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Gender differences in expatriate adjustment

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Abstract: Women are still underrepresented in expatriate assignments. This study investigates whether there are any gender differences in expatriate adjustment that could help account for the low share of female expatriates. The study replicates the analysis of Selmer and Leung’s (2003) exploratory research. It confirms their findings and adds further detail to the understanding of gender differences in expatriate adjustment. The study is based on a cross-sectional survey, mainly of employed members in UK and US women’s clubs in Frankfurt and Madrid and their partners. This study shows that women tend to be better adjusted than men overall. They are ahead especially in important areas such as the building and maintaining of relationships. The paper provides important insight into the differences in adjustment among female and male expatriate employees. It provides an instrument that can be used in the further study of these differences. The study supplies further evidence that companies err if they fail to send women on assignments abroad.

Keywords: expatriates; cross-cultural adaptation; adjustment; gender differences; research paper.


Biographical notes: Arno Haslberger is Senior Research Professor at Webster University Vienna. His research focuses on cross-cultural adjustment and the management of expatriates. He has lived and worked for several years each in the USA, the UK, Germany and Spain. Besides working in academia he has held several human resources positions in FTSE-100 and Fortune-100 companies. He holds a doctorate in sociology and masters-level degrees in sociology and in business administration from Johannes Kepler Universität, Linz, Austria, and a master of science in industrial relations from Loyola University, Chicago.

1 Introduction

The economic emergence of women has been a long-term project. It started about two centuries ago and has accelerated in the last 100 years (Bergmann, 1986). The record has been patchy, though. Women are still segregated into certain types of jobs, often lower earning, less powerful and less prestigious. The index of occupational segregation...
by gender declined in the USA from the 1970s up to the mid-1990s. In 1995, it was 53.5, meaning that more than half of employed women would have to change jobs to remove all occupational segregation (Wootton, 1997). Comparative studies show that most European countries have higher occupational gender segregation than the USA (Evans, 2002; Bridges, 2003). While women are making some progress in managerial work, it remains restricted largely to lower and middle ranks (Morrison et al., 1987; Goodman et al., 2003; Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Of particular interest here, women were excluded from international assignments to such an extent that for decades left them with only token status (Adler, 1984a; Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998; Caligiuri et al., 1999a; Linehan, 2006). Women filled an average of only 15% of all expatriate posts in the time since the inception of GMAC’s relocation trends survey (GMAC, 2007). Yet, for a long time women have been just as likely as men to desire a foreign posting (Adler, 1984b). The reason for their under-representation often stems from prejudice against women by the decision makers back home (Adler, 1984b; Linehan et al., 2001b; Linehan, 2006) exerted through informal selection methods (Harris and Brewster, 1999; Harris, 2001; Harris, 2002). A number of studies have established that foreign women in many locations around the world have just as much chance for success as men (Westwood and Leung, 1994; Taylor and Napier, 1996a; Linehan and Scullion, 1996b; Caligiuri et al., 1999a; Caligiuri and Tung, 1999b; Linehan and Scullion, 2001; Linehan and Scullion, 2001a).

There is a growing literature investigating the differences in patterns of adjustment to their new environment between female and male expatriates and the different variables influencing their adjustment outcomes (Harvey, 1997; Caligiuri et al., 1999b; Selmer et al., 2003). Studies of female and male expatriates are one of the newest additions to the stock of research on sex- and gender-related differences. This paper confirms prior research on gender differences in cross-cultural adjustment (Selmer et al., 2003) and adds important detail on the nature of these differences.

The theoretical part of the paper explains why research about adjustment differences between women and men need investigation. It then discusses cross-cultural adjustment in general before developing specific hypotheses. The sample consists predominately of employed women and men accessed via foreign women’s clubs in Germany and Spain and a multi-national corporation. Data were analysed via two different methods, a multivariate general linear model and nonparametric exact tests, to provide more reliable results. The discussion section compares the results with one of the few other studies investigating female-male differences in adjustment (Selmer et al., 2003).

### 2 Differences between women and men

The disciplines of anthropology, psychology, sociology and neuroscience are amongst many that have investigated female/male differences and have tried to define them and to explain their origin. Extreme positions of differences exclusively rooted in nature or in nurture have largely yielded to moderated positions. A distinction between sex as biological and gender as psychosocial constructs is standard (Segall et al., 1990; Ely, 1995). Yet, this dimorphism of female and male is not uncontested. Borneman (1979) lists nine different factors that define the ‘sexual status’ of a human being. Some are biological such as DNA, hormonal make-up and genitalia. Others are social such as upbringing and assigned roles. In Ely’s words, gender is ‘an ongoing social construction,
the meaning, significance, and consequences of which vary for individuals across settings’ (Ely, 1995, p.590). The continuously constructed character and varying significance of gender is particularly important in cross-cultural interactions. Adler (1987) found that expatriate women are seen primarily as foreigners rather than as women in several Asian countries. Their sex or gender is of lesser significance.

