

illuminating the work-family interface on international assignments

An exploratory approach

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the perception of the work-family interface in an expatriation context. Furthermore, potential antecedents of work-family enrichment and work-family conflict in the work as well as in the family domain are identified and potential gender differences in perceptions sought.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory approach was adopted. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with 15 expatriates and repatriates that were analysed using content analysis.

Findings – Work-to-family conflict was perceived as a time-based conflict, whereas family-to-work conflict was perceived as an energy-based conflict. Work-family enrichment (i.e. work-to-family; family-to-work) was perceived as a transfer of skills and mood. Furthermore, at least in an expatriation context, the work-family interface is reflected in more reciprocal influences than are currently presented in existing concepts. In total, four potential antecedents of work-family interaction were identified: social support at work; development opportunities at work; family social support; and family adjustment. Finally, gender differences in the perception of the work-family interface could be revealed.

Research limitations/implications – First, the interviews were analysed solely by one person; consequently, inter-rater-reliability could not be tested. Second, a direct relationship between each potential antecedent and work-family interaction can only be hypothesized.

Practical implications – The findings enable companies to implement support strategies that foster a positive interaction between the work and the family domain which, in turn, will enhance expatriation success.

Originality/value – The study provides one of the first exploratory examinations of the perception of the complete work-family interface in an expatriation context. Furthermore, this is one of the few studies that include female and male international assignees in the sample and therefore can give a balanced perspective of the work-family interface among male and female assignees.

Keywords Expatriation, Work-family interface, Stressors, Resources, Expert interviews, Employment, Family life, Human resource management, Expatriates

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

A global increase of women in the workforce, dual-earner couples and families with care responsibilities for children and/or elders (Gareis *et al.*, 2009; Chang *et al.*, 2010; Greenhaus and Powell, 2012) has given rise to a great deal of research on the work-family interface within the last ten years. However, most extant work-family research focusses on the conflict side of the interface, while overlooking positive interactions between the work and the family spheres (e.g. McNall *et al.*, 2010). But work-family

conflict is only one side of the interface, work-family enrichment being the other (e.g. Grzywacz and Marks, 2000). We therefore address this gap in the literature by considering not only work-family conflict, but also work-family enrichment. By providing empirical evidence of the reciprocal beneficial influence between work and family, we intend to expand the research object from a pure focus on work-family conflict to a more complete perspective of the work-family interface. Furthermore, we identify potential antecedents of both sides of the interface among international workers. By doing so, we answer the call in domestic research for further research on resources that lead to enrichment (Voydanoff, 2004; Wayne *et al.*, 2006; Demerouti *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, we contribute to further illuminating the work-family interface in an international context by using a sample of both expatriates still on their assignments and repatriates recalling their international assignments. According to Takeuchi *et al.* (2002) and Mäkelä *et al.* (2011) this topic is still under-researched.

We chose international workers, namely expatriates and repatriates, as the target group for examining the work-family interface for the following reason: the work-family interface tends to be more pronounced among international workers than among domestic workers because of various factors inherent to an international assignment (Shaffer *et al.*, 2001b). Existing research shows that this assumption holds for the conflict perspective (e.g. Shaffer *et al.*, 2001a; Van der Zee *et al.*, 2005; Lazarova *et al.*, 2010). In brief, the expatriate faces new challenges at work while also being confronted with challenges at home coping with the family's relocation stresses. Both conditions can cause a higher permeability between work and family boundaries (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2005), which in turn can affect the balance between both spheres (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2005). From a work-family interface perspective, we assume that this higher permeability facilitates not only negative but also positive transfer effects.

In line with a call from Poelmans *et al.* (2005) for more qualitative studies examining the work-family interface in an international context, we adopt an exploratory approach. In particular, we address the following questions: How do international employees perceive the interface between work and family during an assignment? What aspects of both their work life and their family life do international employees perceive as particularly stressful or enriching? Is there any difference in the perception of the work-family interface between female and male international employees?

