Work-life balance in different cultural setting: an expatriate family perspective 
A critical review of the literature

In spite of today’s high communication technology, the number of expatriate assignments is still increasing. Corporate expatriates are typically sent out to assignments to control, coordinate, integrate corporate operations or to transfer knowledge (Suutari 2003). Family is an important perspective in expatriates’ work-life balance discussion because family seems to be the number one reason for returning home before the end of the assignment. The research question of this paper is “in what way family members influence expatriates’ work-life balance?” The theoretical background of work-life balance is based on stress theory and typically the research focuses on individual well-being. By going through the literature, it was noticeable that researchers problematize family matters during assignments. Most of the work-life balance studies are concentrating on the work and family conflicts. In spite of the challenges which the family might face during the assignment, family is in a significant role because the working expatriate might not necessarily want to expatriate without accompanying family members. This literature review concentrates on finding the elements which could cause positive work-life balance during an assignment. The literature indicates that companies should pay more attention to the expatriates’ family matters. Negative work-life balance, in a host country, might lead to the most dramatic situation where the family wants to return prematurely from the assignment. Foreign assignments will be most probably successful if the family has a positive attitude towards expatriation and even better if the family members have personal interests to live abroad, for example for personal development reasons such as language and foreign culture learning.

Keywords: Expatriation, Work-life balance, Family concerns

1. Introduction

Scholars, around the world, have had wide interest in expatriation already from 80’s and expatriates are still a common phenomenon in multinational companies. Scholars are able to find new angles to study expatriation because people are still needed in host country locations, despite of the possibilities offered by high communication technology today (Mäkelä, Suutari & Mayerhofer 2011). The reasons why expatriates are sent to international assignments are to control, coordinate or integrate companies operations in host countries as well as transferring knowledge and organisational practices (Suutari 2003). Firms sent out expatriates when projects need a person for example from headquarters for a longer period of time. Otherwise, business activities are typically handled via travelling. Foreign assignments might be challenging because expatriates’ families usually relocate to the host country. Travelling does not demand adjustment but in expatriate assignments expatriate, spouse and children need to adjust to a new environment and to a foreign culture. The findings of the existing literature implicate that only few studies have been made on expatriate families work-life balance and, therefore, this study area is need of further study.
The importance of studying expatriate families work-life balance (WLB) is the reason that family is still the main reason for premature returns (Mäkelä & Suutari 2011).

Early expatriate studies have concentrated on expatriate recruitment, host country adjustment, training processes and cultural factors. Today scholars are also interested in global careers (Suutari 2003), female expatriation (Fischlmayr & Kollinger 2010; Harris 2004; Mäkelä, Suutari & Mayerhofer 2011), expatriates’ work-life balance (see e.g. Bhanugopan & Fish 2006; Fischlmayr & Kollinger 2010; Grant-Vallone & Ensher 2001; Harris 2004; Mäkelä, Suutari & Mayerhofer 2011; Shaffer et al. 2001), work-family conflict (Mäkelä & Suutari 2011; Shaffer et al. 2001), work and personal life conflict (Grant-Vallone & Ensher 2001), expatriates’ job burnout (Bhanugopan & Fish 2006), family matters (Richardson 2006) and repatriation (Hyder & Lövblad 2007; Lazarova & Caligiuri 2001; Lazarova & Tarique 2005; Pattie, White & Tansky 2010; Suutari & Välimaa 2002). Self-initiated expatriation has also been in interest of many scholars in the recent years (see e.g. Richardson 2006; Selmer & Lauring 2012). This list of studies is not exhaustive but it presents the new topics which researchers have found in the field. This list indicates that researchers are interested in expatriates’ work-life balance related topics. They have noticed that family is an important part of work-life balance but only few scholars have had a strong family perspective on their study. Even though expatriation has widely been studied and new angels are found to look at the phenomenon, still today, scholars are interested to revisit the same challenges than over 30 years ago. Including expatriate adjustment to the host country, expatriate selection, training and cultural factors (see e.g. Hemmasi & Downes 2013; Min et al. 2013).

1.1. **Background of expatriates’ work-life balance**

Work-life balance means the balance between work and life. Work includes career related issues and life balance consists of lifestyle, health and family matters. Different issues affect work-life balance in home country and in host country locations (Mäkelä & Suutari 2011). Issues that may affect work-life balance during a foreign assignment include new position at work, unfamiliar culture and language, and the absence of extended family and friends. In the home country, work-life balance related problems are often long hours spent on work as well as other stress creating factors. The cultural differences of the home and host country are factors to consider when investigating expatriates’ work-life balance. Culture is a deep rooted concept and cultural norms are learned in families from early childhood all the way to adulthood (Hofstede 1982). Therefore, in-depth understanding and respect of the host country’s cultural norms is important aspect of expatriate training. Expatriates are typically divided into corporate expatriates and self-initiated expatriates. Corporate expatriates are sent by business organizations and self-initiated expatriates are individuals who move to host countries by their own choice, for example for career development reasons (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen & Bolino 2012). Corporate expatriates are sent out to international assignments for usually more than 12 months and the relocation happens typically with accompanying family members (Shaffer et al. 2012). During the past thirty years, scholars have had wide interest in different aspects of expatriation. Many researchers have been interested in expatriates’ host country adjustment. However, a work-life balance approach to the subject seems to be rarer as only few studies are made from that perspective. Table 1 distinguishes the differences between adjustment and work-life balance. Distinguish is needed because the concepts overlap in some aspects but the theories behind the concepts differ significantly. Work-life balance is newer study area and, therefore, Fischlmayr and Kollinger (2010) distinguishes how WLB differs from adjustment. It is important to understand the differences to be able to recognize the importance of WLB research.
Table 1. The differences between adjustment and work-life balance (Fischlmayr & Kollinger 2010, 461).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADJUSTMENT</th>
<th>WORK-LIFE BALANCE</th>
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<td>Based on expatriation research</td>
<td>Based on work-life balance and stress research</td>
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<td>Adjustment theory</td>
<td>Stress theory</td>
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<td>Indicators are successful and</td>
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<td>unsuccessful adaptation</td>
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<td>Individual adaptation</td>
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<td>More subjective research and based on individual experience</td>
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The table 1 presents adjustment which originates in expatriation research whereas work-life balance research is closely connected with stress research. The table shows that adjustment is either successful or unsuccessful and work-life balance is either positive or negative. Adjustment theories have models of expatriates’ individual adaptation but work-life balance research is conducted from individual well-being point of view. Adjustment to the host country can be seen more objectively but work-life balance research is more subjective and is based on individual experience. Literature indicates that work-life balance research is usually qualitative because scholars are interested in expatriates’ individual experiences. Typically the data is gathered via in-depth interviews.

