his help to co-parent." To Donald's credit, he moved back to the UK almost immediately, which proved to be the start of reconciling with Jill. "We went to counseling," she explains, "and I found it hugely helpful. I learned that I bottle things up and don't express myself. I said things in counseling I had never said before and so did he." Donald also went to counseling for his alcohol problem. "He got a grip on it," Jill says. "I'm proud of him. All the booze we had in the house went, and he has really got it under control. He knows it is a problem, and he manages it." During this time Jill also improved herself by doing computer studies at a local college, and then finding a good office job. By now in her 50's and living together again as a family with Donald and their children, the Harrington's decided to move to North Hampton looking to improve their lifestyle, and eventually to undertake assignments to South Africa, India, and Ghana for Donald's work.

Their re-marriage occurred some 15 years after their divorce, in December 1995, for practical rather than emotional reasons. "It was a very low-key affair at the court house and we did it because legally it made more sense to be married before we went abroad again, in order to protect our children's interests," says Jill. "I've never regretted it, but it didn't make a big difference to be honest because we were already living together anyway."

As for what makes expatriate marriage successful, Jill says that age and experience are big factors. "We would never have divorced had we stayed in the UK all our lives."

We would never have done the things we did abroad if our parents had been around to pull us into line and to tell us the ‘what’s what’ about marriage and commitment. So, being away from those strong role models was definitely a factor. I’m not saying we would have been happily married in the UK either. I’m pretty sure we would have been miserable, but we would have stuck it out.”

Telling, Jill also explains that by the time they got to Ghana in their early 50’s, they had enough experience to weather the storms of life. “We stayed in our last posting 11 years because by then we knew how to handle it – alcohol, stress, resentment I sometimes felt at not being able to work. We were older and wiser, and more experienced. We knew what to expect. Plus our kids were older and some weren’t even with us. My whole perspective has changed so much since I was a younger woman. There’s been a lot of emotional growth.” Coming back to the UK without Donald, while he remains in Ghana to see out his contract, is part of the emotional growth for Jill. Now a trained reflexologist and hypnotherapist working with cancer patients at a prestigious hospital, Jill is adamant that the positive consequences of their expatriate divorce far outweigh the negatives being, in her own words, “the best thing” for her and Donald as a couple. “It made us take stock of our lives, and made him realize how important I was to him and vice versa. We now work as a team when we didn’t have that for many, many years. There’s not that baggage anymore either [...] we talk things through. I was too subservient, and he took charge. So I’d sulk. Now I don’t do that anymore. My advice to other couples is that I feel very sorry for them to have to go down the path of expatriation in terms of what they are going to go through, most of which they haven’t got a clue about. I feel so strongly that this study is so necessary and so important”.

In the context of this study, Jill’s story is not uncommon, not just because extra-marital affairs contributed to her divorce from Donald but because, like nearly half the participants in this study, she does not identify infidelity as the reason why her marriage ended. Instead, it was symptomatic of deeper underlying issues at the core of the marriage that went unresolved for a long period of time, some of which existed before they expatriated, but many of which unfolded and were exacerbated once they went abroad. This included Donald’s problems with alcohol and Jill’s painful journey of self-discovery as a young wife and mother. Additionally, the isolation and hardship of the foreign location and the absence of family role models in the UK to guide them through the ups and downs of married life abroad were major contributing factors which, when coupled with an expatriate lifestyle, seemed to encourage conflict-producing and polarizing behaviors.

Jill’s story illustrates that expatriation itself is often the major cause of divorce, with the social, moral, and “group think” culture of the expatriate community in which couples live playing a significant role. In this study, the impact of expatriate culture seems to be especially negative in hardship and developing economy locations (e.g. Indonesia, Sri Lanka, China, Nigeria, Ghana, and Thailand, among others) where a husband’s “ego becomes incredibly huge” (no. 17) and “hanging out with men that keep women in their apartments for recreational purposes” (no. 23) meant “my husband thinking the lifestyle in Asia was ‘normal’ and ‘okay’” (no. 21). The findings therefore show that, in an expatriate context, infidelity seems to arise not just from an emotional disconnection among couples resulting from relocation stress (as is the case for Jill and Donald), but often because of “the availability of local

partners to cheat with” (no. 36) and “men working as expats being put on a pedestal and considered to be both fair game and a prized catch by women of the local culture” (no. 22). As one respondent said:

[...] my husband liked the attention of being a big man in a small place and it went to his head. He never wanted me to leave him but he hung on to his exotic mistress, because he could. He had told me that he was under the spell of a good life [...] his head became too full of his own importance. It was like he lived above the rules laid out for everyone else (no. 36).