Numerous sociological and psychological studies have indicated that women are on average more empathetic, more nurturing, more likely to express emotions and engage in self-disclosure, have better social skills, are more cooperative and self-aware (Van Velsor et al., 1993; Westwood et al., 1994; Harvey, 1997; Martin et al., 1998; Nicholson, 2000). For expatriate research the ultimate reason for the differences in psychological functioning between women and men is not important. The fact that there is a difference, on the other hand, is important. Most expatriate research has focused, out of necessity, on males because they constitute the majority of expatriates (Linehan, 2006). The 2005 Global Relocation Trends Survey, which has been conducted since the early 1990s, reported that women for the first time broke the 20% barrier in their share of expatriate posts (GMAC, 2006). Therefore, the bulk of recommendations derived from research on how to improve chances of success abroad are necessarily tailored to men and may systematically exclude initiatives that would particularly support women.

3 Cross-cultural adjustment theory

In the past 20 years, studies of expatriate managers have flourished. Two recent meta-analyses have included 42 and 66 studies, respectively (Hechanova et al., 2003; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). A study of 67 US managers in Japan provided the theoretical underpinnings for the prevailing three-way split into general, interaction and work adjustment facets that informs the studies in the meta-analyses (Black, 1988). As Linehan (2006) points out it consisted of all male subjects and the language of expatriate studies generally tends to be male-centred. Recently, Black’s model has come under criticism for having a weak theoretical basis, possibly suffering from systematic exclusions of facets, and conceiving of adjustment as one-dimensional (Thomas and Lazarova, 2006). Therefore, the discussion of cross-cultural adjustment theory starts out with general underlying principles to outline the theoretical grounding of this study. This brief discussion will then define some key terms and finally refer back to the prevailing research streams in expatriate adjustment.

The driving force in a social system or culture is communication (Luhmann, 2004). For Hall ‘culture is communication’ (Hall, 1959, p.94). Social processes consist of verbal and non-verbal communication behaviours. Structural features such as a set of values or underlying assumptions in a society develop and change as a result of communication (Schein, 1984). The distinction between processes and structures is a temporal one. Value sets in a culture are relatively fixed in the short-term but fluid in the long term. For example the average population replacement rate in Europe from the 1970s to the 1990s was such that about two-fifths of the adult population changed, and with it the structure of its values (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995). During an average expatriate assignment of three to five years, values appear as rather firm structures. An expatriate needs to adapt to both processes and structures in the new environment. Adjustment happens as a result of communication behaviours. For the purposes of this paper social processes include day-to-day interactions as well as the establishment of relationships (Hammer et al., 1978)
and their continuation. Social structures are temporarily stable results of communication and are made up of general living conditions, institutions, values and norms in a given culture.

Adjustment encompasses cognitions, emotions and behaviours (Kim, 1988; Kim, 1991). It has a subjective and an objective side (Taft, 1988). Emotions and cognitions are subjective and internal. Observable behaviours are objective and external. They connect the expatriate with the outside world. If behaviours are effective and the expatriate reaches desired outcomes, he or she will feel positive emotions and will experience cognitive confidence. The reverse is also true, ineffective interactions will lead to negative emotions and a reduction in confidence. In novel situations such as the ones experienced in an expatriate assignment, persons experience two types of challenges to their cognitive confidence: they experience situations in which old and newly acquired elements of their cognitive frame of reference are incompatible, which is cognitive inconsistency or focused ambiguity; alternatively, they find themselves in situations in which they do not have any knowledge about how to behave, which is cognitive ambiguity or pervasive ambiguity (Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Grove and Torbiörn, 1985).

According to uncertainty reduction theory (Berger and Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1979; Berger, 1987), people strive to reduce uncertainty and increase confidence. This is a main driver for expatriates trying to learn to be effective in the host culture. The emotions expatriates feel are influenced on the one side by internal states and traits such as positive or negative affectivity (Joiner and Blalock, 1995; Hochwarter et al., 1996; Kurman and Eshel, 1998) and on the other by the interactions they have and the knock-on effect those interactions have on cognitive confidence. The foregoing shows that the three dimensions interact, sometimes more or less immediately and sometimes with a time lag. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between adjustment as a state and as a process.

