

## **THE DIPLOMATIC SPOUSE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADJUSTMENT, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In this study we focus on spouses of diplomats who are employed within the Foreign Service within the European Union (EU) as well as the European Economic Area (EEA). Although the diplomatic profession is among the oldest in the field of expatriation, there is limited research on this group (Groeneveld, 2008). Unlike other expatriates who may only accept one overseas role in their lifetime, diplomats' entire careers revolve around taking up new assignments in new locations every few years. This year's Russian spy poisoning scandal exemplifies the precariousness of diplomats' positions, as several EU and EEA nations collectively expelled over 100 diplomats, with Russia subsequently doing the same (The Economist, 2018).

The literature on expatriate management has indicated that expatriates' success or failure in moving internationally is largely determined by their cross-cultural adjustment skills (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Caligiuri, 1997; Lee, 2007; Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl & Osland, 2002; Sappinen, 1993). Kraimer, Wayne and Jaworski (2001) have found that employers' spousal support is significantly related to general adjustment; Shaffer et al. (2001) have found that employer spousal support reduces assignment withdrawal symptoms; and Konopaske et al. (2005) have noted the importance of increasing spousal willingness to accept long-term global assignments. Researchers such as Harvey (1985), Kupka and Cathro (2007), Lundström (2013), McNulty (2012), and Wood (2007) have further examined the challenges spouses face when moving to a new location, such as loneliness, isolation, role alternation, disruption of social ties and routines, and loss of identity and self-worth. Other studies by Shaffer and Harrison (2001) and Kupka and Cathro (2007) have found that spouses need to create new professional networks, overcome cultural and language barriers, and develop new support systems while their partners are at work.

Life satisfaction, as an indicator of subjective well-being, has received increased attention in recent years (Voicu, 2015). Research into life satisfaction raises the question of what happiness is and what makes us happy, with topics such as whether it is winning the lottery, living in a perceived large house in a nice neighborhood, or another country being explored (Diener, 2000). While some experience relocation to another country as a significant opportunity, others experience disruption of social ties and routines, and loneliness (Shaffer and Harrison 2001;

Kupka and Cathro, 2007). In the past decades, evidence has accumulated showing that a lack of social support and close social relationships can have far-reaching effects. A wealth of research is available on well-being and satisfaction with life; however, little is known about how diplomatic spouses experience their constant relocation every few years.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Research has indicated that spousal adjustment is an important factor in the overall international assignment's success (Copeland and Norell, 2002; Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk, 2002; Pruetipibultham, 2012). Recent surveys have indicated that the two main reasons for failed assignments are partner dissatisfaction and the inability of the spouse to adapt (Lazarova, Westman and Shaffer, 2010). As Gupta, Banerjee and Gaur (2012) argue, organizations have ignored the spouse adjustment issue and the consequences of poor spousal adjustment. While some studies have found that the spouse may have to deal with greater stress in order to adjust to the foreign culture (Konopaske, Robie and Ivancevich, 2005; Andreason, 2008), the literature still lacks a holistic understanding of which factors lead to adjustment (Gonzales-Loureiro, Kiessling and Dabic, 2015).