Another said:

I remember my counselor telling me that if he had starting drinking, being out all the time, seeing prostitutes in Australia [...] his family or friends would have stepped in. In Indonesia, it was “acceptable” because so many were doing it. His friends were doing it; it was a big laugh (no. 21).

The consequences of the divorce for Jill, and for others like her (i.e. non-working stay-at-home trailing spouses who represent 50 percent of the respondents in this study) were understandably enormous, as forced repatriation to one’s home-country is often the only available option for those with no income or rights of residency to sustain them (and their children) to live independently in a host-location. For example, 14 respondents in this study were forced to repatriate as a result of the divorce. Despite the hardship she endured, Jill’s story is also one of hope. As she and Donald discovered, once they had acquired enough skills as a couple to weather the storms of life, they re-married and went abroad again, this time armed with age and experience to counter the strong influences that expatriate communities often place on couples to engage in behavior that, in their home-country, would be unthinkable. The ability to eventually “bounce back” was a strong theme among the participants in general, with 11 respondents re-marrying after their first divorce, and more than double (23) remaining in the host-country post-divorce, whether re-married or single.

The next vignette is one that focusses on domestic and psychological abuse, another common theme among expatriates as a major cause of divorce. As with most of the participants’ stories, the signs of trouble in a marriage are often not acknowledged for a long time, with devastating consequences.

Case 2: “Jobless, homeless, and penniless”

By all accounts, Quinn Wilson (no. 5) should be used to the demands of expatriate family life, having lived in England as a child when her father, an American cardiologist, spent time there in the late 1970’s. A university graduate with a penchant for travel, Quinn spent much of her 20’s living in Europe to develop her international marketing career while learning new languages, which is where she met her Spanish ex-husband.

“I met him just before I left Paris to return to the US,” says Quinn. “He then traveled to Miami for holidays to see me, begging me each time to move back to Paris to be with him. So I went,” she says, “because I loved Paris and it was where I felt I could continue to develop my career.” Immediately upon arriving in Paris, however, Quinn was told the couple was moving to Madrid so her husband could continue his career as a banker. Shocked, but willing to give it a try, she agreed to go.

“It became a pattern in our relationship that I initially did not see,” she says, “but which eventually nagged at me as a possible problem in our marriage, that he was using relocation as a control tactic. Every time I wanted to establish my own identity, he announced a move which disrupted my life.”

In Spain, she learned Spanish and taught English, but felt increasingly bored with her new life. Then, after a year, her husband proposed and they were married, after which it was announced they were moving again, this time to Brussels. It was here that Quinn gave birth to their two children and raised them as a stay-at-home mother for the next four years. Then, when the children went into pre-school, she made plans to start a Masters degree.

"I should have seen it coming, but as soon as he got wind of the Masters degree idea, another move was announced – back to Paris. And that kept happening every time the children got settled and I then wanted to start doing something for myself in each new location – my husband would announce another move." Because she had been out of the workforce for so long, and all her attempts to re-establish herself professionally had been sabotaged, Quinn felt that she had no decision-making power to say no to the constant moves.

Their last move, to Bogota, proved to be the final straw. Working as the head of the treasury department for a prominent Spanish bank for six-years in Colombia, her husband got caught up in a multi-million dollar financial scandal that saw him being demoted and sent back home, to Madrid. "He didn't get fired but his career was effectively over. All the hard work we had put into the moves, to build his career, was effectively for nothing."