Defined as state (Berry et al., 1988), adjustment is the degree of fit between individual and environment regarding social processes and structures (Gudykunst and Hammer, 1988). A good fit means the perceived adequacy of one’s behaviours, cognitions and emotions (Grove et al., 1985). The definition of successful adjustment may vary depending on whose perspective one takes: Brewster argues that too good a fit may not suit the organisation (Brewster, 1993). This might lead to allegiance issues (Black and Gregersen, 1992).

Defined as process (Berry et al., 1988), adjustment is the acculturation of the newcomer, or the convergence (Kincaid, 1988; Barnett and Kincaid, 1983) over time of behaviours, values and norms, and underlying assumptions of the individual with those prevailing in the environment (Schein, 1984; Black et al., 1992; Trompenaars, 1993). Obviously, expatriates as temporary residents in a host culture adapt mostly on the rather superficial level of behaviours, to a small extent regarding values and norms, and probably not at all with respect to underlying assumptions.

The literature on expatriates reflects, to some extent, the two dimensions of cross-cultural adjustment regarding processes and structures on the one hand (referred to as facets) and regarding behaviours, cognitions and emotions on the other (referred to as dimensions). Black (1988) and Black and Stephens (1989) argued for three facets of interaction adjustment, general adjustment and work adjustment. The former two are somewhat parallel to the distinction of processes for interactions and structures for general adjustment. Work adjustment is conceptually different as work is one specific life sphere. Examples of other life spheres are the bowling club or the Parent-Teachers’ Association (Trompenaars, 1993). In any of these spheres processes and structures exist
Gender differences in expatriate adjustment

towards which a newcomer must adapt. The principles are the same, only the focus of
attention changes and with it the specific processes and structures that need adapting
to. For a discussion of the principles of cross-cultural adjustment, there is no necessity
to focus on any specific life sphere. Work adjustment then can be analysed by the
application of general concepts of cross-cultural adjustment to that specific life sphere.

Ward and colleagues have suggested a two-way measurement distinguishing
psychological and socio-cultural adjustment (Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward et al., 1998;
Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Psychological adjustment refers to the emotional/affective
domain, and socio-cultural to the behavioural domain. Their proposed socio-cultural
adjustment scale includes cognitive items such as understanding. In this respect their
approach covers the behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions mentioned above.

An instrument developed to take into account facets and dimensions of adjustment
found that there were sufficient grounds to measure the facets of relationships, day-to-
day interactions, values and general conditions separately (Haslberger, 1999; Haslberger,
2005). Norms and institutions were excluded in an iterative factor analysis of 67 items
from expatriation literature. The self-report instrument measures cognitions, more
specifically cognitive confidence, and emotions. Behaviours cannot be reliably measured
via self reports. Accordingly, the hypotheses for this paper focus on cognitions and
emotions related to the facets of relationships, day-to-day interactions, values and general
conditions.

Gender differences exist in expatriate assignments and in personal characteristics.
Research on expatriates is mostly based on predominantly male samples. As Linehan
(2006) points out, much of the existing research on women tends to revolve around the
difficulties faced by women playing roles that are outside of what is perceived as typical.
By looking at adjustment differences between women and men this paper helps to
change the focus of research on female expatriates away from gender roles and related
difficulties. Instead, it contributes to a better understanding of cross-cultural adjustment
in its complexity.

4 Hypotheses

Communication is the basis for the development of different cultures. It is also the
vehicle for learning a new culture. Effective communication between actors depends on
their social skills. Women have, on average, better social skills and are more empathetic
and self-aware than men (Van Velsor et al., 1993; Westwood et al., 1994; Harvey, 1997;
Martin et al., 1998; Nicholson, 2000). These characteristics will help women to learn
more quickly than men how to establish and maintain relationships in the host country.
Since women know better than men how to deal with relationships, they will also feel
better about establishing and maintaining them.

Hypothesis 1a: Female expatriates have higher cognitive confidence about how to
establish and maintain relationships than male expatriates.

Hypothesis 1b: Female expatriates feel better about establishing and maintaining
relationships than male expatriates.
Women face different challenges depending on which host country they live in (Adler, 1987; Caligiuri et al., 1996b; Taylor et al., 1996a; Caligiuri et al., 1999a; Caligiuri et al., 2001). They also perceive different opportunities in different countries. In several Asian countries, women found that they were mostly regarded as foreigners and that their gender was less relevant for their interactions or their success (Adler, 1987). Similarly, Caligiuri and Tung (1999b) found that cultural difference measured with Hofstede’s (1984) scale did not affect success. Compared to men, women face a more complex adjustment challenge. Not only do they have to learn about the role of foreigners in their respective host countries, they also have to learn about what impact, if any, their gender has on their life in the host location. Men, on the other hand, only have to deal with their role as a foreigner. They do not face the complexities of the relationship between gender role and host culture since most countries are in practice male-dominated (House et al., 2004). Therefore, women will have less cognitive confidence in day-to-day interactions than men. This will be paired with lower emotional adjustment for women.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Female expatriates have lower cognitive confidence about day-to-day interactions than male expatriates.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Female expatriates feel worse about day-to-day interactions than male expatriates.

