# 'Being dumped in to sink or swim': an empirical study of organizational support for the trailing spouse

Yvonne McNulty [a]

[a] Sydney Institute of Language and Commerce, Shanghai
University, 20 Chengzhong Road, Jiading District, Shanghai,
201800, PR China

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# 'Being dumped in to sink or swim': an empirical study of organizational support for the trailing spouse

Yvonne McNulty*

*Sydney Institute of Language and Commerce, Shanghai University, 20 Chengzhong Road, Jiading District, Shanghai 201800, PR China*

Previous HRD research has determined that spouse and family adjustment is an important contributor to overall international assignment success. This study examined three types of organizational support (practical, professional and social support) provided to trailing spouses during expatriation and how important this support is perceived to be in relation to spouse adjustment. We use family systems theory to explore crossover effects and to explain the link between organizational support and perceived adjustment. Our four-year study of 264 trailing spouses in 54 host-locations found that professional support (to address the dual-career issue) and social support (to alleviate marital stress) were perceived by trailing spouses as having the greatest impact on identity re-construction and, in turn, their adjustment. However, both types of support were lacking. Although practical support was offered almost without exception, it was also frequently criticized. The need to address intrinsic adjustment and assist in the development of a meaningful portable identity emerged as major findings. Using a qualitative research approach to give voice to trailing spouses' 'lived experience', our study provides insights for HRD professionals as to gaps in existing levels of trailing spouse support and where policy improvements can be made.

**Keywords:** adjustment; expatriates; family systems theory; international assignments; trailing spouse

## Introduction

Expatriate family issues has been a major source of interest in the HRD literature (e.g. Harvey 1995; Harvey 1998; Littrell et al. 2006; Wilkinson and Singh 2010; Pruetipibultham 2012; Rosenbusch and Cseh 2012), and family issues has emerged as important across many domains (e.g. Richardson 2006; Weeks, Weeks, and Willis-Muller 2010). The impetus for much of this research is due in large part to multinational corporations (MNCs) increasing need to deploy expatriates on international assignments in order to meet their expanding internationalization efforts, and in doing so to ensure a satisfactory return on investment (McNulty, De Cieri, and Hutchings 2009). As a result, HRD efforts to recruit and train employees capable of working abroad have been given considerable attention (e.g. Osman-Gani

*Email: ymcnulty@thetrailingspouse.com

and Tan 2005). Within this body of research, studies focused on the trailing spouse have emerged as particularly important in light of evidence that suggests spouse adjustment is a critical factor in overall international assignment success (Andreason 2008; Cole 2011). Indeed, recent industry surveys (e.g. Cartus and Primacy 2010) show that 'family and personal circumstances' and 'partner's career' remain the top reasons for refusing to accept an international assignment, thus representing a critical relocation challenge for HRD professionals. Furthermore, the three main reasons for failed assignments constitute a continued risk for MNCs: family concerns, partner dissatisfaction and inability of spouse to adapt (Andreason 2008). In light of these difficulties, it is prudent to consider the following comment by Adler and Gundersen (2007, 314):

> In global transfers, the spouse has the most difficult role of any family member. Whereas employees have the organization and job structure that continue from the home to the new country, and children have the continuity and routine of school, spouses often leave behind many of the most important aspects of their lives, including friends, relatives and meaningful activities ... the challenges of adjusting successfully are therefore both different and greater.

This state of affairs confirms more than two decades of research showing that the trailing spouse plays a key role during expatriation in terms of willingness to go, assignment completion, expatriate adjustment and expatriate performance (Lazarova, Westman, and Shaffer 2010). Trailing spouse research has also extended across a variety of settings, e.g. North America (Black and Gregersen 1991), Australia (Fish and Wood 1997), and Asia (Selmer and Leung 2003), to demonstrate that expatriate family challenges appear to be somewhat universal. For these reasons, recent research has begun to examine specific aspects of organizational support that can enhance and improve spouse's overall international assignment experience relating to, for example, cross-cultural training (Shen and Lang 2009), social support (Copeland and Norell 2002), dual-careers (Harvey 1997), parental demands (Takeuchi et al. 2007) and identity re-construction (Shaffer and Harrison 2001). Building on prior research (e.g. Cole 2011), we contend that effective organizational support can play an integral part in the adjustment process for the trailing spouse, which in turn facilitates HRD efforts to ensure overall assignment success, increasing subsequent assignment acceptance, and mitigating the risk of assignment failure.