The domestic abuse that marked the end of their marriage began when the Wilson's repatriated. "The Bogota scandal was huge. He had a prominent position, and it was a massive blow to his ego," says Quinn. "He got back to Madrid as a nobody within a huge bank, going from job to job. He was impossible to live with. So I had to give him an ultimatum that he deal with his issues otherwise we would end up with a divorce. I came from an abusive childhood, so I was familiar with all of the signs. Domestic abuse is not about violence, but about power and control."

By now, Quinn was 42 years old and needing to get back into the workforce. "But there was horrible discrimination about women and their age in Spain, with job advertisements that actually said 'over 30 need not apply'. The barriers were immense. My kids were 11 and 9 at the time, so I discovered the internet and I came up with the idea of a website for expat spouses (<http://global-xpats.com>) as a way to get back into the workforce." But after extraordinarily bad luck with computer hacking problems and a web site designer in the US that defrauded her of a large sum of money, the venture floundered. "It wasn't until some time later," says Quinn, "that I discovered my husband had been behind all the website problems, sabotaging and hacking into it, and even going so far as to have my phone wire tapped. He had been demanding I give it up or he would throw me out on the street and take the kids."

After filing a complaint in the Spanish court against her husband, Quinn subsequently discovered that, as a foreign mother living abroad, she had few, if any rights, to fight her husband for custody of their children. "Being in Spain, I couldn't leave him. Women who take children and run are guilty of international child abduction, and then pursued by Interpol and the FBI, thrown into jail and the children returned to the other parent. So there is nowhere to go. Embassies are loathe to get involved in marital issues despite their obligation to help citizens abroad. Every instinct to run is hampered by the enormous consequences."

Her husband, by now having become aware of Quinn's decision to legally end their marriage, jumped the gun and filed for divorce before she could find a lawyer to represent her. "The rest of it played out to his advantage," she explains, "because, in Spain, the one who files for divorce gets custodial preference of the children. Plus, he

lied and accused me of being an unfit mother, and the courts believed him. So I lost the kids. The Spanish courts afforded him full primary and physical custody.”

Having been thrown out into the street by her husband with only a suitcase, Quinn was told to be on her way. Jobless, homeless, and penniless, she was also about to become childless. “It was the last time I saw my children, who were in their early teens. That was seven years ago,” she says. “They still live in Madrid and I live in the US because when he threw me out of the house, I had nowhere else to go. It took me two years after leaving Spain just to get a telephone number so I could contact them. That’s how controlling their father is. Losing my children is undoubtedly the biggest consequence of the divorce”.

Presently gainfully employed by the International Monetary Fund at the Institute for Capacity Development in Washington, DC, Quinn is fighting hard to seek redress from the Spanish government under the European Court of Human Rights for the ramifications of her divorce, with a secondary case against the American government under jurisdiction of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. Complicating matters is that there is little judicial independence in Spain. “The divorce was pronounced in 2008 in the Spanish court,” explains Quinn, “during which I was defrauded of everything. The liquidation of assets was a joke – they expected me to disappear and give up on it. But I won’t. He was a banker, we had a lot of money. He hid those assets and he needs to be held accountable.” The official divorce was not finished until 2012 because Quinn fought everything that was presented to her, including people who chastised her along the way that she should be ashamed of herself for not going out to work and instead staying at home all those years with her children.

In reflecting on her journey, Quinn is adamant that expatriation is not what caused the divorce. “We would have gotten a divorce without being an expat because the abuse would have been there regardless. Contrary to a lot of other situations, where most spouses don’t want to live abroad, I whole-heartedly wanted to. I loved the expat life.” Quinn goes on to explain that three things were needed in order for her marriage to be successful – her husband needed to face his emotional issues and to seek help for domestic violence problems; more support from the American embassy in Spain would have enabled her to defend herself and protect the rights of her children; and she was remiss in not finding out her legal rights in the event of a divorce while living abroad.

“I didn’t have my name on bank accounts, either, and people in the justice system kept saying I should have been more on top of this. But I did ask, for 10 years, he just wouldn’t allow me to. I trusted too much. I thought I was savvy, but clearly I wasn’t savvy enough.”