As mentioned earlier, diplomatic spouses face a multitude of issues when moving to a new location. Living outside of their country of origin and moving to a new location every few years, they are faced with significant disruption to their social support networks, career, income, role, and self-esteem. Taking the first of these, Shumaker and Brownell (1984: 13) have defined social support as "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient". The social support of spouses can be achieved through the presence of a number of factors such as the expatriate, the Human Resource department of the assigning company, and locals in the host culture. In addition, stress reduction and positive health outcomes, including both physical and psychological well-being, have also been shown to be effects of appropriate social support (Andrews, Tennant, Hewson & Vailant, 1978; Argyle, 1992; Dean & Ensel, 1982). According to Ong and Ward's (2005) research on social support, there are two social support domains: socio-emotional and instrumental support. Socio-emotional support includes assertions or displays of love, care, concern, and sympathy. Further, it represents the belongingness to a social group that provides company for a variety of activities. On the other hand, instrumental support refers to concrete aid in the form of financial help, required services, or material resources. Further, it relates to the communication of opinions or facts relevant to a person's current difficulties and can be represented in actions such as providing advice or feedback. In their study, they found that emotional support was more frequently provided by people overseas, not only by family and friends at home but also by people from third countries who could be considered as fellow expatriate spouses. However, they found that instrumental support was ultimately more critical to expatriates' psychological adaptation. Researchers such as Caligiuri and Lazarova (2002), Herleman, Britt, and Hashima (2008), and Kupta and Cathro (2007) have argued that, during a global assignment, a critical factor affecting adjustment is social support. While many publications offer theoretical debate and models for thinking about the influence of social support on expatriates and spouses (e.g., Adelman, 1988; Caligiuri et al., 2002; Fontaine, 1996; Wang, 2002), this study focuses on specific groups of diplomatic spouses who relocate more often because of their spouse's profession. Given the above-mentioned arguments concerning cross-cultural adjustment and social support, the following hypothesis can be posited:

**Hypothesis 1.** There is a significant relationship between adjustment and (i) emotional support and (ii) instrumental support

Life satisfaction has been extensively investigated by those seeking to understand the psychological happiness of different populations; it has been defined as a “global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to the individual chosen criteria” (Shin & Johnson, 1978; Vohra & Adair, 2000). Herleman, Britt, and Hashima’s (2008) study examines the relationship between stress and satisfaction, adjustment and support among expatriate spouses. The participants were mostly Americans residing in Belgium. The results indicated that social support was positively correlated with personal and interaction adjustment, while social support was negatively correlated with depression. Social support was found to have no significant relationship with perceived stress, general adjustment, and satisfaction. However, the cumulative effect is that a lack of social support and of close social relationships are documented to have far-reaching implications. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have identified a basic need for close social relationships amongst human beings. Greater amounts of autonomous behaviours and lower levels of stress have also been associated with social connectedness and support (Uchino, Cacioppo & Kiecolt-Glazer, 1996).

Gallagher and Vella-Brodrick (2008) have examined the nature of the relationship between social support and well-being, analyzing the predictive value of social support on subjective well-being. Their study indicates that social support contributes a predictive value in explaining negative affect and satisfaction with life. However, Lu’s (1999) longitudinal analysis of the effect of environmental factors (life events and social support) and personal factors on happiness emphasizes social support as a stronger predictor of subjective well-being: it was found that, of these variables, only social support was significantly related to overall happiness.

In recent decades, scholars have thoroughly demonstrated that a lack of social support and of close social relationships can have far-reaching effects. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have reviewed the evidence, concluding that people seem to have a fundamental need for close social relationships. Social connectedness and support are associated with better levels of autonomic activity, and lower base levels of stress hormones (Uchino, Cacioppo & Kiecolt-Glazer, 1996). Given the above-mentioned arguments concerning adjustment, social support, and life satisfaction, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

**Hypothesis 2:** There is a significant relationship between adjustment and satisfaction with life

**Hypothesis 3:** There is a significant relationship between satisfaction with life and (i) emotional support and (ii) instrumental support

## METHOD

For this study the European Union Foreign Affairs Spouse, Partners and Family Association (EUFASA) was contacted. The union has 24 member states and each of the national associations were contacted and offered the chance to participate (in July 2015). Most (84%) of the participants were female; 23.7% were 40 years old or younger, while 32.2% were 41-50 years old, and 44.1% were aged 51 or older. The participants came from a total of 33 countries, but

most were from just five: the Netherlands (17.4%), Austria (11.5%), Switzerland (11.5%), Belgium (8.5%), and Italy (7.4%). Over 60% of participants had children accompanying them on their assignments; 74.9% of them were employed before they were transferred on a post, but only 38.8% were currently employed. Almost all participants (95.2%) were married and only 6% received cross-cultural training before they went on their assignments.