1.2. Family perspective

It is not unusual that an expatriate will relocate with accompanying family members if the assignment is 12 months or longer. If the assignment is less than 12 months it is not called an expatriate assignment anymore. Short-term assignees are typically on assignments from 3-12 months, flexpatriates’ assignments are only 1-2 months and business travellers stay abroad about 1-3 weeks (Shaffer et al. 2012). It is essential to make a difference between short-term assignees, business travellers and expatriates because the family accompanies typically only to expatriate assignments. Active business travelling might have an influence on work-life balance in home country because the traveller might be absent from home for hundreds of days in a year. Travelling might therefore affect the work-life balance negatively especially if the traveller has spouse and/ or children. However, expatriates’ work-life balance is even more complicated because the accompanying family members need to adjust to a new environment. It is also possible that expatriates have the same obstacles as business travellers because expatriates might need to travel a lot during an assignment.

Scholars presents that the premature return of expatriate families today still often happen as a result of poor adjustment to the host country. Typically, the return occurs because family members (including spouse and/ or children) do not adjust well to the foreign location (Suutari 2003). Therefore, more empirical work-life balance research is needed (Fischlmayr & Kollinger 2010). Especially WLB research is important because it measures the nuances of the families and considers the quality of life during an assignment. There are many different kinds of international assignments, but still today expatriation is a common way of completing international work when people are needed in host country locations. As international assignments usually concern the whole expatriate family, work-life balance needs to be taken into consideration (Mäkelä, Suutari & Mayerhofer 2011). Some scholars have noted that work more strongly affects family life than vice versa (see e.g. Grant-Vallone & Ensher 2001). Global managers states that major challenges are related to work-life
balance during the time abroad (Suutari 2003). Suutari noticed in his study that family members need to have good adjustment skills so that the family can cope well in a cross-cultural environment. Few scholars have also reported challenges, during assignments abroad, in dual career couples (Mäkelä, Känsälä & Suutari 2011; Richardson 2006). Mäkelä, Suutari and Mayerhofer (2011) noticed that female expatriates had difficulties with work-life balance when doing long hours at work. They felt that there were not enough time for themselves and their families. Some of the interviewed female expatriates without children pointed out that they do not feel that starting a family during an assignment would be possible for them, as the work is so hectic that it takes a lot of time and energy.

2. Conclusions and discussion

The literature problematizes expatriates’ work-life balance. The words challenge, obstacle, conflict, struggling, concerns and problems are typical in expatriates’ work-life balance studies where the family perspective is present. This is not surprising because work-life balance concerns are one of the most challenging issues in an international career (Mäkelä, Suutari & Mayerhofer 2011). Family members’ adjustment might increase pressure on work-life balance during an international assignment, however, the absence of family members could create even higher levels of anxiety. Many scholars have been interested in the work family conflicts during assignments but more studies could be done to increase the understanding about the positive aspects of having family members in host country. In today’s global world it is not necessarily the foreign culture which causes conflicts in a family. The reason for unsatisfying assignment could be that the family members were not willing to expatriate in the first place. Family members might have negative feelings about relocating themselves which could lead to a situation where the family is not even willing to adjust to the new culture. To turn the statement around, an important issue for successful expatriation is the family members’ willingness to expatriate.

Expatriates’ work-life balance studies indicate that work affects family life for example by spending long hours at work and, therefore, expatriates do not necessarily have the possibility of concentrating to family time during the assignment (Mäkelä, Suutari & Mayerhofer 2011). However, not that many studies have concentrated on the family matters meaning that how the family is coping when the expatriate is spending more time for work than in the home country. Some of the recent work-family balance studies are done to female expatriates and the reason for this could be the fact that women are often in significant role in family dynamics. The researchers who have studied expatriate families have done the interviews mainly to the expatriates and possibly to the spouses. Empirical studies which would have been done to expatriates’ children are almost non-existing and it indicates a research gap. By studying the assignments also from families’ perspective might bring new aspects to the discussion and therefore the future assignments could be avoided from the premature returns. My argument is that families with high interests towards living abroad have better possibilities on gaining positive work-life balance. This might be the reason why self-initiated expatriate families more often experiences positive work-life balance during their assignments. However, this argument would need further empirical evidence. By studying the wellbeing of families abroad might have a positive impact on choosing the right people for future assignments. It would be interesting to increase understanding about the effects of positive work-life balance during the assignment.
References