Quinn’s story is one of the most heartbreaking of all the participants in this study, and is certainly one of the more dramatic. My point in telling it is to illustrate that the worst-case scenario that we may imagine for some trailing spouses during a divorce abroad is actually a lived reality. While the cause of Quinn’s divorce is undoubtedly a core issue in the marriage that she, and others like her in this study, is adamant had nothing to do with expatriating (in this case domestic and psychological abuse which escalated as a result of her husband’s job loss), the stresses associated with families living and working abroad are clear contributing factors, among them a lack of financial independence for the trailing spouse and being uninformed and uninterested about one’s rights and entitlements in the event of marital breakdown. For Quinn, it led to becoming homeless, penniless, and without custody and primary care of her children, resulting from naivety about her rights and entitlements as a foreign woman

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in Spain. For other participants, the consequences of being “economically trapped” (no. 36) include forced and rushed repatriation (often within days of ending the relationship), extreme financial hardship, bankruptcy, severe depression, and suicide. For at least three participants (nos 10, 11, and 21), a terminal cancer diagnosis followed shortly after divorce proceedings began (which thankfully proved to be curable in all cases). As one spouse said (no. 33):

[...] there is freedom in ending a situation that is painful or inappropriate or both [but] in my case it left me broke, overwhelmed and frightened for years.

The final vignette recounts the story of a custodial single-parent in Singapore from a husband’s perspective. This is an important account because the respondent is a global mobility professional with many years of experience relocating families abroad for his company.

Case 3: “Single-parent dad in Singapore”

Jacob Livingstone (no. 2) is a twice divorced, single-father of two young children. An American by birth, but having recently taken up Singaporean citizenship in order to live there with his children, he has spent the past 20 years as an expatriate in Japan, Hong Kong, India, Taiwan, and China. With two 20-something adult children in the US from a prior marriage, Jacob has deep experience as a global mobility manager for a multinational manufacturing firm. His second divorce, finalized only three years ago, while painful, also did not surprise him.

“We got married for the wrong reason, because Pam was pregnant. We both say now that if the pregnancy hadn’t occurred, we would never have married.” At the time though, Jacob was very happy to get married again and start on a second family. “We were quite content for a while,” he says. “Pam was a flight attendant in Singapore when we met and she was waiting on a job offer in Dubai when she became pregnant. We decided to get married, and within months she gave up her job and we moved up to Hong Kong for my work, where our child was born.”

A few years later, the family was then transferred to India. “It was brutal,” says Jacob. “I worked for a private bank and the hours were horrendous, plus I was traveling all the time. For the first 180 days we were in India, I was on the road for 160 of them. On weekends I was too busy recovering from jet lag to invest much time in the family.” As an experienced global mobility manager, Jacob knew only too well that he would not be able to keep up the hectic pace without paying a price. “After about a year in India, she gave me an ultimatum – leave India, or she would be leaving me. It was a no-brainer. I quit my job at the end of that week.”

Returning to Singapore, where Jacob took six months off work and Pam gave birth to their second child, family life settled down again, but with it came the realization that they were burning through their savings at a steady pace. “I had to go back to work, so I landed a great job in Beijing with only China-related travel. Everyone loved it in China, including Pam. We made so many friends, we relished the culture, and we had a great time as a family.”

But little over a year after their move to Beijing, Pam became disenchanted again. “She started saying she didn’t want to be a mother anymore, and she wanted to be single again. She didn’t let up on that for the next 18 months. She refused to go to counseling with me or to deal with the issue. In the end I got sick of hearing it because she was making everyone miserable, so I decided we should separate. I quit my job in Beijing, moved the family back to Singapore, and filed for divorce. She made it clear in

the divorce proceedings she didn't want the kids, so I've got care and control of them, and she has visitation rights."

"It was tough on the kids that first year," explains Jacob. "They were on the fence as to whether they even liked their mother, and sometimes they refused to go visit her. Things are better now as it's been over 3 years, and I make a concerted effort to include and involve Pam in family movie nights and outings, but at the time it was a pretty bad situation for them."

A self-confessed travel junkie, Jacob is quite adamant that expatriation did not cause the divorce. "I can't lie and say that India was easy. I mean, the location and the demands of the job were a total burnout and it took a toll on our family that I have to take the blame for. But we bounced back from that in Singapore, and then had a fantastic time in China." Jacob instead views the divorce as being a direct result of his ex-wife's emotional dishonesty. "I don't think she's very stable," he says. "I get a general sense of unhappiness when I look at her, even today. When we were married, she felt trapped by the demands of being a wife and mother, but now that she has neither she's still miserable. Pam is just very good at emotionally manipulating people. She's very emotionally immature, and even worse with money. She stole from me for many years – jewelry and other items – and pawned them for extra cash, even when we were dating! I only found out many years later during the divorce."

"I have to be honest and say that there were core issues in the marriage that weren't getting addressed that had nothing to do with expatriating. But I have to also say that, since the divorce, I've mellowed and calmed quite a bit. A lot of the pent up emotional stress and anger related to living with Pam isn't there any more, and I'm a better person for it. My friends say they've never seen such a great and loving Dad. So while I'm not suggesting I'm perfect, I am much happier."

Like Quinn, Jacob feels strongly that the cause of he and Pam's divorce was a core issue in the marriage that existed long before they were married or even lived abroad, in this case Pam's journey of self-discovery and her possible mental health issues that ended, regrettably, in no longer wanting to be a wife or mother. It is impossible to say, however, that expatriation did not contribute significantly to their marital woes, particularly in India where Jacob (by his own admission) engaged in a number of polarizing behaviors that led to him disengaging from his family over a number of years. This included workaholism combined with an excessive amount of work-related travel that left Pam feeling abandoned, isolated, and angry. Indeed, if the circumstances had been different in India and Pam had experienced a less traumatic and friendlier atmosphere in which to raise children, perhaps the outcome in China would not have been so extreme. This story undoubtedly points to the complex nature of family expatriation, where a combination of factors that include psychological issues, a "tough" host-country, and career pressures can sometimes lead to extreme outcomes such as divorce.

Discussion

The reality of expatriate life is that many couples are placed under extraordinary levels of stress that they often do not know how to cope with (Brown, 2008) which, as the findings in this study show, frequently results in polarizing behaviors such as infidelity, excessive drinking, abuse, and workaholism as a means of coping. When divorce occurs, this then adds another layer of stress because it alters family routines, parents' roles, and the boundaries and processes of daily living across multiple borders and geographies (Boss, 2002). While infidelity is often the reason (and, for some

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expatriates, the final straw) that leads to engaging in divorce proceedings, no participant in the study felt that infidelity was the actual cause of marital breakdown. Rather, the causes of expatriate divorce are seen equally among the participants as being due to: first, a core issue in the marriage that exists before going abroad (e.g. alcoholism, mental health issues) that has nothing to do with expatriation; or second, being separated from strong home-country role models to such an extent that one is negatively influenced by an expatriate culture where a form of “group think” results in behavior that is counter to how one might behave “back home,” i.e., the divorce has everything to do with expatriation and had a couple not gone abroad they would still be married.

In the context of expatriation, polarizing behaviors such as sexual misconduct and excessive work-related travel leading to isolation and family stress play a critical role in facilitating marital breakdown because these behaviors escalate the impact of a negative expatriate culture, often over a relatively short period of time. This is then exacerbated by a lack of strong support networks to support families during stressful periods (McNulty, 2012). Family-centered activities, on the other hand, appear to have the opposite effect of creating “stable” (no. 22), “committed” (no. 28), and “emotionally intelligent” (no. 33) expatriate couples with a “shared sense of adventure” (no. 31) and a “team approach” (no. 26). As one participant said:

I saw several successful families. They spent a lot of time together on the weekends. The working spouses seemed to have a very strong sense of family commitment. None of them checked out with alcohol, over-spending on trips and consumer goods, or spent much time away from their spouses and families (no. 23).

Another said:

You need a strong marriage going in – and a husband with a strong character (no. 24).