## Purpose

The purpose of our study is to examine three types of organizational support (practical, professional and social support) provided to trailing spouses during expatriation, and how important this support is perceived to be in relation to spouse adjustment. Our fundamental argument is that effective organizational support is multi-faceted, i.e. it consists of different types of support. In order to produce the desired results, all three types of support need to be available to the trailing spouse. Hence, we contend that a combination of support will have a greater perceived impact on spouse adjustment than one type of support provided in isolation. For example, we propose that practical support will help spouses adjust to their external environment, whereas professional support will address the dual-career issue and social support can help to alleviate marital stress. We contribute to the literature on expatriate family research by extending the very few empirical studies that have

directly investigated trailing spouses' expectations of support during an international assignment (e.g. Selmer and Leung 2003). This includes the very limited number of studies using a sample of trailing spouses (e.g. Copeland and Norell 2002). In drawing on data from 264 trailing spouses in 54 host-locations and 28 nationalities, our study aims to give the trailing spouse a voice in which to share their 'lived experience'. A further contribution is that, by adopting a qualitative research approach, we reveal perceptions and findings that can be compared with other studies to deepen what is currently understood about expatriate family support (e.g. Rosenbusch and Cseh 2012). Additionally, we aim to provide useful insights for HRD professionals as to where current gaps and difficulties in expatriate family support and policy development exist.

The article starts by introducing family systems theory to explore crossover effects and coping mechanisms for the trailing spouse. Next, we explain the link between organizational support and trailing spouse adjustment. We briefly review the literature on three types of organizational support and discuss three important adjustment concerns: dual-career issues, marital stress and identity re-construction. This is followed by an explanation of our study's methodology, after which we present our findings, and conclude with a discussion and overall implications of our study for HRD.

## Family systems theory

The theoretical context for our study rests in family systems theory (Voydanoff 1980) as an extension of broader systems theory. We apply 'systems thinking' (Von Bertalanffy 1972, 414) to our study by focusing on the dynamics and relationships between family system components (e.g. types of organizational support, identity re-construction) to facilitate a stated goal (i.e. spouse adjustment). Importantly, the state of a family system at any point in time is dependent upon its environment in terms of changes arising from inputs (e.g. organizational support) and outputs (e.g. coping mechanisms). We argue that as family systems absorb resources and develop appropriate coping mechanisms, they evolve and subsequently impact on spouse adjustment.

Prior research on expatriation (e.g. Caligiuri et al. 1998; Takeuchi, Yun, and Tesluk 2002) demonstrates that there are significant family system effects during international assignments, where crossover effects between the trailing spouse, expatriate employee and other family members such as children, can influence attitudes and behaviours, and in turn, intent to leave and assignment success. In an ideal family situation, relationships between family members exist in a state of balance, or equilibrium, where each reciprocally affects the psychological state of the other, and in some instances may also have physiological effects. During expatriation, families invariably go through a variety of developmental stages whilst at the same time attempting to maintain a sense of equilibrium. Factors both internal and external to the family system have been suggested to exert pressure on family equilibrium during international assignments (Brown 2008). During expatriation, one would expect ongoing adjustments as family members strive to maintain equilibrium by offsetting a change in one domain (family life as a result of a move) with a corresponding change in another domain (increased organizational support to cope with the demands). For the trailing spouse it is proposed that dealing with individual demands and building appropriate capabilities (to enhance positive

crossover effects) are likely to be influenced by the types of organizational support provided to expatriate families.

A family systems approach to the study of trailing spouse adjustment is justifiable on several grounds. First, it addresses the need for more HRD research such as that of Rosenbusch and Cseh (2012), whose model of family flexibility and cross-cultural adjustment is a clear example of conceptualizing adjustment as an integrated process. A second benefit is that a family systems perspective recognizes a range of internal and external factors that may influence spouse adjustment, thereby establishing a clear conceptual link between organizational support and perceived adjustment. Third, the dynamic nature of family systems is important because it recognizes that the system is in a constant state of change according to a variety of conditions such as the degree of support available to address, for example, the dual-career issue.

## Linking organizational support and trailing spouse adjustment

The adjustment of the trailing spouse has been the subject of much research, most specifically as a direct antecedent of expatriate work performance (see Thomas and Lazarova 2006). Recent research, however, suggests that the link between adjustment and performance is impacted by other factors (e.g. expatriate engagement) that play an intervening role in the overall process (Lazarova, Westman, and Shaffer 2010). Following this line of thought, we propose that trailing spouse adjustment is impacted by three types of organizational support that can address two important concerns of the trailing spouse – dual-career issues and marital stress – to then impact on identity re-construction. These concerns are drawn from a broad research base showing that the trailing spouse's 'lived experience' during an international assignment is frequently exacerbated by the loss of a career, social networks, extended family support, and financial independence, as well as unemployment, all of which requires adjustment to new family roles and responsibilities along with shifts in relationship dynamics within the family unit (Shaffer and Harrison 2001; Cole 2011). Given that the trailing spouse has no official employment status with an MNC but is nonetheless greatly affected by its expatriate policies and practices, we suggest that the role of organizational support cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it may act as an effective proxy for HRD professionals' direct involvement in the personal lives of expatriate family members to address some of these challenges.