The contribution of our paper to the existing literature is threefold. First, given the preponderance of research on work-family conflict, and the evident gap in the area of work-family enrichment (e.g. Chang *et al.*, 2010), we are expanding the research object from a work-family conflict to a work-family interface perspective. Work-family conflict can occur as time, strain or behavior-based interference between the work and family domains (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). The construct of work-family conflict is based on role stress theory (Kahn *et al.*, 1964) and can take one of two directions, namely "work-to-family conflict" or "family-to-work conflict" (e.g. Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Frone *et al.*, 1992; Kossek and Ozeki, 1998). Work-family enrichment represents "the extent to which participation at work (or home) is made easier by virtue of the experiences, skills, and opportunities gained or developed at home (or work)" (Frone, 2003, p. 145) and based on the theory of role accumulation (Sieber, 1974; Marks, 1977). Work-family enrichment is defined as bidirectional, i.e. both "work-to-family enrichment" and "family-to-work enrichment" can occur in parallel (Grzywacz and Marks, 2000; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006).

Second, by illuminating the complex relationships and interdependences between work and family while abroad. We are contributing to close the gap in the literature on

the work-family interface in an expatriation context This gap is surprising, given that existing studies have underscored the essential role of family for a successful expatriation (e.g. Shaffer and Joplin, 2001; Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005; Andreason, 2008; Luring and Selmer, 2010). Moreover, Mäkelä *et al.* (2011) point out that the expatriate's perspective of the interaction of work and family life is absent in existing work. Therefore, we examine the different forms of work-family interaction, namely work-family conflict and/or work-family enrichment and retrace expatriates' and repatriates' perceptions on how they occur. Furthermore, we address the lack of literature on the antecedents that can give rise to work-family interaction during a foreign assignment. We identify stressors and resources in both the work and family domains that seem to be particularly relevant in an expatriate context. In the process, we identify potential antecedents of work-family interaction, because any stressor or resource in either the family or work domain can become a potential trigger of work-family conflict or work-family enrichment (Amstad and Semmer, 2009, p. 139). Third, by including male and female participants in our sample, we are taking a step toward a more balanced picture of male and female international employees' perceptions of the work-family interface than the literature currently provides. Fischlmayr and Kollinger (2010) point out that research could be enhanced by comparing male and female international employees' perceptions of the work-family interface. Most research up to now has used either a pure male (e.g. Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002) or a pure female sample (e.g. Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we will establish the connection between our study and the state of the art in the work-life literature and outline the state of the art on the role of the family in an expatriate context, with a particular focus on the work-family interface. Section 3 presents the research design of our study, followed by a summary of the results from our analysis in Sections 4 and 5. Finally, we discuss our results and offer directions for future research.

2. Research on the work-family interface in the domestic and expatriation context

It is clear from the vast number of literature surveys (e.g. Eby *et al.*, 2005; Casper *et al.*, 2007; Kelly *et al.*, 2008; Chang *et al.*, 2010) and meta-analyses (e.g. Byron, 2005; Ford *et al.*, 2007; Gilboa *et al.*, 2008; Kossek *et al.*, 2011) that the last decade has seen an extensive amount of research on a wide range of aspects of work-family conflict. But although work-family conflict is still the dominant theoretical concept used to examine the work-family interface (Demerouti *et al.*, 2012), it only reflects one side of the work-family interface. Research on the positive interference of work and family, that is, work-family enrichment, on the other hand, is notably scant (e.g. McNall *et al.*, 2010). One indicator for this limited knowledge is the lack of consensus about a common terminology for the positive side of work-family interaction (e.g. McNall *et al.*, 2010). In addition to the term we use, work-family enrichment, it is varyingly known in the literature as work-family facilitation (e.g. Grzywacz *et al.*, 2007), work-family enhancement (e.g. Gordon *et al.*, 2007) or positive spillover (e.g. Hanson *et al.*, 2006). We, however, will follow McNall *et al.* (2010), in using "work-family enrichment" in this paper. Further, there is a lack of research on the identification of resources that can contribute to work-family enrichment (Voydanoff, 2004; Wayne *et al.*, 2006; Demerouti *et al.*, 2010). Last, but not least, the concept remains conceptually and empirically underdeveloped (Voydanoff, 2004; Wayne *et al.*, 2006; Witt and Carlson, 2006; Demerouti *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, multiple researchers (e.g. Bellavia and Frone,

2005; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; McNall *et al.*, 2010) have called for further research in this area, and in particular for a more balanced perspective of the work-family interface. Additionally, findings on gender differences on both sides of the work-family interface (conflict and enrichment) are inconsistent (e.g. Eby *et al.*, 2005; Greenhaus and Powell, 2010), showing that more research is needed to further clarify the influence of gender on the work-family interface.

In expatriate research, the work-family interface is also notably under-researched. This is especially true for the positive side of the interface. There is a plethora of research on factors that contribute to expatriate success, both general (e.g. Hechanova *et al.*, 2003; Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005) and specific (e.g. Aryee and Stone, 1996; Kraimer *et al.*, 2001 on factors in the working sphere; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2005 on individual factors; Peltokorpi, 2008 on context factors). Nonetheless, the expatriate's family remains a factor neglected by the existing literature. The only research in any detail so far has looked at the effect of spouse adjustment on expatriate success (e.g. Caligiuri *et al.*, 1998; Shaffer and Harrison, 1998; Caligiuri *et al.*, 1999; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002; Andreason, 2008; Gupta *et al.*, 2012). Beyond this, there is Haslberger and Brewster (2008), who examined the adjustment process of the family while being abroad, and some additional research focussing on the role of the family in the decision-making process on the actual acceptance or rejection of an assignment abroad (e.g. Tharenou, 2008; Lê *et al.*, 2010). Although certain aspects of the influence of the family on expatriate success have been examined in some depth, research on the interface of work and family itself and its potential antecedents remains scarce.

There is one conceptual study that elucidates the work-family interface while abroad (Lazarova *et al.*, 2010). But it goes no further than analyzing demands (another term for stressors) as antecedents of work-family conflict and resources as antecedents of work-family enrichment, and does not go on to specify which particular stressors or resources could lead to work-family interaction. Only four studies can be cited that empirically examine the theoretical concepts of work-family conflict and work-family enrichment as well as their antecedents using an expatriate sample (Shaffer and Joplin, 2001; Shaffer *et al.*, 2001b; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002; Van der Zee *et al.*, 2005). These studies identified several stressors leading to work-to-family conflict. Business trips and time pressure are identified as stressors by Shaffer and Joplin (2001) and Shaffer *et al.* (2001b). These studies do differ in that lack of adjustment is identified as a stressor in Shaffer and Joplin (2001) and number of working hours in Shaffer *et al.* (2001a), but both studies identified one stressor leading to family-to-work conflict, the number of childcare hours, referred to as "parental demands" in Shaffer and Joplin (2001). Van der Zee *et al.* (2005) investigated one resource (support at work) that fosters work-to-family enrichment and Takeuchi *et al.* (2002) found one resource (spouse's adjustment) that affects both family-to-work conflict and family-to-work enrichment.

In addition, three studies (two quantitative and one qualitative) identify stressors that might occur during expatriation, albeit not directly in relation to work-family interaction (Shortland and Cummings, 2007; Brown, 2008; Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010). Brown (2008) identifies disappointment of the spouse, impairment of relationship quality and dealing with the expectations of the spouse as stressors that occur during an assignment. Fischlmayr and Kollinger (2010) found that adjustment to the host culture, lack of flexible working hours and lack of social networks are major stressors for female expatriates, concluding that these stressors could negatively influence a woman's work-life balance. Shortland and Cummings (2007) recognize long working hours as a stressor with the potential to influence work-life balance.

Summarizing the existing research, the following conclusions can be drawn: first, a complete picture of the work-family interface requires research examining not just one side of the work-family interface (conflict) but the other (enrichment) as well. This need is particularly acute for research in an expatriation context. To the best of our knowledge, only two studies examine positive aspects of work-family interaction in that context (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002; Van der Zee *et al.*, 2005). It is therefore clear that the work-family interface, and the positive side in particular, remains notably under-researched (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011). Second, most of the studies use a pure (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2002) or predominantly male sample of expatriates (Shaffer and Joplin, 2001; Shaffer *et al.*, 2001b; Van der Zee *et al.*, 2005; Shortland and Cummings, 2007), neglecting female expatriates. We found one exception: Fischlmayr and Kollinger (2010) work with a sample of only female expatriates and provide valuable insights into the issue of work-life balance among female expatriates. However, female expatriates are still under-represented in samples in research on work-family interaction. Although female expatriates are still the minority in the expatriate population, their number is steadily increasing (Kollinger, 2005). Accordingly, authors like Mäkelä *et al.* (2011) explicitly call for further exploration of female perceptions of work-family interaction and its antecedents. In particular, a direct comparison of work-family interface among males and females in an expatriate situation would require mixed samples of male and female expatriates (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, due to the essential role of families during an assignment, a closer look at the work-family interface, rather than the broader work-life interface is needed to explore this interrelationship on a deeper level than existing work-life research does (e.g. Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010).

3. Method

We chose an exploratory approach for two reasons, one being the limited amount of research examining the work-family interface in an expatriation context. The other lies in the fact that work-family interaction (and its potential triggers) is a subjective phenomenon, differing among individuals and depending on subjective perceptions and experience (e.g. Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Van Steenbergen and Ellemers, 2009; Fischlmayr and Kollinger, 2010). Consequently, we conducted semi-structured, open-ended expert interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130). Such interviews enable the researcher to understand themes of daily life from the subject's own perspective and to gain new and unexpected knowledge (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 24). Hence, we considered the interviews to be an appropriate instrument for revealing how international employees perceive the work-family interface.

To generate our sample, we contacted a language school where expatriates were participating in courses on a regular basis. We also contacted several companies that had foreign expatriates currently on assignment in their German subsidiaries. The responsible HR-managers provided us with contact information of only those expatriates who were willing to participate. In addition, employees who volunteered for the interviews typically gave us access to their informal networks of other expatriates. As in similar studies (e.g. Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005), we chose two criteria for composing our sample: each participant had to be married or in a relationship, and each participant had to have been in the host country for at least six months. The first criterion is necessary to interview the participants about the interaction between work and family. In the case of childless couples, the term "family" denotes the participant's spouse. The second criterion was chosen to attempt to eliminate the effects of culture

shock in the results. The culture shock phase lasts for about six months (Adler and Gunderson, 2008, p. 277), and the answers of a respondent in that phase could be biased by the severe stress characteristic of that period.

We chose purposeful sampling to generate our sample. We adopted this strategy for two reasons: one, this can be expected to maximize the chances of producing the best possible answer to the research questions at hand (Gläser and Laudel, 2009, p. 97). Two, it should allow us to arrive at a generalizable result (Schofield, 2002). To do this, we adopted a mixture of typical case and heterogeneity sampling strategies (Patton, 2002, pp. 234-235, 240). This approach allowed us to, on the one hand, illuminate key issues (Patton, 2002, p. 240) and, on the other, to identify central themes across a wide variety of cases (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Our sample is varied. It includes a homogeneous group of six “typical” expatriates. According to the Global Relocation Trend Survey (2010) the typical expatriate is male, between 35 and 49 years old, almost always accompanied by the spouse (91 percent) and children (50 percent) and on an assignment for one to three years. Also included in our sample are nine interviewees who are quite heterogeneous in their characteristics: the interviewees’ nationalities are quite diverse, with Germany, Spain, France, the USA, Canada and the UK all represented. Six of the research participants are women. Five expatriates are well below the age defined as typical (aged 27-31). Three expatriates were not accompanied by their spouses. One expatriate was only on a short-term assignment for six months. Two were married to Germans, and so for their accompanying spouses, culture shock was not a factor as they were returning to their native country.