Undeniably, divorce is devastating to all concerned whether it is happening to expatriates or other global employees, with the company’s HR or global mobility function often being required to help employees and their spouses obtain competent legal advice. While the causes of expatriate divorce are complex, so too are the consequences; in addition to those listed earlier, the distraction of divorce is likely to also have strong crossover effects on global employees work, thus impacting on their performance (Lazarova *et al.*, 2010; see, for example, Jacob’s story where he quit his job at least twice in attempts to save his marriage). Additionally, it can be difficult to determine which country will have jurisdiction over hearings and divorce proceedings which can vary considerably from one country to another, thereby creating further stress as we saw in Quinn’s case. For this reason, one of the strongest pieces of advice offered by most of the respondents is for spouses, and trailing spouses in particular, to know their legal rights and entitlements in each country where they are living in the event of divorce. When children are involved, custody battles also require great care (see Remeikis, 2012 for a particularly harrowing example), as we saw in all three cases.

Practical implications

Mobility managers undoubtedly bear the brunt of responsibility for handling crises during international assignments, including when family relationships breakdown and result in separation and divorce. Of benefit to mobility departments is an awareness of the divorce and custody laws for non-citizens (i.e. expatriates) in the various host-countries to which they will be assigned, including the communication of this information to potential assignees and their spouses. Assistance from local HR can be

helpful in obtaining the required information. Importantly, not all countries provide agency and social welfare support to foreign residents; in Singapore, for example, formal agency support is only available to citizens and permanent residents, with most expatriates receiving no assistance. As shown in the case studies above, this can be particularly challenging for families where a non-working spouse has no access to marital assets or money as a means of obtaining paid legal advice, filing petitions to a local court regarding maintenance, and to protect themselves and their children from psychological and physical abuse. Particularly important is that organizations do not abandon expatriate families on the basis of the company only being responsible for the employee. As many spouses reported in this study, duty of care extends to the entire family until they can be safely repatriated or the custody and divorce proceedings are completed.

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Limitations and future research

This qualitative study is the first to empirically examine expatriate divorce. While the sample of 38 respondents can be considered adequate for an initial exploratory study, a larger sample would certainly provide more extensive data and perhaps allow quantitative analysis (e.g. factor analysis) from a wider population of survey respondents that includes a range of global employees beyond only “expatriates.” The study is also limited to individuals that have experienced a divorce as a primary source of data. Future research would do well to include other members of the expatriate community to gain their insights, including international school counselors, global mobility managers, and non-divorced expatriates whose marriages might also be under stress.

A further limitation is that two of the case studies featured in this paper represent the trailing spouse’s perspective (rather than the working spouse) thus limiting a detailed examination of work and non-work spillover and crossover effects. However, given the large amount of transference between the work and non-work spheres of families during international assignments that prior studies have shown (e.g. Lazarova *et al.*, 2010; Shaffer *et al.*, 2001), much would be gained by understanding the ways in which expatriate support programs, and which aspects of support in particular, are most helpful in reducing marital conflict among expatriates, and global employees in general (see Brown, 2008; Lazarova *et al.*, 2015; McNulty, 2012; Sweatman, 1999 as starting points). As one of the primary goals of this research is to develop a future research agenda to allow researchers to see a clearer picture of the steps that need to be taken in order to further examine divorce among global employees, important research questions in relation to the above include:

- RQ1.* To what extent does marital breakdown and divorce impact on the work domain for employed expatriates?
- RQ2.* What are the consequences of divorce for expatriates in relation to: first, work role effectiveness for the employed spouse; second, short-term and long-term career progression for the employed spouse; and finally, career opportunities for the trailing spouse?

Data in this study are cross-sectional and findings are somewhat limited by single-response bias (despite that the respondents can be viewed as expert informants). Future studies would do well to research matched samples of couples engaging in

global work experiences over different points in time in order to track longitudinal changes in marital quality, including why some go on to divorce while others recover from marital breakdown and stay married. This could lead to important insights as to how couples develop strong “risk and resilience” frameworks to enhance marital quality (see Hetherington, 1999; Patterson, 2002).

From a theoretical standpoint, while I have used PP to explain polarizing behaviors as factors that lead to expatriate divorce, there can be other theoretical lenses including family stress theory (Conger and Elder, 1994) and the “sense of self” concept (Gubbins *et al.*, 2010) that may provide interesting and under-explored insights into the emotional reactivity component of polarization. Additionally, while PP was used to theoretically frame the research, it could be more extensively explored, for example, by examining at what point the seeds of polarizing behavior is established in a marriage (i.e. before or after expatriating). In terms of coping mechanisms that expatriate couples bring to bear, it would be interesting to explore whether coping behaviors and skills are different for males vs female spouses, and breadwinner vs trailing spouses. This might then facilitate better organizational support for expatriate couples. Research questions in relation to these topics include:

- RQ3. Does expatriation create or exacerbate polarizing behaviors leading to divorce among married expatriates?
- RQ4. To what extent do: first, male and female expatriates; second, working vs non-working spouses; and finally, breadwinner vs trailing spouses cope differently with marital stress during international assignments?

The antecedents of divorce also require further study. For example, does expatriate marital stress escalate or de-escalate the longer one is married (i.e. is length of marriage a determining factor in avoiding expatriate divorce?) compared to other potential risk factors such as the personalities of the spouses (i.e. the “perpetual problems model”) or the willingness of spouses to address core problems in the marriage (i.e. the disillusionment model; Huston, 1994). These approaches could explain why some expatriate couples, despite their problems, stay married, and consider themselves generally satisfied (but perpetually problematic) while others remain married but are dissatisfied (disillusioned) and at greater risk of engaging in conflict-producing behaviors leading to divorce. Other risk factors include whether hardship and “tough” locations escalate the incidence of divorce compared to “easier” locations, and the role of empathy in coping with expatriate marital stress in relation to how empathy for a spouse’s situation (e.g. being a trailing spouse, having to do a lot of business travel) impacts on the support the other spouse might offer (Baucam and Atkins, 2013). An important research question here is:

- RQ5. To what extent can: first, length of marriage; second, degree of hardship in host-location; and finally, empathy be considered antecedents of expatriate divorce?

In addition to the above, more research is needed on marital breakdown among other types of global employees (e.g. inpatriates, commuters, and those in global domestic roles; Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2004; Tharenou, 2005), including a growing trend in short-term and EBT assignees, where the physical separation of employees from their families typically results in increased stress that is thought to be a major cause of marital stress,

separation, and/or divorce (Copeland, 2009; Starr and Currie, 2009; Westman, 2004). An important research questions here is:

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RQ6. To what extent does the type of global work experience impact on the incidence of divorce among global employees?

Conclusion

Divorced expatriates, especially those that result in single-parent families, represent a marked shift from traditional expatriate families. Thus, the impact that changes in expatriate family composition have on individuals, organizations, and their families is an important area of research. One of the most important contributions of this study is that it takes into account the role of the at-home spouse and children, rather than focussing only on the employed expatriate and the implications arising from a divorce to the MNC (i.e. work/non-work crossover effects). While this is not to suggest that the organizational perspective does not matter and can be ignored, it does suggest that the consequences of expatriate divorce can be better managed when the process of how they unfold for all the parties involved is more fully understood.

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Note

1. As an insider to the expatriate community, having lived and worked abroad as a corporate expatriate for the past 15 years in USA, Singapore, and China, I was able to draw on an extensive network of contacts to find participants.

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Appendix: Interview and survey questions

1. What's your divorce journey? Tell me about meeting your ex-wife/husband, your marriage, where you've lived together, when you went abroad, and when the relationship ended (formally, or informally).
2. What is the single biggest factor that contributed to your divorce?
3. In addition to this factor, are there other factors?
4. What are the consequences of your divorce?
5. Do you think the divorce would have occurred if you had not been an expatriate or relocated abroad? How much of the divorce do you attribute to being an expatriate?
6. What do you think was needed in order for your marriage to be successful? What are the specific coping mechanisms of a successful expatriate marriage? What are the top three things needed in order to be successful in an expatriate marriage?
7. Knowing what you know now about expatriate marriage, would you do it again? Would you go abroad again as a married couple? Would you get married again as an expatriate or in your home-country?
8. What advice do you have for a married couple considering relocating abroad?

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