Spousal adjustment was measured by a scale developed by Black and Stephens (1989). The questionnaire contained nine questions that were been divided into two factors: interaction adjustment and general adjustment. Items were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“completely unadjusted”) to 7 (“completely adjusted”). The level of social support was measured by the index of sojourner social support (ISSS) developed by Ong and Ward (2005). Items were measured using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (“no one would do this”) to 5 (“many would do this”). The scale contained 18 questions that were divided into two factors: emotional support and instrumental support. Satisfaction with life was measured by the scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) and consisted of five statements. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement using a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The original scale was modified slightly with the words “in your host country” added to each question so that the participants would answer the question specifically about their lives in their current expatriate locations.

The 31 items of the questionnaire were subjected to principal components analysis (PCA). Prior to performing PCA, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of 0.3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.94, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser 1970, 1974) and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. PCA revealed the presence of five components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 43.2%, 13.7%, 6.7%, 5.7%, and 3.5% of the variance respectively. An inspection of the screeplot revealed a clear break after the fourth component. Using Catell’s (1966) scree test, it was decided to retain four components for further investigation. The four-component solution explained a total of 69.3% of the variance, with component 1 contributing 43.2%, component 2 contributing 13.7%, component 3 contributing 6.7%, and component 4 contributing 5.7%. The interpretation of the four components was in line with the questionnaires used and can therefore be used for the development of the research model (AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS). All components show a number of strong loadings and all variables load substantially on only one component. The first factor is instrumental support with Cronbach’s Alpha (CA) of 0.97 (n=253, M=2.46, Sd=1.05), the second factor is adjustment with CA of 0.86 (n=255, M=5.42, Sd=1.05), the third factor is emotional support with CA of 0.95 (n=260, M=2.15, Sd=0.96), and the fourth factor is life satisfaction with CA of 0.87 (n=269, M=4.97, Sd=1.29).

## RESULTS

The first hypothesis was: “*There is a significant relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and (i) emotional support and (ii) instrumental support.*” The relationship was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlations coefficients. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Using Cohen’s (1988) classification of strength of association, there was a medium positive

relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and emotional support ( $r = 0.314$ ,  $n = 246$ .  $p < 0.0005$ ). The relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and instrumental support was small and positive ( $r = 0.291$ ,  $n = 241$ .  $p < 0.0005$ ). Based on these findings, hypothesis 1 was supported.

The second hypothesis was: “*There is a significant relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and satisfaction with life.*” The relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and satisfaction with life was strong and positive ( $r = 0.448$ ,  $n = 255$ ,  $p = 0.0005$ ). This indicates that when the level of adjustment is high, the level of satisfaction with life is also high. The correlation was significant at the 0.01 level and therefore hypothesis 2 was also supported.

The third hypothesis was: “*There is a significant relationship between satisfaction with life and (i) emotional support and (ii) instrumental support.*” The same method and preliminary analysis were used as in the other two cases. The findings shows a medium/strong and positive relationship between satisfaction with life and emotional support ( $r = 0.431$ ,  $n = 259$ .  $p < 0.0005$ ), which indicates that when the level of emotional support is high, the level of satisfaction with life is also high. The relationship between satisfaction with life and instrumental support was medium and positive ( $r = 0.391$ ,  $n = 253$ .  $p < 0.0005$ ) which indicates that when the level of instrumental support is high, the level of satisfaction with life is also high. Since both variables, emotional support and instrumental support, had significant positive relationships with satisfaction with life, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Standard multiple regression was used to predict the level of satisfaction with life. Two out of three (adjustment and emotional support) variables used in the regression model were statistically significant and they explained nearly 30% of the variability in participants’ satisfaction with life ( $R^2 = 0.29$ ). It is important to mention that the different items did not all have the same relative importance in predicting satisfaction with life. Because the multiple regression equation had the form  $Y = \alpha + \beta_1 * x_1 + \beta_2 * x_2 + \dots + \beta_n * x_n$  it can be stated as:

$$Y = 1,734 + 0,434 * ES + 0,425 * A \quad (1)$$

where Y is the predictive value for participants’ life satisfaction. To judge the quality of the model it is possible to put the averages for the two components that predict the level of life satisfaction into the equation and compare the result to the result for the research itself. The predictive value for life satisfaction was 4.97, which was exactly the same value obtained for life satisfaction in this research. The regression equation’s coefficients (B) are a measure of the contribution of each component to the predictive value of the regression equation, but since they were on a different scale we used Beta for relative comparison of importance. The Beta values for each component are similar though the value for adjustment (Beta=0.35,  $p=0.000$ , VIF=1.11) were slightly higher than for emotional support (Beta=0.32,  $p=0.000$ , VIF=1.11).

Based on this, it was concluded that both components made equal contributions towards explaining the dependent variable (life satisfaction) and together they explained around 30% of the variability in participants’ satisfaction with life.

## DICUSSION

In this paper we analyzed data from a survey of spouses of diplomats employed by Foreign Ministries within the EU and the EEA. Using a standardized questionnaire, we examined the relationship between adjustment, social support, and satisfaction with life, with the result that all

of our hypotheses were confirmed. This study demonstrates that there is a positive relationship between adjustment and both emotional and instrumental support. This indicates that spouses who experience high levels of emotional and instrumental support are more likely to be well adjusted to the new local environment and life in the host location. These findings support prior studies of Caligiuri and Lazarova (2002) and Herleman, Britt, and Hashima (2008), as well as of Kupka and Cathro (2007) who argue that social support during a global assignment could be critical for adjustment. Further, Kraimer et al. (2001) found that employer spousal support significantly correlated to general adjustment. Research has shown that expatriation and recurring relocation cause potentially significant problems for individuals' psychological well-being (Foyle, Beer & Watson 1998).

The findings also demonstrate that there is a positive relationship between adjustment and satisfaction with life. This indicates that spouses who experience high levels of satisfaction with life also experience high levels of adjustment. Life satisfaction is an indicator of subjective well-being and although it has been examined for various subgroups, little is known about the relationship between adjustment and satisfaction with life for expatriate spouses in general. These results are important from an environmental perspective, as suggested by Veenhoven (1994), who has argued that happiness does react to life transitions, both positively and negatively. This is therefore an important indicator of how spouses experience their lives once they have moved to new locations. Diplomats and their spouses relocate every few years and, as a result, it is important that spouses experience their transition to and life in a new environment as satisfying and fulfilling.

Further, the findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between satisfaction with life and both emotional and instrumental support. This indicates that when spouses perceive levels of emotional and instrumental support to be high they also experience high levels of satisfaction with life. These findings are not consistent with the findings of Herleman et al. (2008), who did not find a significant relationship between social support and satisfaction among expatriate spouses. This calls, therefore, for further investigation on why the inconsistency exists. However, the results are consistent with Lu's (1999) and Gallagher and Vella-Brodrick's (2008) studies indicating the positive relationship between social support predicting happiness and well-being. Finally, our results reveal that adjustment and emotional support each account for nearly 30% of the variance in satisfaction with life. Prior research has indicated that spousal adjustment is an important factor in the overall success of international assignments. Sociocultural adaptation refers to the ability to "fit in" or execute effective interactions in the new cultural surroundings. Being able to navigate in the new cultural setting has been found to be a part of the adjustment process; levels of ability to interact with and adjust to a new culture have been associated with both uncertainty and anxiety (Gudykunst, 2005). As Kim (2005) suggests, the talent of adjusting is a combination of communication adaptability and interactional involvement where assimilation and learning by doing is important. Emotional support, on the other hand, includes care, concern, sympathy, and belonging to a social group. The feeling of being adjusted and receiving social support can therefore be considered important as it explains a considerable part of how diplomatic spouses experience satisfaction with life.

Although this study contributes to the literature on cross-cultural adjustment for spouses, certain limitations need to be taken into consideration. These are, for example, method bias, language, and geographical location.

## **REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS**