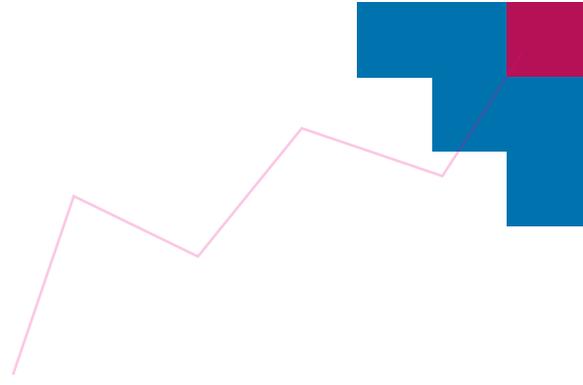


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The challenge of dual career expatriate management in a specific host national environment: An exploratory study of expatriate and spouse adjustment in Switzerland based MNCs¹

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Abstract

The number of expatriates from global firms has been continuously increasing over the past decades as multinational companies still view expatriation as an important tool for sharing and transferring knowledge, controlling subsidiaries and developing workforce competencies. Expatriate management is still a costly and complex task for multinational companies. Adjustment, which has been defined as an individual's degree of comfort, familiarity and ease with several aspects of a new cultural environment, is considered to play a central role in expatriation success. In a context characterized by the rise of dual career couples, the increasing number of female expatriates and the growing awareness concerning *work life balance*, private life issues are increasingly important for multinational companies. On the basis of 126 expatriate couples' questionnaires, this paper compares adjustment of male and female expatriates working in multinational companies in a specific host country environment: the Geneva Lake region in Switzerland where many MNCs have settled their European headquarters. Furthermore, our paper investigates the impact of two variables – gender and employment status – on adjustment of expatriate spouses.

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Introduction

The number of expatriates from global firms has been increasing continuously over the past decades (PWC 2010; Brookfield 2012; Cartus 2012) as these kind of companies still view expatriation as an important tool for sharing and transferring knowledge, controlling subsidiaries and developing workforce competencies. Furthermore, as international companies continue to expand globally they need to attract, develop and retain an increasing number of global managers in order to compete in the global business arena. Hence, foreign assignments remain one of the most frequently used tools for developing global leaders (Black *et al.* 1999; Caligiuri and Di Santo 2001), for controlling subsidiaries and transferring knowledge throughout corporate value chains that are increasingly international (Harzing 2001; Tungli and Peiperl 2009). The development of managers with a global mindset, the use of expatriates and the recruitment of foreign employees by transnational companies contribute in creating new transnational spaces (Morgan 2001) and the emergence of transnational communities (Djelic and Quack 2010) populated by global cosmopolitans (Brimm 2010).

The increasing international mobility brings private life issues for employees, especially in a context characterized by the rise of dual career couples, the increasing number of female expatriates and the growing awareness concerning *work life balance* (Andreason, 2008). Hence, the women's participation in international assignments constantly increased during the last decades (Mercer Human Resources Consulting 2006; GMAC 2008) along with a consequent increase in the presence of male accompanying spouses and thus of female breadwinner families in the expatriate population (Cole 2012). Numerous researchers have emphasized the influence of the spouse's role on successful expatriation and on the expatriate's adjustment and there is an increasing pressure on multinational companies to adequately support the spouse (Konopaske *et al.* 2005). Recent studies have focused on a comprehensive description of the spouse's role, especially on the positive impact it may have on expatriation (Lauring and Selmer 2010; Mäkelä *et al.* 2011a) also adopting a gender perspective (Cole 2012; Davoine *et al.* 2013).

Within this context, expatriate management is an increasingly costly and complex task for multinational companies. When the latter is not managed in a proper way, companies face negative consequences such as increasing reluctance to undertake international assignments, higher refusal rates, losing of expatriates at the end of the international transfer and waste of personnel competences and skills with costly consequences in terms of money and global development strategy of their labor force. While career-related issues of expatriate and repatriate employees may have severe impacts on companies' talent management, the success of international assignments is equally important since failure rates of international assignments are still significant and the costs associated high. However, in the expatriate research literature a unique definition of expatriation success or failure doesn't exist. Aycan and Kanungo (1997) suggest that expatriation is successful if expatriates: (1) stay in the assignment until the end of the term, (2) adjust to living conditions in the host country and (3) perform well professionally. Adjustment, which has been defined as an individual's degree of comfort, familiarity and ease with several aspects of a new cultural environment (Black and Stephens 1989), is thus considered to play a central role in expatriation success. Several studies show that spouse and familial support play an important role in the expatriate's adjustment to living conditions in new cultures and indirectly impacts on the job performance (Kraimer *et al.* 2001; Black and Gregersen 1991; Tung 1998).

This paper examines the adjustment of expatriates and expatriate partners to a specific host country environment: the Geneva Lake region in Switzerland where many MNCs have settled their European headquarters. Hence, Switzerland has been characterized by a high degree of internationalization very early since the scarcity of natural resources and the small domestic market pushed Swiss companies to adopt an international orientation (Bairoch 1990). In 2009, foreign multinationals in Switzerland (many of them acting as headquarters for the European region) employed over 246'000 people and Swiss companies employed 2.6 million people abroad (UNCTAD 2011), which highlights the considerable extent to which the business environment in Switzerland is internationalized. Switzerland is thus an interesting country to study the phenomenon of international mobility because of its important population of high qualified migrants and foreign top managers (Davoine and Ravasi 2013). Some authors even propose to consider Switzerland as a laboratory of globalized elite (David *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, apart from being characterized by a highly international and attractive local job market in terms of salary and career-related opportunities, the Geneva Lake region has also been reported as a very attractive environment for family and children (OECD 2011; OFS 2012) due also to the quality of its conditions, e.g. transport and health care infrastructures (WEF 2012).

On the basis of the analysis of expatriate couples' questionnaires, our paper aims at comparing the general, interaction and work adjustment of male and female expatriates working in multinational companies in a single host-country (the French speaking part of Switzerland around the Lemman lake). Furthermore, our paper investigates the impact of two variables – gender and change in employment status – on the general, interaction and work adjustment of expatriate spouse.

After a first part presenting the concepts of cross-cultural adjustment and of gender-related specificities, we will discuss the importance of the expatriate partner and his/her adjustment in the expatriation process. Then we will address some “new” trends in the expatriation population – i.e. the rise of female expatriates and the dual career issue – in order to develop the hypotheses of our paper. After the description of the context and participants of our study we will present our findings. In the last section, we will discuss our results and highlight the contributions, implications and limitations of our research.

The concept of cross-cultural adjustment

Cross-cultural adjustment can be defined as the degree of a person's psychological comfort and familiarity with various aspects of the foreign environment (Black and Mendenhall 1990; Caligiuri *et al.* 1998). Adjustment involves reduction of uncertainty associated with evolving in a new environment (Black 1988), and the ability to “fit-in” or to negotiate interactive aspects of the host-culture (Ward *et al.* 1998). The most influential theoretical model of expatriate cross-cultural adjustment is the one proposed by Black *et al.* (1991). An important contribution of the model is the distinction between anticipatory adjustment (i.e. pre-assignment) and in-country adjustment (i.e. in the host-country) (Black and Gregersen 1991; Black *et al.* 1991), supporting the idea that accurate expectations shaped in the home-country facilitates in-country adjustment (Caligiuri *et al.* 2001; Mahajan and De Silva 2012, Takeuchi

et al. 2002). Anticipatory adjustment has been found to be influenced by several factors such as previous international experience and training, and in-country adjustment is affected by various individual, organizational and non-work factors (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.* 2005; Hechanova *et al.* 2003). For instance, partner and family adjustment abroad has been widely identified as a critical factor related to expatriate adjustment (Takeuchi 2010). Moreover, while earlier contributions examined expatriate adjustment as a unitary construct (e.g. Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963), Black *et al.* (1991) proposed a multidimensional conceptualization including general, work and interaction adjustment, which has been clearly operationalized and widely used and validated (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.* 2005; Hechanova *et al.* 2003; Schaffer *et al.* 1999; Harrison *et al.* 2004). *General adjustment* refers to the comfort associated with various aspects of the host-cultural environments such as living conditions, food, or health care; *interaction adjustment* refers to the comfort associated with socializing with host-country nationals, both inside and outside of work; and *work adjustment* refers to the comfort associated with the work requirements and tasks on assignment. As discussed in the final section of our paper, it is important to highlight that the validity of their conceptualization has been criticized for methodological reasons (e.g. lack of inductive-exploratory approach, concerns about arbitrariness and the validity of some items) (Hippler 2006). However, despite these weaknesses, this model remains, today, the most widespread operationalized model to examine expatriate cross-cultural adjustment.

Male and female expatriate adjustment

Much progress has been made in understanding women's experiences and adjustment abroad as well as some crucial factors influencing their adjustment. Several types of contributions on female expatriates' adjustment can be identified: studies comparing adjustment of male and female expatriates, studies dealing exclusively with adjustment of female expatriates and often examining influence factors, and theoretical contributions on female expatriate adjustment, typically aiming at building comprehensive models. It has for instance been widely recognized that family and company support appear to be particularly crucial to female expatriates' successful adjustment abroad (Caligiuri *et al.* 1999), in a context where precisely pressures from both family and work spheres may be exacerbated, especially for women (Fischlmayr and Kollinger 2010), potentially negatively impacting their cross-cultural adjustment (Harris 2004a). Findings of the previous gender comparative studies on this topic suggest that women *can* adjust as well as men. However, a closer look at their results shows that no clear consensus exist about women's levels of adjustment in comparison to those of men: some studies report no significant gender differences (Cole and McNulty 2011; Mérognac 2009), some others find that women may be better adjusted on some dimensions, especially those related to interactions or relationships with host-country nationals (Selmer and Leung 2003a; Haslberger 2010), and further studies suggest that women may have weaker adjustment levels depending on the countries of assignment (Caligiuri and Tung 1999).

Indeed, as suggested by the latter study, depending on cultural values and gender norms in vigor in the host-country, adjusting to the foreign environment may represent considerably

different challenges for men and women (Caligiuri and Cascio 1998), with women potentially facing additional barriers and various forms of discrimination in the work and non-work contexts (Insch *et al.* 2008). Female expatriates' experiences and thus adjustment may strongly vary depending on the location, its cultural values and on host-country nationals' attitudes towards them (Adler 1987). Consequently, given these observations, it may be fundamental for studies dealing with female expatriates' adjustment to focus on a single host-location in order to better control for such cultural influences and be able to account for them (Selmer and Leung 2003a; Stroh *et al.* 2000).

A look at past research shows that studies including exclusively female expatriates have usually been conducted in a single host-country, however they do not offer much diversity, since they have all been performed in Japan, Hong-Kong and the United Arab Emirates. For gender comparative studies, we can observe that only one of them focus on a single host-location: Hong Kong (Selmer and Leung 2003a); all the others include male and female expatriates evolving in various host-countries. Hence, we might have some more precise indication about how women adjust in Asian countries and in the Middle East, but this does not mean that similar outcomes will be observed in Western cultures. Indeed, for example, male and female expatriates originating from Western countries, who are likely to represent a significant proportion of the expatriate population, may not expect a strong cultural distance in Western host-countries, which may lead to unforeseen difficulties. Tung (2004) for instance emphasizes that those female expatriates in her study that reported the strongest perceived barriers abroad were American female expatriates in the UK. The author suggests that they may have expected a high similarity between both countries and did not anticipate existing cultural differences enough. On the other hand, previous research found that expatriates had more adjustment difficulties in culturally distant countries than in more culturally similar ones (Parker and Mc Evoy 1993).

Overall, Selmer and Leung (2003a)'s call for gender comparative studies on expatriate adjustment in a single, and preferably non-Asian host-country does not seem to have been answered yet. This current study aims at addressing this gap, through comparing adjustment of male and female expatriates working in multinational companies in the French speaking part of Switzerland.

The role of the expatriate partner in the expatriation process

At the beginning of the 80's the identification of the importance of family and spouse factor (Tung 1981) has led to the first studies with a specific focus on the conditions of expatriate families and spouses during the international assignment. In particular, the seminal contributions of Harvey (1985) and Adler (1986) have shed light on the consequences of foreign transfers on expatriate partners: disruption/interruption of social ties and routines, loneliness, isolation, social roles modification, loss of identity and self-esteem. Hence, for expatriate partners, the adjustment to the host country culture can be longer and harder compared to the expatriate employee as the latter during the assignment is less exposed to the culture of the host country and he/she generally continues to work in a context relatively

familiar. Expatriate partners are usually in charge of dealing with several practical/administrative issues tied to the relocation process and the settling-in of the family: finding a house and moving the furniture, identifying providers of services such as doctors, dentists and food shops, enrolling the children in local or international schools, etc. All these tasks are usually performed in a rather unknown environment often without knowing and understanding the local language while the partner works long hours.

Some very recent studies attempted to investigate in a more fine-grained and comprehensive manner the role of expatriate partners. Luring and Selmer (2010) used an ethnographic approach to study the behaviors of a group of women expatriates in Saudi Arabia and identified a number of social strategies such as the creation of networks and alliances that they used to develop and support their husbands' careers. In the study of Mäkelä et al. (2011a) the authors highlighted six different roles (supporting, flexible, determining, instrumental, restricting and equal partner spousal roles) that expatriate partners belonging to dual-career couples adopt during an international assignment. Davoine et al. (2013) in their study carried out in the diplomatic sector showed different dimensions of the expatriate spouse role and their analysis brought to light the positive side of the role of expatriate partners and their support.

However, most of research has principally considered the expatriate partner mainly and solely as a facilitator or a barrier to the expatriation success focusing especially on the notion of spouse adjustment. Most of studies dealing with this notion are based on the seminal research of Black and Stephens (1989) who stated that expatriates during an international assignment have to adjust to work, to interacting with host nationals and to the general environment. Expatriate partner adjustment is limited to the general environment and the interaction with local people (as expatriate partners, most of time wives, were not expected to work). Defined as the degree of psychological comfort with various aspects of a host country (Black, 1988), these authors proposed to consider the notion of adjustment as a multifaceted construct. Some researchers suggested adding new facets - such as personal adjustment (Shaffer and Harrison 2001) or role adjustment (Mohr and Klein 2004) - to the two dimensions of spouse adjustment identified by Black and Stephens (1989).

Expatriate partner adjustment: outcomes and determinants

In one of the first studies that investigated specifically the influence of the expatriate spouse on expatriate adjustment (Black and Stephens 1989) the authors found positive correlations between spouse adjustment and expatriate adjustment, in particular between spouse general adjustment and the three dimensions of expatriate adjustment (spouse interaction adjustment was found to be related only to expatriate interaction adjustment). Later studies generally confirmed the influence of spouse adjustment on expatriate adjustment founding significantly positive relations between spouse general adjustment and expatriate general adjustment (Takeuchi *et al.* 2007), interaction adjustment (Shaffer *et al.* 1999), and work adjustment (Takeuchi *et al.* 2002). In the meta-analytic analysis of Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.* (2005) spouse adjustment was even identified as the most powerful predictor of expatriate cultural

adjustment of their research. They found also positive and significant relationships between spouse adjustment and expatriate interaction adjustment and work adjustment.

In a very similar vein, family's adjustment was found to be positively and significantly correlated with expatriate interaction adjustment (Palthe 2004) and with general adjustment but not with work adjustment (Black, 1988). However in another study (Caligiuri *et al.* 1998) family cross-cultural adjustment has been identified as a mediating variable between family characteristics (support, communication and adaptability) and expatriate work adjustment in the host country.

Apart from the impact on the expatriate adjustment which is the most investigated outcome of expatriate partner adjustment, in two studies the latter was also found to be a significant positive predictor of intentions to stay in the foreign country and complete the international assignment (Black and Stephens, 1989; Shaffer and Harrison, 1998).

Because of the importance of some outcomes of expatriate adjustment (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.* 2005 and Pinto *et al.* 2012 for a review), numerous studies investigated the antecedents of expatriate partner adjustment because « *if spouse adjustment is indeed related to expatriate adjustment and to the success or failure of the international assignment, then it seems critical to gain a better understanding of the factors that facilitate or inhibit spouse cross-cultural adjustment* » (Black and Gregersen 1991, p. 462). Factors supposed to influence the level of spouse adjustment have been relatively extensively investigated and they are related to the spouse as individual, to the expatriate, to their family, to the expatriate employer and to the general foreign environment.

At the individual level, favorableness of the spouse opinion on the international assignment was identified as a strong predictor of spouse adjustment (Black and Stephens 1989; Black and Gregersen 1991; Caligiuri *et al.* 1998; Mohr and Klein 2004): spouses and families who perceive the international move in a positive way adjust better to living in the foreign country. While Black and Gregersen (1991) found a positive and significant relationship between self-initiated pre-departure training and spouse interaction adjustment, Mohr and Klein (2004) identified several factors positively related to all facets of spouse adjustments such as previous international experience, age and host country language knowledge. Among several personality characteristics tested (such as emotional stability, cultural empathy or flexibility) open-mindedness was found to have the strongest relationship with spouse adjustment (Ali *et al.* 2003). Among the inhibitors of spouse adjustment, the impact of perceived stress has been found to be significantly negative (Herleman *et al.* 2008).

With regard to the expatriate, spouse adjustment is, as previously discussed, influenced (in a reciprocal way) by the expatriate adjustment (Mohr and Klein, 2004) and also by the expatriate work satisfaction (Ali *et al.*, 2003). At a family level, several authors have found a significant positive relationship between the general notion of family support and spouse adjustment (Black and Gregersen, 1991; Caligiuri *et al.*, 1998; Copeland and Norell, 2002). Positive relationships between other characteristics of the family unit and spouse adjustment have also been also found in the study of Caligiuri *et al.* (1998) for family communication and family adaptability and in the study of Copeland and Norell (2002) for family cohesiveness.

Several factors related to the expatriate firm and have been found in the study of Black and Gregersen (1991) to have a positive relationship with spouse adjustment: firm's offering pre-move visits to the host country and seeking spouse opinion about the international assignment and company-provided pre-departure training. Company assistance in general was found to be positive related with expatriate adjustment (De Cieri *et al.* 1991). In two studies (Black and Gregersen 1991; Mohr and Klein 2004) the length of the international assignment has been identified as predictor of spouse adjustment.

With regard to the general environment in the host country several factors have been identified as predictors of spouse adjustment: culture novelty (Black and Stephens 1989; Black and Gregersen 1991; Mohr and Klein 2004), favorable living conditions in the host country (Black and Gregersen 1991) and support from and interaction with local people (Black and Gregersen 1991; De Cieri *et al.* 1991; Copeland and Norell 2002; Mohr and Klein 2004).

Two factors that are central in our paper – i.e. gender and employment status - have surprisingly never or very rarely investigated. Expatriate spouse adjustment has traditionally been investigated with samples numerically dominated by female spouses, at the exception of the study of Cole (2011) which includes the largest number of male spouses to date. This imbalance within research samples between male and female spouses is probably the main explanation of the exclusion of gender as a variable able to explain different levels of spouse adjustment. Since, as stated by Copeland and Norell (2002, p.260) and illustrated by Davoine *et al.* (2013) « *male and female accompanying spouses undoubtedly share some of the same concerns but they also approach a relocation with special gender- and role-specific issues* » a comparison of adjustment between male spouses and female spouses seems thus timely.

With regard to employment status, the limited empirical data produced to date does not offer a clear picture of the effects of this variable on the adjustment of expatriate partners. In the study of Shaffer and Harrison (2001) the shift from being a working spouse to a non-working one does not have any effect on spouse adjustment. The authors explained this unexpected result through the thesis that spouses that experienced transition from employment to unemployment could have reconciled with this change. In a slightly different approach, Merignac and Roger (2012) found that expatriate spouses that have a working activity have significant higher adjustment than spouses that do not. In light with the tentative explanations of Shaffer and Harrison (2001), their results reported also that spouses who voluntary decided to change employment status have higher interaction and personal adjustment than those that were forced.

Finally, the study of Cole (2011) is by far the most interesting in light of the research objectives of our paper as it investigates in a quite sophisticated manner the interplay between change of employment status, gender and spouse adjustment. In this study, among s expatriate spouses that experienced interruption of employment career-oriented male partners recorded lower levels of cultural adjustment and interaction adjustment than career-oriented female partners.

“New” expatriation issues and hypotheses of our study

During the last years two main changes have occurred which make the actual picture different when compared to the traditional expatriation context in which the expatriate was typically a male accompanied by a wife who had almost always the role of homemaker. Hence, the participation of women in international assignments has significantly increased in the last decades (Mercer Human Resources Consulting 2006; GMAC 2008) as well as the number of dual career couples in the society in general and among expatriates in particular (Harvey 1996, 1998; Andreason 2008; Permits Foundation 2009). As a result female-led dual career couples (Harvey 1997) are increasingly frequent in the expatriation population.

Specificities of female expatriate adjustment

Female expatriates may face a more stressful life in the host country than male expatriates, due to additional difficulties in balancing work and private spheres (Shortland and Cummins 2007). Indeed, traditional norms about women’s care and domestic responsibilities remain significant in many Western countries (Hobson and Fahlén 2009; Acker 2012) and a strong inequality between men’s and women’s time spent on domestic work still exists (Gwozdz and Sousa-Poza 2010). Even in dual earner couples, women usually continue to have the primary responsibility for childcare and household tasks (Eby *et al.* 2005), a fact that is widely observed also in Switzerland (OFS 2008). Hence, male and female expatriates may have been typically socialized to this model in their home countries and may reproduce it in Switzerland, consistent with local gender norms. In addition, it has been emphasized that transitions involving careers, employment and family roles are less easily experienced by male expatriate partners who often suffer more deeply the alterations of their identity that result from these changes (Harvey and Wiese 1998; Punnett *et al.* 1992; Punnett 1997; Anderson 2001). Moreover, while Switzerland can be considered as safe country in international comparison (WEF 2013), women anywhere may face some forms of discrimination or harassment to a stronger degree than men, inside and outside the workplace (Insch *et al.* 2008). In Switzerland, such situations may arise in more covert ways (see e.g. CEDAW 2009) and women may not be as prepared to face them as in countries where they are much more overt.