Value differences are a key distinguishing characteristic of different cultures. The most cited project to chart cultural differences to date, Hofstede’s dimensions (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede and Bond, 1984; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Hofstede, 1992) is value-based. Values also feature prominently in Schein’s (1984), Trompenaars’ (1993) and House et al.’s (2004) conceptualisations of culture. While research on country-level value differences cannot be used in individual-level adjustment studies (Spector and Cooper, 2001; Hofstede, 2002; Spector and Cooper, 2002), it shows that expatriates have to adjust to more or less different value systems in their host countries. Different researchers have studied gender differences in values. Eaton and Giacomino (2001) studied 36 personal values and found significant differences in 18 of them. They concluded that there were ‘very large differences’ between women and men (Eaton and Giacomino, 2001, p.222). In a comprehensive study of religious values based on several large data sets including the World Values Survey (Abramson et al., 1995) sociologists found that, across different countries, women tend to be more religious (Miller and Stark, 2002). Neither gender socialisation nor differences in social power among genders played a role in explaining the difference. A study of Finnish students using Hofstede’s masculinity – femininity subscale found women to have significantly more femininity-related values than men at the beginning and at the end of a multi-year course in business studies (Lämsä et al., 2000). Na and Duckitt (2003) found significant age and gender differences in values in Korea. Gender-related value differences were larger in the older group. In workplace values, on the other hand, Glover et al. (2002) found no significant difference between women and men. The fact that women and men hold different values has no bearing on finding out about the values in the foreign location. Therefore, no difference in cognitive confidence should arise. Women have more empathy than men. They may empathise more with the values of the local population and hence feel better about them.
**Hypothesis 3a:** There is no difference among female and male expatriates in cognitive confidence about values.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Female expatriates feel better about local values than male expatriates.

Adjustment to general living conditions is a facet of cross-cultural adjustment that is well-researched (David, 1972; Black, 1988; Black et al., 1989; Black, 1990; Black and Gregersen, 1991b; Stephens and Black, 1991; Stephens and Black, 1996b; Taylor et al., 1996a; Selmer, 1998; Caligiuri et al., 1999b; Ward et al., 1999; Selmer, 2002; Selmer et al., 2003; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). There is no reason to believe that it is more or less difficult for women to learn about housing or other environmental conditions than for men. Therefore, there will be no difference in confidence about knowledge regarding general conditions. Women are more self-aware than men. Consequently, they will be more sensible in noticing the challenges posed by general conditions in the host culture, which will make them feel worse. At the same time, women have more realistic expectations about expatriate relocation, while men underestimate some of the challenges (Harvey, 1997). Met or over-met expectations are associated with higher levels of general adjustment (Black, 1992). There are two opposing forces with greater sensitivity on the one hand, and more realistic expectations on the other. Therefore, the overall differential impact on the affective adjustment of women and men is undetermined.

**Hypothesis 4a:** There is no difference between female and male expatriates in cognitive confidence about general conditions.

**Hypothesis 4b:** There is no difference between female and male expatriates in how they feel about general conditions.

## 5 Method

### 5.1 Sample

This study is based on a convenience sample (N = 185; 117 women and 68 men). It consists mainly of members of US and UK women’s clubs in Madrid, Spain and the Frankfurt metropolitan area in Germany and their spouses. In addition, expatriate employees of a multinational corporation residing both inside and outside of Europe participated in the study. Finally, a small number of expatriate faculty members at an US university and members of the expatriate community in Madrid responded as well.

In order to ensure some comparability of results with an earlier exploratory study of female-male adjustment differences (Selmer et al., 2003), only employed persons were entered into the analysis. This left 57 women and 65 men in the sample.

Women’s ages ranged from 24 to 54 with a mean of 36.3 years (SD 9.0 years). Men’s ages ranged from 25 to 65 with a mean of 39.4 years (SD 8.8 years). 70% of women and 79% of men were married or living with a partner. Respondents were highly educated. 82% of women and 86% of men had obtained at least a bachelor’s degree. A further 14% of women and 6% of men had completed some course work towards a college degree.

Respondents’ jobs fell into three main categories: journalism (35%); general business such as information technology, finance, sales and marketing (27%); and public sector such as positions in embassies and teaching (8%). 53% of women and 48% of men worked in non-managerial positions. A further 19% of women and 27% of men worked
in lower- and mid-level management positions. 17% of women and 24% of men were in upper-management and executive positions. Finally, 11% of women and 2% of men were self-employed.

The average length of stay for women was 4.1 years (SD 4.1 years). The total number of years women had spent abroad including the current stay was 9.6 years (SD 5.9 years). The average length of stay for men was 3.5 years (SD 3.9 years). The total number of years men had spent abroad including the current stay was 11.7 years (SD 9.2 years).

Respondents resided in 22 different countries. 44% of women and 29% of men lived in Germany, 26% of women and 31% of men were in Spain, and 4% of women and 11% of men were in the USA. 34% of women and 26% of men were citizens of the USA. Another 36% of women and 43% of men were citizens of the UK.

Depending on the outcome variable and the analysis method applied the number of cases in the analysis varied. The multivariate general linear model analysis does not accept any missing data. Therefore, it based on a final tally of 28 women and 40 men. In addition, nonparametric exact test statistics were calculated on the same sub-sample because they are more robust with small sample sizes. Exact tests have the drawback that covariates cannot be controlled. As in Selmer and Leung’s (2003) analysis age, marital status, position and length of stay were used as covariates in the general linear model.

5.2 Instrument

A self-report questionnaire was used to measure cross-cultural adjustment. It included 12 items related to processes and structures which were measured with questions regarding cognition and emotion (Haslberger, 1999; Haslberger, 2005). Issues covered in the instrument are outlined in the appendix. The 12 items were selected from a total of 67 through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. The 67 items stem largely from prior research on cross-cultural adjustment supplemented by items found to be missing, such as the establishment of relationships. Answers were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale, plus 7 meaning highest adjustment. The range for cognitions was from 1 to 7, for emotions from −7 to +7. Positive emotions were left as recorded, negative emotions re-coded with a minus sign. Scores were calculated by averaging responses to the questions loading on the eight different variables. Individuals with missing values were excluded from the analysis.

6 Results

Table 1 shows descriptives and correlations among different facets and dimensions of adjustment. All cognitive facets are significantly correlated. Their means are all above the mid-point; the average for the general conditions facet is quite high, indicating a high level of adjustment. All affective facets are also significantly correlated. Averages are in positive territory for all except day-to-day interactions, indicating a lower general adjustment level to this affective facet. Standard deviations are marginally greater for the affective dimension. The emotional dimension of relationships is highly correlated to all cognitive dimensions except general conditions. Emotions about day-to-day interactions are highly correlated with cognitions about relationships and day-to-day interactions and correlated with the cognitive dimension of values. Emotions about values are highly correlated with cognitions about relationships and day-to-day interactions. Emotions
about general conditions are only correlated with cognitions on general conditions. Surprisingly, the cognitive and affective dimensions of values are not significantly related, indicating that knowing about the values of the host country does not necessarily result in feeling good about them. On the other hand, if cognitive and affective adjustment to relationships and day-to-day interactions is present, so are positive feelings about the values in the host society.

At the level of correlations, cognitive and affective dimensions emerge as somewhat distinct and so do the facet of general conditions to a larger and the facet of values to a lesser extent. Relationships and day-to-day interactions seem to be at the core of cross-cultural adjustment as measured by this instrument.

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations and correlations among adjustment variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitions</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Day-to-day</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.435**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.583**</td>
<td>.540**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>General Conditions</strong></td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>.331**</td>
<td>.383**</td>
<td>.333**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.765**</td>
<td>.426**</td>
<td>.386**</td>
<td>.176</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-to-day</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.429***</td>
<td>.562**</td>
<td>.306*</td>
<td>.179</td>
<td>.461**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>.333**</td>
<td>.333**</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>-.086</td>
<td>.396**</td>
<td>.575**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Conditions</strong></td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.207</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>-.143</td>
<td>.257*</td>
<td>.361**</td>
<td>.452**</td>
<td>.365**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Cronbach’s alphas for the scales were as follows: Cognitions – relationships (.93), day-to-day interactions (.80), values (.74), general conditions (.85); Emotions – relationships (.86), day-to-day interactions (.52), values (.71), general conditions (.59). Particularly, the result for emotions related to day-to-day interactions is disappointing. The alphas are higher than the several of the alphas in Project GLOBE, which accepted coefficients of .43 and .45 on the organisational values dimensions for institutional collectivism and for power distance, and several others in the .5 and .6 ranges (Hanges and Dickson, 2004). The authors emphasise that the ‘literature on criterion-referenced tests has documented the utility of scales exhibiting little, if any, internal consistency’ (Hanges and Dickson, 2004, p.147). In line with them it is suggested to add items to the less consistent dimensions in future research.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).**

The cross-cultural adjustment differences between women and men were analysed with a multivariate general linear model (Table 2). Dependent variables were the eight outcome variables in Table 1. Gender was the fixed factor and covariates were age, marital status, position and length of stay. There was a weak overall multivariate effect of gender (F = 1.993, p = 0.064). Analysis of the detailed effect of gender on cross-cultural adjustment showed significant differences in the cognitive and affective dimensions of
relationships (F = 8.329, p = 0.005; F = 8.035, p = 0.006), and the affective dimension of values (F = 3.848, p = 0.054). None of the other differences in averages were significant. Exact tests of two independent samples, i.e. women and men, to investigate differences in adjustment of women and men produced comparable statistics (Table 3). Exact tests have the advantage that they produce reliable statistics with small data sets. Unfortunately, covariates cannot be entered into the calculations. Therefore, results of the two analysis methods can only roughly reinforce each other. Exact tests showed significant results for differences in cognitive and affective adjustment regarding relationships (exact significance 2-tailed for cognitions .011 and for emotions .005) and values (cognitions .022, emotions .041). All other results were non-significant.

Hypotheses 1a and 1b received strong support in both analyses. Hypotheses 2a and 2b were equally clearly rejected by both. Hypothesis 3a and 3b received tentative support in the general linear model. In a larger sample an equal means difference in the cognitive dimension of values would be significant and would lead to rejection of Hypothesis 3a. This happened in the exact test analysis, which showed a significant difference between women and men. Hypothesis 3b was supported on the 0.1-level of confidence in the general linear model, which is acceptable for an exploration with a small sample. Exact tests also supported the hypothesis. Hypotheses 4a and 4b were confirmed by both analyses as there is no significant difference between women and men regarding general conditions.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>F-ratios</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Multivariate Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>8.329(**)</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>F-ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-to-day interactions</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>0.065</td>
<td>0.799</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>1.880</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General conditions</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>5.76</td>
<td>0.311</td>
<td>0.579</td>
<td>0.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>8.035(**)</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Day-to-day interactions</td>
<td>–0.66</td>
<td>–1.39</td>
<td>0.197</td>
<td>0.659</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>3.848(*)</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General conditions</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.447</td>
<td>0.506</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *The Levene test of equality of variances was not significant for any of the eight outcome variables indicating data symmetry.

**Significant at the 0.01 level.

*Significant at the 0.1 level.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Cognitions</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Emotions</th>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Day-to-day</td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Day-to-day</td>
<td>Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney U</td>
<td>357.000</td>
<td>505.500</td>
<td>378.500</td>
<td>537.500</td>
<td>336.500</td>
<td>478.000</td>
<td>397.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcoxon W</td>
<td>1177.000</td>
<td>1325.500</td>
<td>1198.500</td>
<td>1357.500</td>
<td>1156.500</td>
<td>1298.000</td>
<td>1217.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>−2.536</td>
<td>−6.83</td>
<td>−2.279</td>
<td>−2.84</td>
<td>−2.788</td>
<td>−1.026</td>
<td>−2.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig.</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.495</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.776</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.305</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2-tailed)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exact Sig.</td>
<td>.011*</td>
<td>.499</td>
<td>.022*</td>
<td>.780</td>
<td>.005**</td>
<td>.309</td>
<td>.041*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Grouping Variable: gender.
**Significant at the 0.01 level.
*Significant at the 0.1 level.
7 Discussion

The study generally found high levels of adjustment, as would be expected: those who could not adjust at all are unlikely to be in the sample as they are unlikely to have stayed abroad. Working women in this study had higher average adjustment levels than working men in all facets and dimensions when controlling for age, marital status, level in the organisation and length of stay. This presents a challenge to the continuing small share of women in foreign assignments (Adler, 1984; Caligiuri et al., 1999a). Only some of these differences are significant, though.

As expected, women have significantly higher levels of adjustment because they are better at establishing and maintaining relationships. Their generally acknowledged superior social skills help them to learn faster and to be more confident in their knowledge about how to establish and maintain relationships in the host culture. This also helps them to feel better regarding their relationships with their hosts.

Counter to expectations, there was no significant difference in adjustment to day-to-day interactions. Based on the sample population in this study women have no more difficulty than men in adapting to this facet. Interestingly, both women and men felt slightly negative overall about their daily interactions. This was the only aspect where average respondents scored below the mid-point of the scale. One of the arguments against sending women on foreign assignments is that the host culture relegates women to an inferior position in society and that this would cause female expatriates undue strain and performance difficulties compared with men (Adler, 1987). Yet, several studies have challenged this assumption (Adler, 1987; Taylor et al., 1996a; Caligiuri et al., 1996b; Caligiuri et al., 1998; Caligiuri et al., 2001). Women expatriates face many challenges, some the same as men’s, others different. Women in their own cultural environment face different challenges than men. They can cope with these hurdles at home: why shouldn't they be able to do so abroad? Results from this study show that there is little reason for a blanket assumption that women will face more of a struggle.

Selmer and Leung (2003) found that women had higher overall interaction adjustment than men. This agrees with the relationship facet in this study, but not with the day-to-day interactions facet. Cultural differences and gender-role related influences may be more salient in short-lived day-to-day interactions with strangers than in the longer-term building and maintaining of relationships. Women can apply their social-skills advantage better in deeper contacts than in the more shallow aspects of daily interactions. The adjustment to day-to-day interactions, therefore, depends to a larger extent on external variables. Adjustment to relationships on the other hand has a larger portion that depends on personal characteristics such as empathy and social skills. This could explain the lack of difference in women’s and men’s adjustment to day-to-day interactions. Future research into differences in adjustment patterns between women and men should investigate further the divergence of results for relationships and day-to-day interactions.

It is not entirely clear whether women differed from men in their confidence about knowledge of local values. The two analyses produced divergent results. But women definitely felt significantly better about these values. It may be a result of superior empathy and of being able to understand others more that allows women to feel better about local values. Women and men hold differing values (Eaton et al., 2001). These value differences tend to be consistent across different countries (Miller et al., 2002). Women show less variation in many psychological characteristics than men (Nicholson,
Gender differences in expatriate adjustment

2000). Therefore, expatriate women may have to confront slightly smaller value differences to their local counterparts compared to expatriate men. This might explain, at least in part, why they feel better about local values. If the size of value differences among women in different countries were less, it could also explain why women possibly feel more confident about their knowledge of values.

As expected, there was no difference between women and men in adjustment to general conditions. They were equally confident in their knowledge and they felt similarly regarding general conditions. This result agrees with Selmer and Leung’s (2003) findings. Cognitive adjustment to general conditions was the highest for both, women and men. Schein’s (1984) model of cultural layers puts artifacts and creations at the first, explicitly observable, level. General conditions are easily observable. Therefore, cognitive confidence about them will be high. That does not necessarily mean that one feels good about general conditions. Both women and men feel slightly positive about them, but women feel better about relationships and values. Men, on the other hand, feel on average best about general conditions.

Table 3 shows how adapted women and men are as percentages of ‘full’ adjustment. It also shows the difference between cognitive and affective adjustment. The dimensions of adjustment are more synchronised for the establishment and maintenance of relationships and for values than for day-to-day interactions and general conditions. There are no obvious reasons for these differences. One speculation might be that relationships and values are more important to people. Therefore, cognitive adjustment and feelings have to be more closely related in order to avoid dissonance. Any large discrepancy in those areas might motivate them to adapt further in order to create a balance, independent of the general level of adjustment. Day-to-day interactions and general conditions, on the other hand, are more external to the person. Just because one knows a great deal about day-to-day interactions and general conditions and is confident about one’s knowledge does not mean that one has to like and feel good about them. A dissonance in those areas is bearable, perhaps even expected, as a normal consequence of living abroad.

Compared with the study by Selmer and Leung (2003) a few interesting points emerge. Levels of adjustment are roughly similar. Men’s affective adjustment in this study is lower than in Selmer and Leung’s. They found that women had significantly lower psychological adjustment, which is conceptually similar to affective adjustment albeit measured with a different instrument. This is contrary to the findings in this study where women had significantly higher levels of adjustment in two of the four affective facets. Reasons for this discrepancy between the two studies are unclear, but it is interesting to note and is worthy of future research. Selmer and Leung found women had higher interaction adjustment. This agrees with the results in this paper with a slight qualification: the instrument used here distinguishes two facets of interaction adjustment and found women more cognitively and emotionally adapted to relationships, but not to daily interactions. In Selmer and Leung’s study, women and men were equally adjusted to general conditions. This study found the same pattern.

Overall, this study provides further evidence on the differences in adjustment patterns of women and men.
Table 4  Percent of ‘full’ adjustment and difference between cognitive and affective adjustment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Women %</th>
<th>Men %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>79.6%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-to-day interactions</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General conditions</td>
<td>83.7%</td>
<td>82.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-to-day interactions</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General conditions</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difference: Cognitions minus Emotions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day-to-day interactions</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General conditions</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8  Limitations

This study suffers from a number of limitations common to cross-cultural adjustment research. First, it is based on a cross-sectional convenience sample. Second, the sample size is rather small because of missing data. Third, the missing data may stem from a systematic refusal by less or more adapted persons to answer certain questions. Fourth, the single method of data collection may lead to common method variance. Finally, while this study provides evidence for the better adjustment of women and therefore an argument for sending more female expatriates, it cannot provide guidance on the different ways to support women’s and men’s adjustment respectively. On the positive side, the study is largely in agreement with the results from Selmer and Leung (2003), who used a different sample and different outcome measures. Where disagreements appear, they stem from the more detailed measurement of adjustment outcomes in this paper and not from a clash in principle.

9  Conclusion

Women are an underused resource in international assignments. The reason for this often lies with a bias in the sending organisation and the barriers put in the path of career women (Harris et al., 1999; Linehan et al., 2001a; Harris, 2001; Harris, 2002). Nevertheless, study after study shows that women can be successful abroad (Adler, 1987; Adler, 1996b; Taylor et al., 1996a; Adler, 2001). This study contributes to the growing evidence by showing that women tend to be better adapted than men overall, and
significantly so in such important areas as the building and maintaining of relationships with members of the host culture including customers, business partners and local employees. Of course, this does not mean that women’s chances of being accepted in the host country and related opportunities for success are the same for women and men the world over. Rather, ‘it depends’ (Caligiuri and Cascio, 1998, p.406). While specific recommendations on how to best support female expatriates are not possible, companies should be aware that significant differences in adjustment patterns exist between women and men. As a general rule, companies have to assess carefully in the future the conditions for success and the different support measures women and men may require. But it would be an injustice and a waste of talent to continue sending only a small portion of female expatriates.

References


Gender differences in expatriate adjustment


Gender differences in expatriate adjustment


Notes

1 Abramson and Inglehart (1995) study short-term (several years) and long-term (several decades) value change. They show that there is short-term fluctuation of materialist/post-materialist values in Europe related to changes in the inflation rate.

2 All subsequent analyses are based on this sub-sample to ensure comparability.

3 The discussion of results sometimes uses a language of causality. The reader should be aware that this cross-sectional research has only established associations between variables. A more elaborate research design involving longitudinal data is required to show causal relationships.
APPENDIX A: Outcome Measure

INTERACTIONS (A)
1 Reprimanding a local person of lower status than you – telling off someone for something that they have done wrong (based on Furnham and Bochner, 1982)
2 Dealing with a local person who is upset/cross and aggressive/abusive (based on Furnham and Bochner, 1982)

RELATIONSHIPS (R)
3 Establishing friendships with local people
4 Getting to know your local neighbours
5 Finding social contact with locals (based on Spradley, 1972; Earley, 1987)
6 Maintaining interpersonal relationships with local persons (based on Hammer et al., 1978)
7 Approaching others (locals) – making the first move in starting up a friendship (based on Furnham and Bochner, 1982)

CONDITIONS (C)
8 Living conditions in general (Black et al., 1989)
9 Dealing with the housing conditions, for instance reliability of electricity or phones, or amount of available space (based on Black et al., 1989)
10 Dealing with the environment, for instance noise levels, pollution, litter (based on De Leon and McPartlin, 1995)

VALUES (V)
11 Prevailing political values of local nationals
12 Religious values of local nationals
APPENDIX A: Outcome Measure (continued)

The response scales for each of the items are as shown below. Respondents were asked to answer questions (a), (b) and (c) for each of the items above.

COGNITION (C)

(a) People who live in a foreign country sometimes are uncertain about various aspects of life in the foreign culture. How confident are you about your knowledge regarding the following?

7 = completely confident; 1 = not confident; N/A (move to next item)

EMOTION (E)

(b) Which one of the following four groups of emotions most closely resembles what you generally feel?

satisfaction/happiness; anxiety/fear; impatience/anger; sadness/depression

(c) How strong is this emotion (are these emotions) generally?

7 = extremely strong; 1 = barely noticeable

Emotions were coded along a positive – negative range (+7 to –7) with anxiety, anger and depression forming the negative branch.

The instrument was administered in English only. About 4/5th of respondents were native English speakers; the others lived in English-speaking countries and/or had English as their dominant language at work.