The adjustment process is conceptualized as one where individuals are continuously engaged in the balancing of demands against capabilities (Patterson 1988). Demands for the trailing spouse may include *stressors*, i.e. one-off events such as the move abroad; *strains*, i.e. ongoing unresolved tensions resulting from stressors that manifest over time, such as giving up a job/career, changed family routines, children starting new schools, and changes in financial status; and *daily hassles*, i.e. dealing with locals in a foreign language. Capabilities may include coping behaviours derived from emotional resources (friendships, clubs, associations, online), informational resources (company assistance with finding a job) and instrumental resources (relocation allowances, residency permits). Other resources may be found in 'socio cultural brokerage' (Glanz, Williams, and Hoeksema 2001, 104), for example, where children may facilitate access to social networks and friendships for the trailing spouse.

We contend that the trailing spouse's ability to effectively balance demands against capabilities (i.e. reduce stressors and develop effective coping behaviours) is facilitated by the extent to which they receive adequate organizational support. We argue that both career and relationship stress are two of the most common ongoing unresolved tensions encountered by the trailing spouse when moving into unfamiliar cultural environments, and that poor coping mechanisms in relation to each impacts on the ability to reconstruct their identity, and in turn, overall perceived adjustment. In this section we briefly describe each of these constructs.

### Trailing spouse organizational support

When comparing the types of support provided to the trailing spouse, consulting companies (e.g. ORC Worldwide 2008) report that up to 80% of organizations provide extensive practical support during an international assignment (e.g. pre-assignment visit to the host location, furniture storage, tax advice, interim accommodation, home-sale assistance, language courses, cross-cultural training and immigration paperwork), yet only 50% provide support towards the pro-fessional integration of the trailing spouse (e.g. job search, career counselling, resume preparation, work permit assistance, and retraining/tuition reimbursement), and less than 30% provide company support towards the social integration of expatriate families (e.g. introductions to other expatriates, memberships to sports and social clubs, and information about and access to expatriate forums and spouse networking groups). Furthermore, Cartus and Primacy (2010) in their survey of 196 organizations in North America, Europe, and Asia reported that firms' interest in improving spouse and family assistance is waning, with only 13% making it a priority for the next three years, down from 19% in 2007. It was also found to be the least important priority overall in a list of seven priorities, and when asked to list the greatest mobility challenges in terms of future impact on their organization, firms listed nine challenges of which spouse and/or family issues did not warrant mention. Thus, whilst companies generally give considerable attention to the logistics of an international relocation, much less attention is given to the professional and social skills necessary for the trailing spouse to adjust to their new circumstances in terms of adapting to and building a 'meaningful portable life' (Fish and Wood 1997; Anderson 2005).

### Dual-career issues

Harvey (1997) and Cole (2011) found that unresolved dual-career issues negatively influence the adjustment cycle for the trailing spouse. Brown (2008) demonstrated that abandoning or interrupting a spouses career leads to a loss of power, identity and self-worth, which may have spillover effects to other family members. The limited research available on male trailing spouses indicates that spousal problems may be more serious for men (Selmer and Leung 2003). Other problems include higher refusal rates to accept international assignments, discontinuity of trailing spouses career leading to family and marital stress, disruption to family income, increased risk of assignment failure, and repatriation and re-engagement issues arising from trailing spouses' often prolonged absence from the workforce (Harvey 1998; Haslberger and Brewster 2008). Conversely, The Permits Foundation (2009) reported that employed trailing spouses perceive that working during an assignment

has a positive impact on their adjustment, family relationships, health and well-being, as well as willingness to complete and to extend their current assignment and to go on a new one. Hence, dual-career support remains highly valued by expatriates and their spouses.

### Marital stress

Although psychological as well as physiological stress during international assignments has received much attention in the literature (e.g. Wilkinson and Singh 2010), marital stress between couples has received limited attention (e.g. Pascoe 2003). Of the few published studies we found, marital factors were found to be related to relocation adjustment for expatriates and their spouses (James et al. 2004). Thompson (1986) found that 'a strong marriage' was perceived by trailing spouses to be an important factor in coping with international life. One of the main sources of marital stress is expatriates' long working hours which creates marital tension as well as loneliness and isolation (De Cieri, Dowling, and Taylor 1991). Other factors contributing to marital stress include abandonment of a spouse's career, altered financial status, a change in relationship dynamics and the loss of social support networks (Lazarova, Westman, and Shaffer 2010). Hence, a move abroad can either reconfirm the couple bond due to an increased reliance on each other for social and psychological support, or it can place a strain on a relationship that may lead to separation or divorce.