On the other hand, it has also been emphasized that being a woman can be an advantage in general day-to-day activities. For example, some women interviewed by Taylor and Napier (2001) perceived as a clear advantage that local men may be more willing to be helpful to women, especially foreign ones. Moreover, Haslberger (2010) suggests that women tend to have more realistic expectations regarding relocation than men, who may underestimate some challenges. This seems to be consistent with Harrison and Michailova (2012), who stress that female expatriates evolving in the UAE context faced several adjustment challenges, however they had expected them and it was just a matter for them of getting used to their new environment. In line with the previous elements, Dallalfar and Movahedi (1996) found that women were better informed on the host-country than men prior to arrival. Given these mixed elements, we do not expect any clear gender differences in general adjustment:

Hypothesis 1a: *There are no significant differences in general adjustment between male and female expatriates.*

Several authors emphasized the fundamental role of social support, including among others the interactions with host-nationals, in female expatriates' experiences and adjustment abroad (e.g. Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002; Van den Bergh and Du Plessis 2012). Precisely, women are also often perceived to possess superior interpersonal skills, potentially enabling them to create such interactions and establish these needed relationships. Female expatriates interviewed by Napier and Taylor (2002) viewed themselves as good listeners, interested in people, and constantly tried to find ways to interact with them positively; hence they thought that adjusting to a different culture might be easier for them than for some of their male expatriate counterparts. Indeed, in line with these elements, while characteristics or values typically associated with men are e.g. independence, control, competition, rationality; it has been noted that women tend to be more people/relationship oriented, with a focus on values such as interdependence, cooperation or receptivity (Rosener 1990; Marshal 1993; Grant 1988; Adler 1979; for a discussion see Alvesson and Billing 2000). As a result, it has been emphasized that these superior interpersonal skills provide them a competitive advantage on international assignments (Harris 2004b; Hofbauer and Fischlmayr 2004). Consistent with these elements, Cole and McNulty (2011) found that female expatriates exhibit a higher level of self-transcendence (related to values such as e.g. of appreciation, equality, broadmindedness, cooperation, loyalty) than their male counterparts, which was found to especially facilitate higher levels of interactional adjustment.

Moreover, referring to Berry and Kalin (1995)'s modes of acculturation between minorities and mainstream cultures, Tung (2004) found that more men than women tended to live in separate expatriate compounds and adopt a "separation" mode. On the other hand, women tended to adopt more often an integration or assimilation mode, even in culturally distant or less developed countries. Integration and assimilation modes have been identified as being the most conducive to interactions with local people abroad (Tung 1998). The author suggests that this behavior may be related to their situations and experiences faced as minorities in management in their home countries, which gave them a stronger mental constitution to cope with isolation in living and working (Tung 2004). Given these elements, we expect a higher interaction adjustment for female expatriates:

Hypothesis 1b: *Female expatriates' interaction adjustment is significantly higher than that of their male counterparts.*

Taken-for-granted stereotypical assumptions that associate successful management with typically male characteristics are still well anchored today in organizations and more broadly in society (Schein *et al.* 1996; Shortland 2009; Vance *et al.* 2006; Oakley 2000), and negatively impact women's experiences both in the domestic and international contexts. Moreover, while the fundamental necessity of providing sufficient position power to female

expatriates has been often recognized, especially when gender stereotyping in the host-country appears to be strong (Caligiuri and Cascio 1998; Tzeng 2006), several studies suggest that female expatriates are more likely to be assigned in lower and more junior management positions than their male counterparts (Selmer and Leung 2003c; Domsch and Lichtenberger 1992, Caligiuri *et al.* 1999), or in less prestigious and visible functions (Hofbauer and Fischlmayr 2004). Hence, this headquarters' lack of confidence may be perceived by colleagues in the host-country and undermine female expatriates' authority, potentially leading to problems in adjusting to the work abroad.

Forster (1999) underlines that, in contrast to men's experiences, the location of an international assignment may have a considerable influence on women's work adjustment, with those working in East Asian countries (i.e. in other locations than Hong Kong and Singapore) reporting higher difficulties in adapting to their work than those relocated in Europe or North America. Hence, Switzerland may not range among the most challenging countries for women in terms of adjustment to work. Moreover, several advantages for female expatriates have been identified in previous research, such as their strong visibility and the fact that they may be seen as extremely competent since they have been selected for the international assignment (Hearn *et al.* 2008; Taylor and Napier 1996; Altman and Shortland 2001), as well as their more interactive and relational leadership style, often considered as particularly well suited for business in an international and cross-cultural context (Rosener 1990; Van der Boon 2003; Izraeli and Zeira 1993; Jelinek and Adler 1988). They may also be viewed first as foreigners, and then as women, suggesting that gender norms applying to local women do not apply to female expatriates (Adler and Izraeli 1995, Westwood and Leung 1994), although this could not always be confirmed (e.g. Harrison and Michailova 2012). Given these mixed elements, we do not expect any clear gender differences in work adjustment.

***Hypothesis 1c:** There are no significant differences in work adjustment between male and female expatriates.*

Specificities of male partners' adjustment

Studies specifically addressing the situation of male expatriate spouses are still rare (for few exceptions see Anderson 2001; Punnett *et al.* 1992; Punnett 1997; Harvey and Wiese 1998; Selmer and Leung 2003e). Several studies have showed that male partners are psychologically committed to their career and the latter plays a critical role in the representation of their identity (Harvey and Wiese 1998; Punnett *et al.* 1992). Some studies have supported the assumption that women accept more easily than men the abandonment of their career to adopt the role of wife or mother, and that men have more difficulty taking on the role of secondary breadwinner or homemaker (Silberstein 1992; Anderson 2001). Indeed, in most Western societies certain transitions such as a negative career move or withdrawal from employment in order to take a more active role within the family are more acceptable for women than for men (Harvey and Wiese 1998; Punnett *et al.* 1992; Anderson 2001). Male expatriate partners

who experience feelings of isolation and ostracism tend to look for other people in the same situation in order to share their experience and reduce external negative pressures. Unfortunately, since the population of expatriate managers is still dominated by men and those of expatriate partners by women, the typical challenges that expatriate partners must cope with (e.g. feelings of isolation, change of status) seem to be magnified in the case of male spouses. The latter can find it difficult to take part in activities organized within a group numerically dominated by women. Their possibilities and opportunities of collecting useful information and developing social ties and networks are thus highly reduced (Punnett *et al.* 1992; Anderson 2001). Furthermore, while being part of a female breadwinner dual career family could be easily accepted by male spouses, this uncommon situation can create discomfort in other people such as male expatriates or host country nationals (Cole 2012). Therefore, we hypothesize that in general male partners experience some additional difficulties in the adjustment process compared to female partners.

***Hypothesis 2a.** Male expatriate spouses will have lower general adjustment than female expatriate spouses.*

***Hypothesis 2b.** Male expatriate spouses will have lower interaction adjustment than female expatriate spouses.*

***Hypothesis 2c.** Male expatriate spouses will have lower work adjustment than female expatriate spouses.*

The dual career issue

Furthermore expatriate partners involved in dual career couples (couples in which both partners are psychologically committed to their respective careers) are faced with the additional challenge of finding a job and ultimately abandon and sacrifice their own careers. Adjustment can be thus more problematic for dual career couples which need, not only to adapt to the host country but also try to different kinds of strategies in order to coordinate both careers (Mäkelä *et al.* 2011a).

To follow the expatriate, the spouse often has to resign from his/her job and abandon a potential career, which can impact on the expatriation success (Mohr and Klein 2004; Kupka and Cathro 2007). The most important and frequent problem faced by dual career couples in international assignments is the difficulty, or the impossibility in some cases, for the partner to find a job in the host country. A recent survey on expatriate spouse employment (Permits Foundation 2009) show that almost all of them were engaged in a professional activity before accompanying the expatriate on international assignment and only one third were able to pursue their own career. Seventy-five percent of those who were not working during the time abroad mentioned wanting to do it, and a great majority thought the employment issue had direct effects on adjustment, family relationships, health and well-being (Permits Foundation 2009). Other large scale surveys (ORC Worldwide 2005; GMAC 2008) reported similar results. Generally, the dual career issue is the origin of several problems affecting the

expatriation management such as higher refusal rates to relocate internationally, more difficult (or at least different) adjustment to the host country or reduction of family income.

Expatriate partners may be not allowed to work because of work permits and visa limitations and when this kind of restrictions do not exist in the host country, they have to face severe job-finding related obstacles such as cultural and language barriers, unrecognized foreign educational or professional qualifications, lack of available and suitable jobs and general preference for local hires (Pellico and Stroh 1997) The partners forced to abandon their career are in a more fragile psychological state, which is not only due to the career interruption, but also to the exclusive focus on the partner's career at the expense of their own professional interests. Even though the gravity of this situation also depends on the partner's professional life cycle stage, career abandonment leads to stress situations with repercussions on family life and on the expatriate's work (Harvey 1996; Harvey *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, when the expatriate partner is able to secure a new job in the host location, it could be at a lower level than before with the consequence of loss of status, power, self-worth and identity. A study of Merignac and Roger (2012) showed that expatriate spouses that have a working activity have significant higher levels of general, interaction and personal adjustment than spouses that do not. Their results reported also significant differences in interaction and personal adjustment depending if the change in the employment status has been chosen or imposed. We hypothesize that for expatriate spouses able to secure a job and thus continue to work in the new location, maintaining an identity will be easier and the adjustment to the new environment will be less problematic.

Hypothesis 3a. *Expatriate spouses that have a professional activity during the international assignment will have higher general adjustment than spouses that do not have a professional activity.*

Hypothesis 3b. *Expatriate spouses that have a professional activity during the international assignment will have higher interaction adjustment than spouses that do not have a professional activity.*

Given the representation of the male role in general, and in the expatriate population in particular, changes in the employment status seems to be less easily experienced by male partners than female partners (Harvey and Wiese 1998, Selmer and Leung 2003e). Transitions involving careers, employment and family roles, especially in a foreign country, are less easily experienced by men who suffer more deeply the alterations of their identity that result from these changes (Harvey and Wiese 1998; Punnett 1997). In a study of Cole (2011) among the expatriate spouses that experienced interruption of employment and that defined themselves as career-oriented, male partners recorded lower levels of cultural adjustment and interaction adjustment than female partners. Probably, male spouses will tend to strongly avoid to be forced in a new inconvenient role such as those of "househusband" or volunteer. Thus, we can hypothesize that male spouses continue to work and pursue their career in the new location more often than female spouses.

Hypothesis 3c. *Expatriate male spouses will more frequently have a professional activity during the international assignment than expatriate female spouses.*

Method

Participants and context of the study

The data for this study come from a broader survey study on expatriate employees living in the French speaking part of Switzerland and working in multinational companies located in this region. About 12 multinational companies agreed to participate to the study and they either forwarded the link to the online version of the survey or directly sent the paper version to their expatriate employees. In addition, the organization International Link, which is affiliated to the Chamber of Commerce of the state of Vaud agreed to send the link to our questionnaire to an extended database of expatriates working in multinational companies in the French speaking part of Switzerland. The use of several intermediaries to collect the data contributed to reduce sampling bias. Finally we received 152 complete and usable questionnaires. Overall, expatriates in our study come from more than thirty countries and nationalities of participants are distributed as follows: French (20.3%), German (13.8%), Italian (11.1%), British (6.5%), US (5.2%), Japanese (5.2%) and other nationalities (37.9%).

In our sample, 126 participants (82.9%) were married or living with a partner, and 26 were single. Since our study focuses on dual-career couples, we only considered respondents that were married or living with a partner, and following sample description and analyses are thus based on the sample of 126 participants. Their average age is 39.21 years old (SD=7.8), they had spent 2.01 years on current assignment (SD=2.08) and 6.62 years as an expatriate (SD=6.2). Out of the 126 respondents, about 70 % are males. The majority of the participants have children (60%).

Female expatriates were on average 37.7 years old (SD=8.43), had worked for 1.98 years on current assignment (SD=2.31) and had spent 6.9 years as an expatriate (SD=6.34). Only about 41.7% of women in our sample had children. Finally, about 22.2% of the female expatriates held a senior management position. A bit less than half of women (47.2%) were self-initiated expatriates.

Average age of male expatriates, 39.8 years old (SD=7.55) was higher than that of their female counterparts. They had spent about the same time on current assignment, 2.03 years (SD=2.00) and a similar time abroad, 6.51 years (SD=6.17) as female expatriates. About one third of men had initiated their expatriation themselves and were not assigned by their home-companies. Most of male expatriates had children (67.8%). Finally, one third of men held a senior management position (33.3%). A summary of male and female expatriates' demographic characteristics can be found in table 1 below.

Table 1: Expatriates' demographic characteristics.

| Personal characteristics | Whole (married) sample (N=126) | Male expatriates (N=90) | Female expatriates (N=36) |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Age (years) | 39.21 | 39.8 | 37.7 |
| Presence of children | 60.3% | 67.8% | 41.7% |
| Senior/Executive position | 30.2 | 33.3% | 22.2% |
| Organization-assigned/Self-initiated expatriates (%OA) | 52.8% | 67.8% | 63.5% |
| Total time as an expatriate (years) | 6.62 | 6.51 | 6.90 |
| Time spent on current assignment (years) | 2.01 | 2.03 | 1.98 |

In addition, preliminary results were later presented to and discussed with twelve HR representatives of the multinational companies who took part to our study and who were in charge of the international mobility of their employees. We thus reviewed our findings with such kind of key informants and that allowed us to more deeply evaluate our results and to have a more comprehensive understanding of the research issue.

Instruments

We used the 14-item scales developed by Black (1988) and Black and Stephens (1989) to measure the three dimensions of expatriate cross-cultural adjustment. Respondents were asked to evaluate on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1, “not at all adjusted” to 7, “completely adjusted”) how well they were adjusted to several aspects of their lives in Switzerland (general environment and conditions of life, interaction with host-country nationals outside of work, work). Confirmatory factor analysis using SPSS Statistics 20 revealed the three-factor solution. Reliability of each resulting dimension was acceptable (Nunnally 1978): general adjustment ($\alpha=0.84$), interaction adjustment ($\alpha=0.95$) and work adjustment ($\alpha=0.80$). We measured the adjustment of the expatriate partner with the 9 items developed by Black and Stephens (1989) with regard to general adjustment and interaction adjustment. In order to address the dual career issue and the common situation in which the partner is working during the assignment we developed three-items able to measure the adjustment to work/career. For this dimension we asked expatriate partners to evaluate on a 7-point Likert scale how they are adjusted (from “not at all adjusted” to “completely adjusted”) to *Work*, *Personal income level* and *Career development*. As for expatriate adjustment, reliability of each resulting dimension was acceptable for each dimension of partner adjustment too: general adjustment ($\alpha=0.85$), interaction adjustment ($\alpha=0.90$) and work adjustment ($\alpha=0.90$). The employment status of the expatriate partner and its change as a consequence of the international assignment was measured by asking the expatriate two questions: (1) *Was your partner working at the time of the decision to relocate?* and (2) *Is your partner currently working?*

Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations for all dependent variables. Expatriates were overall well adapted to their work and to their general life environment in Switzerland, with on average levels above 5 (on a scale ranging from 1 to 7). Comparatively, though around the mid-level point, their adjustment to interacting with host-country nationals is lower. This result suggests that interactions with locals may represent a significant challenge for expatriates in Switzerland, and may be more difficult to master than challenges related to work and general life environments.

Table 2: Means, standard deviations and correlations among dimensions of expatriate adjustment.

| <i>Variable (n=126)</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1.Work adjustment | 5.48 | 1.23 | - | | |
| 2.General adjustment | 5.05 | 1.04 | .366** | - | |
| 3.Interaction adjustment | 4.05 | 1.67 | .435** | .415** | - |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Our three hypotheses related to differences in male and female expatriate adjustment were tested performing an analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each adjustment dimension (see table 3). These analyses revealed that female expatriates had significantly higher levels of interaction adjustment than their male counterparts ($F=5.421$, $p<0.05$), confirming the hypothesis 1b. No significant differences could be identified in terms of general adjustment and work adjustment, which also confirming our hypotheses 1a and 1c.

Table 3: ANOVAs for the three adjustment dimensions by expatriate gender.

| | Male expatriates (n=90) Mean (SD) | Female expatriates (n=36) Mean (SD) | F-Ratios |
|------------------------|---|---|----------|
| Work adjustment | 5.39 (1.32) | 5.69 (0.95) | 1.455 |
| General adjustment | 4.98 (0.99) | 5.25 (1.16) | 1.714 |
| Interaction adjustment | 3.83 (1.66) | 4.60 (1.57) | 5.421* |

Note: * $p<0.05$;

In table 4 the descriptive statistics and correlations for the three dimensions of expatriate partner adjustment are indicated. While general adjustment is positively and significantly correlated with both work adjustment and interaction adjustment, surprisingly, the correlation between work adjustment and interaction adjustment is positive but not significant. Compared to the levels of adjustment of expatriates, those of their partners are always lower for all the three dimensions suggesting an adaptation process more challenging and difficult for partners than for expatriates. As for the latter, for expatriate partners too, the most problematic dimension is the interaction adjustment.

Table 4: Means, standard deviations and correlations among dimensions of partner adjustment.

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1.Work adjustment | 4.66 | 1.66 | - | | |
| 2.General adjustment | 4.64 | 1.22 | .355* | - | |
| 3.Interaction adjustment | 3.79 | 1.67 | .240 | .488** | - |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

In order to test the hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c, a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been performed. As showed on table 5, only one dimension was found to be significantly different and not in the expected direction: while there was no significant difference between male and female partners in general adjustment and work adjustment, our results show that male partners have significantly higher interaction adjustment than female partners. Thus, hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c are not supported.

Table 5: Means and standard deviations of dimensions of adjustment of male vs. female expatriate partners

| | Male partners Mean (SD) | Female partners Mean (SD) | F-Ratios |
|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------|
| Work adjustment | 4.65 (2.04) | 4.67 (1.40) | 0.001 |
| General adjustment | 4.94 (1.17) | 4.53 (1.23) | 2.607 |
| Interaction adjustment | 4.31 (1.74) | 3.60 (1.62) | 4.344* |

Note: * p< 0.05;

In order to test the hypotheses 3a and 3b we measured the impact of the partner employment status and its change on two dimensions of adjustment - i.e. general and interaction – through

a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA). The same statistical test (ANOVA) has been performed in order to test the last hypothesis 3c. Results are showed on table 6 and table 7.

Table 6: Means and standard deviations of dimensions of adjustment of working vs. non-working expatriate partners

| | Working partners Mean (SD) | Non-working partners Mean (SD) | F-Ratios |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------|
| General adjustment | 4.80 (1.29) | 4.56 (1.19) | 1.105 |
| Interaction adjustment | 4.15 (1.84) | 3.53 (1.54) | 4.098 * |

Note: * $p < 0.05$;

Overall, our results showed that employment status of expatriate partners has an impact on partner adjustment: while no significant differences have been observed with regard to general adjustment, expatriate partners that work during the international assignment have a significant higher interaction adjustment than expatriate partners that don't have a professional activity. However, another independent samples *t* test showed that a change in the employment status (working before the international assignment/not working after) doesn't have a significant impact neither on general adjustment nor on interaction adjustment. Thus hypothesis 3a is not supported and the hypothesis 3b is partially supported.

With regard to gender differences in the employment status (hypothesis 3c) our results (see table 7) showed that male partners more often than female partners have a professional activity but the difference is significant during the international assignment but not before it. However, and again, we didn't find significant differences between change of employment status between male partners and female partners. Thus hypothesis 3c is only partially supported. These results are discussed in the next section.

Table 7: Employment status of male vs female expatriate partners

| | Male partners (%) | Female partners (%) | F-Ratios |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|----------|
| Working before the international assignment | 28 (80%) | 58 (62.4%) | 3.633 |
| Working during the international assignment | 20 (60.6%) | 29 (32.2%) | 8.549* |

Note: * $p < 0.05$;

Discussion

With regard to expatriate adjustment, consistent with hypothesis 1a, we did not find any gender differences in general adjustment, as in past research (Selmer and Leung 2003; Haslberger 2010). In a similar vein, and in opposition to hypothesis 2a, we didn't find any significant differences between general adjustment of male partners compared to female ones. Our results, indicating that male partners do not face additional challenges in the adjustment to the general foreign environment allow tempering the idea that family issues for women on international assignments may be strongly exacerbated, among others due to challenges associated with the relocation of male partners (Rusconi 2002; Fischlmayr and Kollinger 2010; Linehan and Walsh 1999; Tzeng 2006).

In Switzerland, several solutions exist and are widespread to help balance work and family, such as relying on household help or external support for childcare, although some challenges remain with respect to the latter due to the lack of offer and the high prices (OFS 2008). These solutions can contribute to help expatriates and spouses in the adjustment to the Swiss environment and attenuate potential differences in adjustment levels between male- and female-led dual-career expatriate couples. Switzerland has recently been listed among the 10 best global locations for executive women (Schembari 2009), a country where the proportion of mothers in paid work is among the highest in OECD (although mainly part-time) and where children report among the highest life satisfaction in international comparison (OECD 2011, OFS 2012). With regard to the family dimension, these features of the Swiss context should certainly help the general adjustment of female expatriates and improve the (hypothesized more difficult) adjustment of male spouses.

Probably the relative high quality of many aspects of general life conditions (e.g. housing, cost of living, health care facilities, food) may not be, in fact, more challenging for women than for men (nor the opposite). Switzerland is constantly rated one of the most competitive economies worldwide, with well-developed e.g. transport and health care infrastructures (WEF 2012). Moreover, Switzerland is a very internationalized country hosting a high number of foreign employees (UNCTAD 2011). Various expatriate networks – in which female-led dual career couples are quite common – have developed and are well established, which may be a considerable source of social support impacting men and women's cross-cultural adjustment at various levels (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002; Johnson *et al.* 2003).

Consistent with previous findings (Selmer and Leung 2003a; Haslberger 2010), we found that women were better adjusted to interacting with host-nationals than men, which also confirms our hypothesis 1b. Past research suggested that women may more strongly seek to integrate the host-society than men, obviously contributing to foster interactions with host-country nationals (Tung 2004). Moreover, they may also more successfully interact with local people in Switzerland. Indeed, in addition to their observed superior interpersonal and people-oriented abilities (Billing and Alvesson 2000), it has been stressed that female expatriates tend to possess higher language skills (Forster 1999) and may be more likely to master the language of the host-country than men (Dallalfar and Movahedi 1996). Hence, despite the increasing use of English in various spheres of social life, and especially in the professional

context (Murray *et al.* 2001), the ability to speak the language of the region in which the expatriate evolves is crucial to optimally interact with local people outside of work. Furthermore, women's higher interaction adjustment may also be partly explained by the openness of the Swiss working environment to women. Indeed, Caligiuri and Tung (1999), using a unidimensional measure of adjustment, found that female expatriates' tend to report lower adjustment than men in countries with lower workforce participation of women. Mérignac (2009) extended these findings by showing that women's labor participation rate in the host country was significantly and strongly correlated with female expatriates' interaction adjustment. In Switzerland, women's workforce participation rate is high in international comparison (i.e. 62% in 2011 against 51% for the OECD average, see Worldbank 2013), and is higher than in most of expatriates' home countries in the current study (e.g. France, Germany, UK, US, ranging between 51% and 58%). Hence, female expatriates in Switzerland may evolve in an environment that is comparatively rather more open to women, potentially positively impacting their interaction adjustment.

Our research shows a complete different picture when we observe the results regarding the levels of interaction adjustment of expatriate spouses. Contrarily of what expected, male partners of our sample are significantly better adjusted to the interaction with host nationals than female partners are. Several explications can be attempted in order to discuss this unexpected result. First, the characteristics of the Swiss context previously mentioned could help male spouses in their interaction with local people. Male spouses of the study of Cole (2012) were comfortable with their role in female breadwinner expatriate couples but suffered from the discomfort of local people not used to interact with male trailing spouses (Harvey and Wiese 1998). Even if female breadwinner families are rather uncommon (Levy *et al.* 2007) gender norms could be relatively more flexible in Switzerland than in other parts of the world. Male partners could thus avoid feelings of solitude and even ostracism (Harvey and Wiese 1998; Cole 2012) and be able to interact at least with the same ease as female partners. Second, the relative small number of male partners, which is a frequently mentioned cause of isolation and lack of social ties with other people in the same situation (Anderson 2001; Cole 2012) can encourage male partners to establish more frequent and deeper contacts with local people. Furthermore, their relative small presence can also offer them an "exotic bonus" (Simpson 2004; Davoine *et al.* 2013): special consideration and differential treatments can be accorded to them facilitating their interaction with host nationals.

Female expatriate work adjustment has not been found to be lower than that of men, confirming our expectations (H1c). This result is consistent with previous empirical studies showing that female expatriates can be at least as successful in their job as men on international assignments (Tung 2004; Caligiuri and Tung 1999). A first element that may contribute to explain this finding is that our study involved expatriates all working in multinational companies based in Switzerland. Depending on the organizations and their home countries, companies do not all transfer their practices and corporate cultures to the same extent. Hence, some expatriates may evolve in working environments that are not significantly different than the ones in their home countries (see e.g. Harrison and Michailova 2012), thus considerably minimizing work adjustment challenges for both male and female

expatriates. Moreover, it has often been stressed that women can benefit from several advantages as expatriates, such as a strong visibility, very high perception of competence and an interpersonal leadership style very well suited to managing in an international context (Altman and Shortland 2001; Jelinek and Adler 1988). On the other hand, women are also likely to face more barriers at work in the host country than their male counterparts (e.g. isolation, stereotypical assumptions, lack of mentors, exclusion from networks, lack of career support, pressure to work long working hours) (Linehan and Scullion 2008; Selmer and Leung 2003d; Shortland and Cummins 2007), which could negatively impact their experiences at work. However, this might not necessarily lead to lower work adjustment for women. Indeed, although often exacerbated abroad, many of these barriers may not be new to female expatriates, since they may already have faced them in their home country and could thus be well prepared for dealing with them abroad (Mérignac 2009).

With regard to expatriate spouses, no gender differences have been observed with regard to their adjustment to their work and career situation. We expected that male partners would experience more difficulties since the concepts of career and professional activity would be more critical to their identity than for female partners (Harvey and Wiese 1998; Punnett *et al.* 1992) and that they would have more difficulty taking on the role of secondary breadwinner (Silberstein 1992). However, our results indicate that male partners and female partners do not differ in their adjustment to the new professional circumstances: we can probably ascribe this result to the fact that the Geneva lake region (where the study has been conducted) is a highly multinational environment characterized by a high presence of European headquarters and international activities and very attractive local contracts. Hence, the local multinational job market for international qualified profiles can highly facilitate the pursuing of a successful “trailing spouse career” and contribute to temper potential gender differences in the levels of adjustment to work and career. We can also suggest that male spouses, more concerned by the alteration of their professional situation as a consequence of the international transfer, are better prepared to face some potential career-related difficulties and to act in order to cope with them. Other elements that can potentially justify our results regarding the expatriate partner adjustment to work and career are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Hence, our research reports interesting findings concerning gender differences in the employment status and the impact of the latter on adjustment of expatriate partners. First, our results indicate that having a professional activity has a positive impact on the adjustment of expatriate partners. The influence is significant for interaction adjustment but not for general adjustment. Hence, spouses who work during the international assignment have a easier time in interacting with local people: a first obvious explication is that working and thus being active outside of the household allow the spouse to multiply the exposure to the local environment and the number of contact with host nationals (Mérignac and Roger 2012). Furthermore, expatriate partners without a professional activity do not dispose of a personal income and of the associate role of co-provider for the family which can be highly critical features for the construction of their identity, role and self-esteem (Harvey 1985; Kupka and Cathro 2007). This situation can lead to a more difficult relationship with local people especially working individuals not used to interact with trailing spouses without professional activity. Furthermore this potentially negative situation can be exacerbated if the expatriate

partner is identified by the local environment as partner of an expatriate manager and not as an individual in his/her own right (De Cieri *et al.* 1991; Tremayne 1984). However our results didn't report any significant influence of change of employment status of expatriate partner adjustment: we interpret this result a similar fashion than the findings and remarks of some authors (Shaffer and Harrison 2001; Cole 2012) who stated that expatriate partners that decided to interrupt their career in order to follow their partner in the international assignment could have reconciled this situation within themselves and being comfortable with their condition of not-working accompanying partner.

Although we didn't identify any significant gender differences in the change of employment status of expatriate partner, impact of gender has been observed when comparing the percentages of male and female expatriate partners with a working activity during the international assignment. Hence the percentage of expatriate partners with a working activity decreased from 80% before the transfer to the foreign country to 60% during the international assignment for male spouses and from 62% to 32% for female spouses. It is interesting to note that the difference between male and female partners is not significant at the time the decision to relocate was made and it became significant after relocation. This result allow to show the gendered dimension of the expatriation process in accordance of much of the family migration literature, that highlight that the role of accompanying spouse is more often played by women than men (Cooke 2007; Bruegel 1996; Boyle *et al.* 1991) and that even within couples that can be qualified as equal, it is very often the women that make work and career compromises (Raghuram 2004). Adopting a gender role approach, we can state that the decision to relocate and the expatriation process seems to reinforce and even introduce gender norms with regard to occupational trajectories and family roles as we observed a significant higher presence of trailing spouse with a working activity in couples female-led expatriate couples than in male-led ones. It is worthwhile to note that this situation can be also reinforced by the attitude and behavior of local people that could facilitate in a deeper manner male spouses in the job search than they would do with female spouses. For example, the study of Eby *et al.* (2002) showed that executives assigned more organizational resources to partners of female employees than to the partners of male ones. The organizational support can take the form of help with work permits, with arranging educational possibilities, the covering costs of trying to find a job, spouse career and life counseling and even compensation for the lost salary (Riusala and Suutari 2000). With regard to the specific context of our study, it seems worthwhile to illustrate an interesting initiative promoted by some multinational corporation located on the Geneva lake region in order to address the dual career issue and to help expatriate partners in their job search. This initiative has taken the form of a network (*International Dual Career Network*) and its purpose is to facilitate job search and to share career information with the spouses of international employees and expatriates of the organizations that are part of the network. The latter is managed by expatriate spouses with the support of organization members' employees and it gives access to HR professionals and job opportunities and offer job and career related information on efficient job search behaviour in the Geneva Lake region. After being successfully established in that region, this network is evolving globally with new locations (e.g. Zurich, Paris, London, Sao Paulo among others) that are progressively joining it.

Conclusion: implications and limitations

Some limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, self-reports were used to collect the data, which has been argued to potentially lead to common method bias, such as inflation of relationships between variables (Podsakoff and Todor 1985; Organ and Ryan 1995). However, some body of literature suggests that assumptions related to common method variance with self-reports are overstated and represent an oversimplification of the reality (Spector 2006). We followed several steps in order to reduce likelihood of common method bias by using self-reports (Podsakoff et al. 2003; Conway and Lance 2010). First, a clear rationale for using self-reports has been followed. Indeed, self-reports appear to be the most relevant method to collect data in this study, given that cross-cultural adjustment involves highly personal issues such as psychological comfort and familiarity with foreign environment. Thus, the people concerned with adjustment are the best suited to adequately answer such questions. Second, item reliabilities for the three adjustment dimensions were very high, as presented and discussed in the methodological part. This was expected, since we used the widely operationalized 14-item scales developed by Black (1988) and Black and Stephens (1989) to measure expatriate cross-cultural adjustment. Third, we proactively followed some steps aiming at reducing common method bias. For instance, we clearly emphasized that respondents' anonymity will be guaranteed. Also, items were assigned in random order, and we stressed that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers. A second limitation refers to the cross-sectional design of the study. Indeed, while cross-cultural adjustment is a process over time (Black and Mendenhall 1991; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. 2005), our study only deals with adjustment levels of participants at a given point in time. Further studies could consider adopting a longitudinal design to address this weakness. A third limitation relates to fact that expatriate partners did not all report their adjustment levels themselves. However, a question asked who answered the items concerning the partner. We tested for differences in levels of partner adjustment between answers given by the expatriate and those given by the partner, and no significant differences could be found, suggesting that our data on partner adjustment is homogenous. While adjustment is a personal issue, this result could be explained by the fact that expatriate and partners may often interact and are likely to exchange with each other on their feelings, impressions, etc.. Nevertheless, further research could survey the spouses directly to ensure greater accuracy of the data collected. Finally, a last limitation relates to the operationalization of cross-cultural adjustment used in this study (Black et al. (1991)). It is indeed recognized that the environment features requiring adjustment may be numerous, and go beyond the 14 item-scales proposed by Black et al. (1991)'s model and their three domains of adjustment (see Hippler 2006 for a review). Hence, the validity of their conceptualization has been criticized for methodological reasons (e.g. lack of inductive-exploratory approach, concerns about arbitrariness and the validity of some items). However, despite these weaknesses, this model remains, today, the most widespread operationalized model to examine expatriate cross-cultural adjustment.

Our study has several implications. First, although the proportion of female expatriates has significantly increased over the past decades, empirical evidence shows that important bias against women remain in international assignment selection (e.g. Stroh *et al.* 2000; Harris 2002; Connerley *et al.* 2008). One major point emphasized in previous research is the perceptions by some home-country managers that female expatriates may not be able to adjust

to the host-country culture and would thus be less successful abroad than their male counterparts (e.g. Paik and Vance 2002; Vance *et al.* 2006; Kollinger and Linehan 2008). Representing the first empirical investigation of cross-cultural adjustment differences between male and female expatriates in a single – Western – host-country, our results are consistent with those of Selmer and Leung (2003a) in the Hong-Kong host-location, showing that women adjust at least as well as men, and even better when considering the interaction dimension of adjustment. Hence, despite the fact that women face more barriers than men on international assignments in both work and non-work contexts (Insch *et al.* 2008), and while host-country environment has been found to considerably influence female expatriates' experiences (Taylor and Napier 2001), this result appears to hold in very different host-country contexts. While several explanations have been discussed in this study (e.g. greater interpersonal skills, they tend to live less often in separate expatriate compounds, etc.), further, preferably qualitative research is needed to more comprehensively address and interpret these findings. Moreover, further research should investigate adjustment differences between male and female expatriates in other single host-locations (e.g. other European countries, South America, Africa) to check if findings remain similar.

Second, it has widely been emphasized in previous literature that organizations may perceive male spouse and family issues as insurmountable for women abroad, as exemplified by Selmer and Leung (2003c) who found that female expatriates in their study were significantly less often married than their male counterparts. In contrast, our study shows that male partners are at least as well adjusted than their female counterparts, and even better adjusted to interacting with host-country nationals. Male partners who are well-adjusted may be a significant source of psychological support to female expatriates (Harris 2004a), who tend to need more support than male expatriates (Linehan 2000), illustrating the reciprocal influences between partner and expatriate adjustment. Further research is needed to investigate these reciprocal influences and potential gender differences that may be observed. An interesting hypothesis may be that, precisely because expatriation is more disruptive in female-led relocations, the assignment is much better prepared by both partners, both physically and mentally. Preparation is a crucial aspect in shaping accurate expectations, expected to facilitate in-country adjustment. Moreover, in such cases, partners may be more ready and committed to support the (female) expatriate abroad.

Regarding the practical implications, our findings provide evidence that companies that do not consider single or married women to the same extent as men for international assignments are neglecting a highly valuable source of talents, who can adjust at least as successfully as men to the host-country environment, in the work as well as the non-work context. This may be especially critical in a time when finding suitable employees willing to relocate has become a major challenge for organizations. Since female expatriates have been increasingly sent abroad over the past decades, it can be assumed that more and more companies have begun to take this issue seriously through maximizing their talent pools, yet much more can be done to support women at all expatriation stages (e.g. by reducing bias in the selection process through formal/open processes, providing more organizational support during the assignment, etc., see Harris 2002; Selmer and Leung 2003d; Shortland and Altman 2011). From the perspective of women, the perception of favorable conditions and environment for expatriation may enhance their willingness to relocate. The results of our paper show also the

importance for organizations to adequately support the expatriate spouse in finding a job during the international assignment since we found that having a professional activity has a positive influence on partner adjustment. As helping expatriate partners in their job search can facilitate their adjustment to the new foreign conditions, support of multinational corporations can be essential in order to avoid assignment failures and also reluctance to undertake international assignments. From a practical point of view, the *International Dual Career Network* above mentioned seems to be a quite innovative and promising tool beyond the traditional support offered by multinational companies. It appears to be an interesting research issue too especially in the light of Kupka and Cathro (2007, p.966)'s call to investigate « the type of corporate networks MNC use to facilitate the search for job opportunities for spouses. Furthermore, going back to the notion of transnational communities (Djelic and Quack 2010, Morgan 2001) it represents a quite interesting and uncommon example of transnational spaces in which a transnational community is clearly emerging and that can be worthwhile to be more deeply studied.

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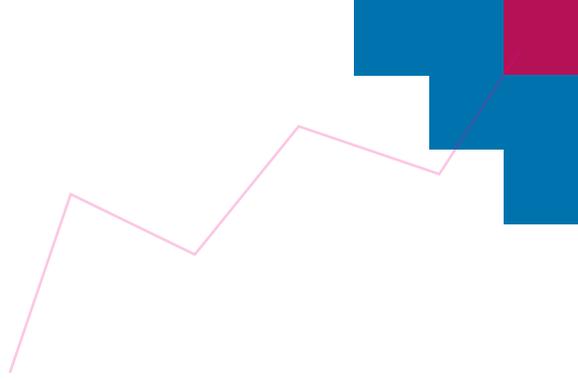
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