### Identity re-construction

Drawing on identity disruption theory, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) conceptualized spouse adjustment as a process that is largely pre-occupied with reformulating one's identity in a new environment. They found that spouse adjustment is affected by three inter-related antecedents: *personal* identity (i.e. language fluency, employment status, self-efficacy); *social* identity (i.e. relationships with family, friends, acquaintances); and *situational* identity (i.e. cultural novelty, living conditions, assignment duration), but that the greatest impact on adjustment stems from spouses' ability to re-establish a social sense of themselves. Additionally, retaining a *past* identity was not found to be as important as the establishment of a *new* identity through the building of interpersonal relationships in the host-country. In line with Cole (2011), we contend that a new identity will be facilitated by professional support to address the dual-career issue and social support to alleviate family and marital stress. Furthermore, given the increasing number of re-assigned expatriates who may spend many years, or even decades, outside their home country, the intrinsic needs of spouses will likely emerge as the most critical factor in building a meaningful portable identity.

### Method

This is a qualitative study based on a combination of descriptive and exploratory approaches, and inductive analysis (Creswell 2003). Sekaran (2003) suggests that this framework is useful for clarifying and defining the nature of a problem when the phenomenon itself is under-researched and there is little or no existing theory to explain it. We gathered data from 264 trailing spouses while on assignment using an

online questionnaire. The large sample can be attributed to the long period of data collection (2001–2005). Table 1 summarizes the sample characteristics for the study. The typical trailing spouse in this study was married (97%) for at least four years (72%), female (91%) with children (57%) and under 40 years of age (54%).

Table 1.  Sample characteristics.

|  | n = 264 | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* |  |  |
| Female | 241 | 91 |
| Male | 23 | 9 |
| *Respondent's age* |  |  |
| 21–29 years | 10 | 4 |
| 30–39 years | 122 | 46 |
| 40–49 years | 83 | 31 |
| 50–59 years | 44 | 17 |
| 60 and over years | 5 | 2 |
| *Number of relocations* |  |  |
| 1 | 97 | 37 |
| 2–4 | 133 | 50 |
| 5–7 | 20 | 8 |
| 8–10 | 10 | 4 |
| More than 10 | 4 | 1 |
| *Length of marriage* |  |  |
| Less than one year | 13 | 5 |
| 1–3 years | 59 | 23 |
| 4–10 years | 75 | 29 |
| 11–20 years | 68 | 27 |
| More than 20 years | 40 | 16 |
| *Marital status* |  |  |
| Married | 257 | 97 |
| Engaged | 3 | 1 |
| Other (defacto, same-sex) | 4 | 2 |
| *Home-country region* |  |  |
| North America | 101 | 38 |
| South America | 3 | 1 |
| Middle East/Africa | 7 | 3 |
| Asia Pacific/Australia/NZ | 61 | 23 |
| Europe/UK | 92 | 35 |
| *Host-country region* |  |  |
| North America | 63 | 25 |
| South America | 28 | 11 |
| Middle East/Africa | 25 | 10 |
| Asia Pacific/Australia/NZ | 55 | 22 |
| Europe/UK | 80 | 32 |
| *Questionnaire response* |  |  |
| Online | 258 | 98 |
| Paper | 6 | 2 |
| *Number of children* |  |  |
| 0 | 115 | 44 |
| 1 | 34 | 13 |
| 2 | 78 | 30 |
| 3 | 30 | 11 |
| 4 | 6 | 2 |

Table 1.    (*Continued*).

|  | $n = 264$ | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Children living with you* ($n = 148$) | | |
| Yes | 97 | 66 |
| No | 39 | 26 |
| Some | 12 | 8 |
| *Number of languages spoken* | | |
| 1 | 109 | 42 |
| 2 | 83 | 32 |
| 3 | 39 | 15 |
| 4 or more | 31 | 11 |
| *Time since lived in home-country* | | |
| Less than one year | 75 | 30 |
| 1–5 years | 116 | 46 |
| 6–10 years | 47 | 18 |
| 11–15 years | 6 | 2 |
| More than 15 years | 10 | 4 |
| *Longest time in one location* | | |
| Less than one year | 28 | 12 |
| 1–2 years | 50 | 20 |
| 2–3 years | 67 | 27 |
| More than 3 years | 100 | 41 |
| *Number of countries lived in* | | |
| 1 | 106 | 42 |
| 2–4 | 115 | 46 |
| 5–7 | 24 | 9 |
| 8–10 | 4 | 2 |
| More than 10 | 1 | 1 |

## Data collection

The sample was sourced through collaboration with various expatriate associations, such as Philadelphia International Women's Association, www.expatexpert.com, and Primetime Women's Business and Professional Association Singapore. A description of the study was forwarded by email to an appropriate stakeholder in each association, who then on-forwarded information about the study to their members. Only trailing spouses were invited to participate and snowballing was encouraged (i.e. sending information about the study to expatriate friends). Interested participants were directed to find out more about the study by accessing a website detailing a summary of objectives (including informed consent) and a link to the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were submitted to an email address owned by the author. No identifying information about respondents was captured.

## Questionnaire development

As this was an exploratory study, questionnaire development proceeded in several steps. First, relevant existing measures were gathered from the literature and modified to provide a starting point. Second, questions were then written. We developed a 13-item measure from the work of Caligiuri et al. (1998) and Harvey (1997) to determine rankings of importance of three types of organizational support (practical, professional and social support). Example items included education

assistance, pre-departure training, and access to technology. Spouses' perceived adjustment was assessed using a 28-item measure that included self-reported measures for dual-career issues (14 items) based on the work of Harvey (1997; 1998), and marital stress (14 items) based on the work of Thompson (1986). For example, an item for marital stress stated 'When I am unable to work in a new location, the stress in our relationship increases'. We gathered additional data relating to adjustment coping mechanisms by adapting a nine-item measure from Tung (1998); an example item is, 'Which of the following activities help you adjust in a new location (choose more than one if applicable)'. The majority of questions were formatted to a five-point Likert scale ('very important' to 'very unimportant' or 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'), along with several open-ended questions to draw out the trailing spouse experience in respondents' own words. An example of an open-ended question is, 'What are the major causes of stress in your relationship when you relocate'. Third, the questionnaire wording was pre-tested with three trailing spouses in the field to determine any problems of clarity and ambiguity, following which minor amendments were made. Lastly, four mobility managers drawn from the author's professional network reviewed the questionnaire and several revisions were made to reduce the number of questions and the order in which they were asked, based upon their feedback.

### Data analysis

Responses to Likert-scale questions were analysed using a means analysis, frequency distribution scores and individual item analysis. Responses to open-ended questions were analysed using NVIVO v.8 to code and derive key themes, and content analysis to then determine how strongly key themes were manifested. Several procedures were put in place to promote research 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 281) in order to establish the 'truth value' of the study (290). Following Marshall and Rossman's (2006) framework, *credibility* (internal validity) was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of the processes and complexities of the study which are described in-depth in this section. *Transferability* (usefulness of the study) was enhanced through thick description of the findings which are presented here in as much detail as possible. *Dependability* (a form of reliability) was facilitated by the deep knowledge of the author who used her 'insider status' as a trailing spouse to guide research design, data collection and inductive analysis. *Confirmability* (objectivity) was maintained through (1) peer debriefing, where we passed several drafts and notes from the coding process to other researchers and practitioners in the field for their review and feedback; and (2) an 'industry report' of the findings which was compiled and sent back to as many participants as possible for member checking.

### Findings

Evidence in our study shows that a mix of practical, professional and social support were perceived to be important to trailing spouse adjustment regardless of whether support was actually provided. Table 2 ranks organizational support in order of perceived importance. Less than one third of trailing spouses (29%) rated the organizational support they received as 'good' or 'excellent'. Frequently spouses complained of having an indirect or 'shadowed' relationship with their partners'

Table 2.   Ranking of organizational support in order of perceived importance.

| Item | Important | Neither important or unimportant | Unimportant | *n* | Type of support |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Access to technology (email, internet) | 95% | 4% | 1% | 261 | Social |
| Finding and/or subsidizing housing | 94 | 5 | 1 | 262 | Practical |
| Ongoing support after first 3 months | 85 | 9 | 6 | 261 | Practical |
| Sufficient time for family to adjust | 82 | 14 | 4 | 257 | Social |
| Company funded home-country visits | 82 | 13 | 5 | 260 | Social |
| Subsiding decreases in family income | 80 | 15 | 5 | 260 | Professional |
| Education assistance for trailing spouse | 76 | 18 | 6 | 260 | Professional |
| Outsourcing relocation programme to external vendors | 74 | 20 | 6 | 262 | Practical |
| Pre-departure training | 71 | 25 | 4 | 259 | Professional/ social |
| Expatriate employee's availability to assist with relocation | 68 | 11 | 21 | 260 | Social |
| Access to a mentoring or coaching programme | 51 | 39 | 10 | 258 | Professional/ social |
| Assistance with finding paid work for the trailing spouse | 44 | 29 | 27 | 259 | Professional |
| Expatriate employee's work-related travel schedule | 43 | 20 | 37 | 262 | Social |

organization and subsequently found it difficult to obtain information about relocation policies and practices. As one spouse said, 'I feel cut off from a process that affects my life deeply'. Findings also point to a frequent complaint about the lack of respect and professionalism shown by HR staff towards trailing spouses. Words used to describe HR staff included 'mean', 'stubborn', 'out of touch' and 'clueless'. Trailing spouses felt that their needs were trivialized or ignored by HR staff, as one spouse explains:

One of the things that has been continually disappointing to me is HR departments seem to be populated with people who have never relocated, in some cases even resent

expats, and who have no interest in learning how they might improve their relocation services.

Adding to this stress is the feeling that companies abuse the role of the trailing spouse by expecting them to assume relocation responsibilities that should instead be outsourced to external vendors and/or assigned to the expatriate employee, as one spouse explained:

> My husband is supposed to keep working his hours and relocate. Companies base this on the fact that there should be a housewife at home dealing with it … I object to trudging round like an unpaid company scivvy so they can save the cost of a relocation company…. its the whole hidden labor market, like it will all be taken care of by itself.

### Perceived adjustment

We found that spouse adjustment is a multi-faceted construct that is influenced by a range of factors and corresponding support, as outlined in Table 3. Trailing spouses identified a number of activities that they perceived would help with their adjustment during an international assignment (see Table 4). Using internet and email (91%), socializing with expatriates (90%) and spending time with their spouse and children (81%) were the top three adjustment coping mechanisms. Unfortunately, spending enough time with their (employed) spouse proved to be a tremendous challenge and was cited as a major source of marital tension and frustration. The least important adjustment activity was voluntary or unpaid work (41%), which was resented by

Table 3. Trailing spouse adjustment factors.

| Item | Important | Neither important or unimportant | Unimportant | $n$ | Type of support |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strong and stable marriage | 99% | 1% | 0% | 261 | Social |
| Lack of stress in the marriage | 94 | 4 | 2 | 259 | Social |
| Sufficient time for family to adjust | 82 | 14 | 4 | 257 | Social |
| Manageability of expatriate employee's job demands | 71 | 16 | 13 | 259 | Practical |
| Expatriate employee's availability to assist with relocation | 68 | 11 | 21 | 260 | Practical |
| Trailing spouse's ability to earn an income | 52 | 20 | 28 | 257 | Professional |
| Expatriate employee's work-related travel schedule | 43 | 20 | 37 | 262 | Practical |

Table 4.   Adjustment coping mechanisms.

| Activity | % | *n* | Type of support |
|---|---|---|---|
| Using internet or email | 91 | 260 | Social |
| Socializing with expatriates | 90 | 263 | Social |
| Spending time with spouse/children | 81 | 264 | Social |
| Keeping in touch with family back home | 79 | 264 | Social |
| Socializing with locals | 74 | 259 | Social |
| Learning host country language | 71 | 262 | Professional/social |
| Sporting clubs and associations | 57 | 263 | Social |
| Massage, yoga, meditation, journal writing | 47 | 262 | Social |
| Voluntary or unpaid work | 41 | 264 | Professional/social |

some spouses as 'supporting the local citizens for free', without being 'good enough to be employed, pay my taxes and be given my independence'.

### Dual-career issues

We found that 84% of trailing spouses had a tertiary qualification or a college education and 79% had a career prior to relocating. Yet, only 36% were able to continue their career once relocated due mainly to visa and work permit restrictions. Professional support for the career-oriented spouse therefore emerged as a poorly met need ('a major failing' as one spouse described it), in areas such as providing outplacement services, the services of a career coach, career guidance and counselling, education reimbursement, assistance to obtain a work permit, professional contacts and fair opportunities. Cash allowances were not perceived to be of much benefit. The lack of dual-career support led to deep resentment for having sacrificed a job and proximity to family to support someone else's career. Some serious outcomes relating to this issue were reported:

> A number of female partners of my husband's colleagues have had serious problems adjusting due to their inability to work and make friends. Many wish to return home, others are really stressed, and two are potential suicide cases . . . should I not be able to obtain work I will seriously consider breaking the contract because there are half a dozen expat wives on anti-depressants because of it and I won't be joining them.

At the heart of the dual-career issue appears to be a loss of identity stemming from an inability to obtain paid work. As one spouse said:

> I do not live for my husband, nor do I live for his work and the company just couldn't understand that. He did not marry a housewife and I will never be one.

For others, there was a sense that not working led them to 'feel like a second-class citizen', where 'my self esteem has taken a beating' and 'I feel that I have given up my real self and become less of a person'. One spouse went so far as to say:

> It is a lonely way to live as we are left to reinvent ourselves and our children after every relocation. It's exhausting and unrewarding. I regret my life.

*Marital stress*

In terms of marital stress, 99% of trailing spouses rated 'a strong and stable marriage' as the most important adjustment factor during an international assignment, with 71% indicating that it is harder to adjust in a new location when there is a high degree of marital stress. Sources of marital tension were due to spending insufficient time with their spouse and a lack of understanding about the deeper adjustment issues and challenges they faced. Female spouses in particular spoke about their needs being trivialized by their husbands because they were perceived to be 'on holiday' and had 'a cook, a maid, and a driver and you get to do whatever you want at any time of the day'. One spouse stated:

> What upsets me is the feeling that his company does not offer enough (or any) family support, and that he is not willing to fight for it or for us.

Another said:

> It's difficult to explain how you can feel stressed and depressed when all you have done is taken the children around in the car and played tennis'.

When asked if they were considering separating or divorcing because of the stress of relocating, 6% indicated 'yes', as the following spouse explains:

> 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.

To alleviate marital stress, counselling sessions for couples were suggested to be helpful in terms of outlining possible areas of future conflicts, as well as providing advice on how to deal with them in a foreign location. Trailing spouses also suggested more vacation time, time off during the relocation for the expatriate to help with the move, a reduction in business-related travel during the first month of the assignment, flex-Fridays, accompanying spouses on business trips, company functions for the family, and not scheduling business meetings and conferences during leisure time and on weekends. There was a general feeling that organizations 'need to admit that they moved a family and not just the employee, so don't expect the family to adjust without assistance from the working spouse'.

*Identity re-construction*

Trailing spouse identity issues emerged as a major finding of the research overall. One spouse compared her identity crisis to 'being a woman in a third world country; I'm not permitted to work and everything is at the discretion of my husband'. Another said, 'I'm not living my life, I'm living his'. For others there was a feeling that identity issues were caused by 'dreams being destroyed in a minute', which often led to resentment at being stereotyped as a trailing spouse who wanted to only 'drink coffee, do charity work, gossip, and watch day-time TV every day'. One spouse summed up this feeling well:

> I was a barrister in Australia who thought it might be fun to take a year to live with my husband in far north Finland. It wasn't. I couldn't work. I was ignored and my whole identity disappeared. We now live apart for five days a week - he in far north Finland, me in Helsinki. I am working, but it is not the senior job I had in Australia and this has caused intense bitterness.

Social and professional support were found to be important facilitators of spouses' identity reconstruction as a way 'to belong' and 'to be able to create a life of my own'. Yet, assistance with both types of support was lacking. Being 'dumped in to either sink or swim' and 'being treated by the company as totally invisible' were frequent complaints. Language training was found to be important for building self-esteem and coping with everyday practicalities, where fluency in the host-country language was perceived to provide 'power and independence'. Similarly, providing assistance to the trailing spouse to source clubs and associations, as well providing a list of email addresses of other spouses in the company were suggested as important improvements.

### Discussion

On the whole, findings in our study point to a level of overall organizational support that continues to disappoint trailing spouses, with a strong belief that MNCs are not genuinely interested in their welfare (see Selmer and Leung 2003 for similar findings). Whilst practical support was the most common type of resource provided, it was nonetheless frequently criticized. Confirming prior research (e.g. Adler and Gundersen 2007; Cartus and Primacy 2010), the issues that were poorly addressed included the dual-career dilemma, socialization within the expatriate community and marital stress, i.e. professional and social support that potentially contribute to long-term intrinsic adjustment. Indeed, the issue perceived unanimously by trailing spouses, almost without exception, to have the greatest effect on their perceived adjustment was a 'strong and stable marriage'. Hence, in balancing demands against capabilities (Patterson 1988), we found that inadequate support frequently led to 'sink or swim' attempts to cope with the stressors, strains and daily hassles the trailing spouse encountered. Furthermore, career and relationship stress remained ongoing unresolved tensions.

On a more positive note, the findings present an interesting perspective on trailing spouse adjustment, which emerges as multi-dimensional and socially constructed (Shaffer and Harrison 2001). The link between dual-careers and identity seems to create psychological challenges that are manifested in feelings of isolation, loneliness, resentment and depression. In line with crossover and work-family research (e.g. Brown 2008), we conclude that international assignments rarely impact just one aspect of life for a trailing spouse, but instead feeds into and influences other areas of life such as feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, identity, and marriage and family relationships (Harvey 1997). Theoretically, these findings can be explained by the fact that different people will have different interpretations of what it means to be a trailing spouse and how it influences their view of the effectiveness of the organizational support provided to them. Thus, the situational aspects of the trailing spouse experience are important considerations, for example, dual-career status, prior expatriate experience, gender, and stage of family life-cycle.

Attitude can also play an important role (see Tung 1998). Despite some rather negative findings, spouses recognized that certain stages of a move are more stressful

than others and there are limits to what organizational support can accomplish. In recognizing that the development of a portable identity is both an outer as well as an inner journey (see Bryson and Hoge 2005), spouses were clear that 'it comes down to the individual' where 'being the trailing spouse can be viewed as an encumbrance or an opportunity'. In developing specific policies and practices, organizations need to consider that all spouses will need some training and support but some will need more than others.

### Practical implications

On a practical level, trailing spouses' expressed an overwhelmingly urgent need for HR staff to have personal relocation experience as a necessary pre-requisite for working in this field. Also needed is a direct communication link between the MNC and the trailing spouse, irrespective of their non-employee status. Funnelling important documents about a relocation through the expatriate employee was viewed as risky as the information often did not make it home. Additionally, there is frustration that employees are not allocated sufficient time to settle-in with their families upon arrival in the host-country before being inundated with work commitments and extended business travel.

Assistance in finding a job for the trailing spouse (e.g. obtaining work permits, using a career coach, updating a resume), helping them stay connected remotely to their career (i.e. through paid subscriptions, associations), and/or building a new career appears especially necessary (see, for example, Parfitt 1998). If employment is not an option or not desired, companies could help with the reimbursement of education-related costs to compensate for the loss of spousal income, or childcare to facilitate attendance at courses. To reduce the stress of isolation, MNCs would do well to sponsor memberships of local social clubs and provide training in networking skills. Attention also needs to be paid to organizing introductory social events in the host location.

Overall, organizations need to provide realistic overviews both prior to and during an assignment to help trailing spouses accurately identify the challenges they might face and as well as the personal attributes they may bring to their situation to overcome some of these challenges. This could be facilitated through coaching, counselling, or the provision of books and other reading material (e.g. Heinzer 2009; Martins and Hepworth 2011) in combination with knowledge of, and access to, appropriate online resources (e.g. www.expatwomen.com). Improved attention to all of these issues can contribute to increased motivation, as well as provide a more solid day-to-day structure for trailing spouses, thus facilitating increased adjustment as well as the quality of the psychological contract with respect to the care and maintenance of expatriate families.

### Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that our study provides a somewhat simplified representation of the multi-faceted construct of expatriate adjustment (e.g. Lazarova, Westman, and Shaffer 2010) because we focus only on one aspect, i.e. organizational support and its perceived impact on trailing spouse adjustment. We also acknowledge that the three types of support examined are not a conclusive list of factors that may play a role in spouse adjustment. As research on this topic develops, identification and

understanding of other support factors will continue to evolve and new streams of research may further extend and build on this study over time. Additionally, in adopting a systems theory perspective, we recognize that the multi-faceted nature of organizational support as well as the unique intrinsic needs of individual spouses renders it impossible to determine – in absolute terms – which types of support in isolation or in combination are likely to have the greatest impact on perceived adjustment. For this reason, further empirical study using quantitative approaches is needed to more fully examine these inter-relationships, including the effects of perceived organizational support on expatriate success. Furthermore, as our study uses cross-sectional data, future research would benefit from multiple sampling periods. Given that strains emerge and build over time as ongoing tensions, it would be worthwhile to examine strains at different stages of an assignment to explore under which conditions strains build up and under which they abate to impact on perceived spouse adjustment. It must also be noted that the study was limited to English-speaking respondents, hence conducting the study in another language would add to the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, we hope our study provides valuable foundational work for HRD as a necessary part of the development of this topic.

## Conclusion

The focus of this research has been to identify key issues related to the organizational support provided to trailing spouses during expatriation and how important that support is perceived to be. One critical gap in knowledge that has been addressed is to identify the dominant stressors for trailing spouses during international assignments and how HRD professionals can begin to meet those needs. Hence, the study has contributed to a better understanding of the sources of stress for trailing spouses, both externally as well as intrinsically, which may help in developing a meaningful portable identity. This has been achieved by enhancing our understanding that expatriation is a gains and losses event for the trailing spouse, whose overall assignment satisfaction is dependent upon striking a balance between missed opportunities in the home-country and new opportunities arising from the relocation to a host-country.

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