The final sample consisted of 15 research participants because after interviewing 15 international employees, theoretical saturation was reached (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 113), i.e. information about stressors and resources during an international assignment as well as statements about the work-family interface started to be repetitive. Out of these 15 interviewees, 13 expatriates are currently stationed in Germany and two are German repatriates, who had been on assignments in France and were recalling their assignment experiences. The assignments lasted between six months and five years. The interviewees currently on their assignments had been in the host-country for periods ranging from almost six months up to four years. During their assignments, all interviewees were working in middle or top management positions or as engineers with management responsibilities. Their employers are in the automotive, chemical, energy and defense industries.

The expatriate interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol. The interviews were designed to reveal how international workers perceived the work-family interface and what stressors and resources in the work and family domains they perceived as particularly prevalent while being abroad. The subjects covered during the interview were the conceptually and empirically deemed relevant points selected from both the work-family conflict literature (e.g. Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Byron, 2005, Eby *et al.*, 2005) and work-family enrichment literature (e.g. Voydanoff, 2004; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Bass and Grzywacz, 2011): demographic information, family life stressors, family life resources, work life stressors, work life resources, coping strategies, development of new resources while abroad and sources of support. Whenever a response seemed to contain relevant information about the topics of the study, the interviewer asked follow-up questions to get as many details as possible about the topic.

All interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper either in English or German. Interviews were taped (with each interviewee’s approval) and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. The

interviews were analyzed using content analysis (Patton, 2002; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), i.e. developing a set of codes and applying them to all transcripts (Patton, 2002, p. 4). We first derived an initial set of codes from the literature before starting the analysis and then refined it during the process. Some codes were modified or supplemented in an iterative process of going into the material and incorporating theoretical considerations based on the existing literature (Patton, 2002, p. 453; Mayring, 2010, p. 59; Schmidt, 2007, p. 448). For example, one code derived from the literature, “Social support at work” (Aryee *et al.*, 2005; Van der Zee *et al.*, 2005), was modified according to its sources (i.e. organization, supervisor, co-worker) and its types (i.e. emotional and instrumental) based on the interview material and was then reviewed against the theoretical literature (House, 1981). “Family cohesion” emerged as a code during the analysis of the interviews and was added to the coding system in the course of analysis. The analysis was performed by the first author using the research software NVivo 8 (Bazeley, 2007). Where necessary, interview quotations have been translated into English by the first author of this paper.

4. Perceptions of the work-family interface in an expatriation context

The analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed that the interviewees perceived both types and directions of work-family interaction during their assignments. To reveal potential gender differences, we focussed specific attention on differences in responses of female and male interviewees. No gender differences in perceptions of the work-family interface were detected excepting where explicitly indicated. We first present our results reflecting the work-to-family direction of the interface, and then our results revealing the perspective of the family-to-work direction. We conclude with presenting the results concerning the assignment-family interface.

4.1 Perceptions of the work-to-family direction of the interface

Work-to-family conflict. To some degree, the interviewees perceived a time-based conflict between work and family. Three (50 percent) of the six female interviewees perceived a work-to-family conflict. The first quotation, from a female expatriate clearly expresses guilt feelings about having less time for her family, particularly her children (see Table I, left column). By contrast, the second quotation, from a male expatriate (see Table I, right column), indicates that he did not perceive having less time for his family as a problem. He assumed that the existing conflict was not a problem for his family as they were used to his coming home late. Three (33.3 percent) of the nine male interviewees mentioned that they did not perceive any time-based conflict a problem. Two male

Work-to-family conflict (female perception)	Work-to-family conflict (male perception)
I, as a mother, had this position and we, as parents, were not there to accompany our children into this new world [of living in a foreign country]. And I perceived that as very stressful [...] I take the stress from work [...] and that has consequences at home. That I am not there or that I gave everything at work and then I am not at home to cook dinner [Own translation] [French female expatriate, 45 years, married, 2 children]	No [...] I cannot say so. I would rather say, that [...] all expats I know were willing to work even more, okay? And my family was used to that before [the expatriation] [...] me coming home late. That is more of a male problem [Own translation] [German male repatriate, 47 years, married, 4 children]

Table I.
Work-to-family conflict

interviewees went so far as to say that they are convinced they are capable of keeping both spheres entirely separated, as will be explained in further detail below (see Table IV). This is referred to as segmentation in the work-family literature (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000). We interpret the differences outlined above as differences between male and female expatriates' perceptions of work-to-family conflict[1].

The quotations of all three female interviewees above the age of 40 reflect that the strain on the family (including the interviewee) was more intense for a female assignee than in the standard case of a male expatriate. These three made clear in their interviews that they accepted the assignment for career reasons and as a personal challenge. This seems to entail that they perceived the trade-off in favor of the career as a detriment to family life. However, these three also either stated or implied that the higher stress level of the family was caused by the fact that they adopted the role of breadwinner instead of their husbands (see Table II). This was even the case for the one female expatriate who was not accompanied by her family during the assignment (see right column, Table II). Nevertheless, the German female repatriate said that this intensified conflict was perceived only as a temporary problem, confined to the initial phase of the assignment (see middle column, Table II).

Work-to-family enrichment. Eight (53.3 percent) interviewees perceived a work-to-family enrichment. Four of them perceived work-to-family enrichment in the sense that they learned something in one sphere (here, the working sphere) that they could transfer to and apply in the other sphere (here, the family sphere). One example of this kind of work-to-family enrichment is being more aware of what one says and how one says it. The first quotation (see Table III, left column) of a male expatriate shows that he learned work-based skills, but could also apply them at home. The quotation of another male expatriate illustrating this point (see Table III, right column) also reflects a learning experience at work, namely, learning to take things at a slower pace than the interviewee was used to. He transferred this experience to his family life, so that

Intensified work-to-family conflict for females

My husband couldn't cope with this insecurity, [...] I perceived that as very, very difficult [...] We were on our own and because I was the decision-maker who started this process, I am talking about me personally as a professional woman, I perceived that as very, very difficult [...] I, as a mother and wife, started it [the assignment]. That cost me a lot of energy [...] If my husband gets an offer for another assignment, [...], I'll accompany him. But I, myself, would reject another offer. Me being the one who initiates it? I would not do that again [Own translation] [French female, 45 years, married, 2 children]

If you take such steps, change a country, change a language, and on top of all having a role reversal as it was in our particular case. That cost us a lot of energy to rebuild everything: make new contacts, organize our whole life again. And then this additional burden, that the woman usually organizes the social life and the family life and all of a sudden a man is responsible for it. Then you can imagine that this situation really wore us down in the beginning [Own translation] [German repatriate, 44 years, married, 2 children]

I was home in August [during the assignment] and there was the tension beginning to rise because it was now his domain. Home was his responsibility [...] It's no longer my routine, it's his routine and it's no longer our routine, it's their routine. So where do I fit in anymore? [American female expatriate, 41 years, long-distance relationship, 2 children]

Table II.
Gender influence
on intensity of work-to-
family conflict

eventually he and his wife were able to extend this slower pace to their private life as well, helping them both to be more relaxed.

In addition to work-to-family enrichment defined as a transfer of attitude, skills or behavior (Hanson *et al.*, 2006), the interviews revealed other forms of work-to-family enrichment. Given that the assignment itself by definition falls within the working sphere because it is primarily initiated by the company (e.g. Stahl *et al.*, 2009), it can also change the dynamics and structure of a family system. It can create more cohesion among family members as they are forced to rely more heavily on each other for the support formerly provided by their own individual social networks at home. Fourteen interviewees (93.3 percent) perceived the stronger focus on each other within the family as positive and as a beautiful experience. Additionally, it led to more cohesion within the whole family, not only among the expatriate and the spouse. The stronger cohesion was often, but not exclusively, caused and indicated by more family traveling and family activities during the assignment, as was mentioned by six (40 percent) of the interviewees. The three expatriates who were having long-distance relationships while on assignment also perceived the influence of work on their relationship as positive. These perceptions are reflected in the statements below (see Table IV).

Other influences in the work-to-family direction of the interface. The decision of whether and when to have children was an important issue among the younger expatriates. Eight of the interviewees were below 40, and four of them (50 percent) referred to how the assignment affected this decision. For two of the younger

Work-to family enrichment (Transfer of skills)

Table III.
Work-to-family enrichment (Transfer of skills)

<p>In this company we have 47 nationalities and 1000 people and whatever you do, however you say it you're going to upset somebody, so that's been a massive learning experience to take away from the work into my personal life, because, you know, you really think about what you say and how you would say it [British male expatriate, 31 years, cohabiting, no children]</p>	<p>So I think the pace of work is slower [here in Germany], so I would say, that yeah, we [as a couple] do take things a little bit slower, we are more patient and we realized this when we were back home [in the US] for the holidays [...] Here, we just take things a lot slower [American male expatriate, 38 years, married, no children]</p>
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Table IV.
Work-to-family enrichment (Changes in the family system)

Family cohesion	Travelling	Long-distance relationship
<p>So you really have a lot of good free time just to be together. So I always say for us it, the assignment, was very good [...]. it gives you a lot of time just to focus on each other and to be very close because you're much more dependent on one another when you have no other, you know, friends and family from home to support you [American male expatriate, 38 years, married, no kids]</p>	<p>I like these short trips in Germany [...] Those are very, very nice things, which we also did as a very close-knit family. I think we did not split apart so much [...], because we live here in Germany [...]. Despite having teenage aged kids, we do a lot of very beautiful [things] [...] [Own translation] [French female expatriate, 45 years, married, 2 kids]</p>	<p>I would have to say that our relationship has definitely improved since the assignment [...]. I think if there are weaknesses those are disposed of very quickly. But also [...] I was unaware of how much I would miss being with her during the process and I think that that's helped to bring us closer together [British male expatriate, 33 years, LDR, expecting a child]</p>

interviewees, this was not a consideration (one couple did not want children, and the other was a male homosexual couple). However, three interviews made it clear that the host country (or more precisely, the cultural and/or legal environment and language of the host country) did have an impact on the couple's decision. The first interviewee (see Table V, left column) expresses concern that Germany's specific cultural background, in which the "male breadwinner" model still predominates (Gottschall and Bird, 2003), will make it more difficult to find a satisfying family-career balance than in her home country of Canada. The second interviewee (see Table V, middle column) did not feel that the timing of the assignment in itself affected the couple's decision to have children, but rather that they found the German legal and social environment an encouragement to have children, and these positive circumstances made up for language problems they encountered when communicating with the hospital staff while giving birth. By contrast, another couple (see Table V, right column) did see the influence of a foreign language and culture to reconsider the timing of their fertility decisions. For some in expatriate situations, at least, cultural peculiarities and the higher risk of misunderstandings have to be considered in addition to the standard aspects that every couple has to take into account when considering having children.

4.2 Perceptions of family-to-work conflict and enrichment

Family-to-work conflict. Eight interviewees (53.3 percent) perceived a family-to-work conflict primarily in terms of demanding a lot of energy in one sphere (here, the family sphere) to the detriment of the other sphere (here, the work sphere). Specifically, a lot of energy was spent worrying about and attempting to resolve issues at home. The statements of two male expatriates shown below (see Table VI) are indicative of a family-to-work conflict.

Although there were no gender differences in the perception of a family-to-work conflict, we did observe another difference that may be attributable to gender: the way

Negative impact of host country culture:	Positive impact of host country culture despite language problems	Impact of host country culture and language
[M]y biggest concern about the future is, how the family will sort of be accommodated to work and I see this area [in Germany] as a little more traditional and that a lot of women stay at home, which is something that, I mean, I'd like to stay home when the children are just born, but I want to go back to work and have a career, too [Canadian female expatriate, 29 years, cohabiting, no kids]	So he was born last year here in XY [...] Our German isn't brilliant, but we learned some key words for that [giving birth in the hospital]. We found out about, [...], the Elterngeld and all that kind of stuff [...] We suddenly saw, this would be a good place to have a kid and then, I think Germany is in general a better set up for children than the UK [British male expatriate, 38 years, married, 2 children]	The woman that she [subject's wife] talked to [about having kids] and she kind of indicated, uh maybe not [...] And she was like Make sure you know everything because not every culture does it the same way. So my wife was kind of Oh, I don't know, I don't know the language. So now she is real hesitant, but it's still, because we want to start a family [...] there are some things we are worried about, because it's like, well, you go to a doctor and you ask them to explain things to you, but, there's still that language barrier [American male expatriate, 27 years, married, no kids]

Table V.
Influence of the assignment on family-decisions

Table VI.
Family-to-work conflict

Family-to-work conflict (Energy-based)	
In a way, when they were happier and enjoyed what they were doing it made me less worried about what was going on at home. And when they weren't happy and stuff I couldn't concentrate at work as well. So it made it more difficult to do my job [American male expatriate, 47 years, married, 2 children]	After that six months I did not have to be concerned with her happiness. You didn't have to try to make sure that she was happy or you're worried that she was unhappy, so therefore, yes. You could focus much more completely on your work. So, at work you did not have to worry about trouble at home, you could just be focused on your work [American male expatriate, 38 years, married, no children]

the two male interviewees stated (see above, Section 4.1) that they separate work and family said this in such a way as to apply for both directions: work-to-family and family-to-work. The way they said it was very factual in nature. There were also two female interviewees (see Table VII) who assumed there was no interaction between the work and the family sphere, but these two expressed this perception much more cautiously than the two male interviewees. Both these women expressed the subjective perception or hope that they were able to keep the two spheres apart, rather than stating it as an objective fact as the two males did.

This more cautious phrasing could be rooted in gender role ideologies and the fact that family roles are presumed to be more defining for women (Greenhaus and Powell, 2010). Hence, women might fear that they are less capable of separating family and work life than men. Alternatively, the replies of the male interviewees could be biased by social desirability, because of the perception that underperformance at work caused by family interference is less tolerated for males than for females.

Family-to-work enrichment. Family-to-work enrichment was perceived by eight interviewees (53.3 percent). Out of those eight, the five male interviewees perceived it primarily as a transfer of skills and attitudes. The first quotation (see left column, Table VIII) shows that family-to-work enrichment occurred by transfer of skills or attitudes from the family to the work domain. The male expatriate learned to be more patient at home and to not insist on solving every problem himself. Applying that attitude at work led to family-to-work enrichment. This is contrasted by the second quotation (see right column, Table VIII), which is consistent with the responses of the three women in this group, that family-to-work enrichment came primarily from a transfer of mood and energy from the family into the work domain.

Segmentation (Male quotations)	Segmentation (Female quotations)
So, if we just focus on my work life and the relationship to my family, then I already answered it. There are no mutual influences [Own translation] [German male repatriate, 47 years, married, 4 children] So we developed a habit, I guess, for work is here, family is here. That was always pretty separate [American male expatriate, 52 years, married, 1 child]	In terms of work... I don't think it has affected me very much at all, because I am pretty confident about what I am doing [Canadian female expatriate, 29 years, cohabiting, no children] Any negatives in my family life that impacted my work life? I hope that I was professional enough to not let it affect my work life, whatever was going on [Own translation] [German female repatriate, 44 years, married, 2 children]

Table VII.
Segmentation

4.3 The assignment-family interface

Another specific characteristic of the work-family interface during international assignments is the impact that the assignment as a career-move (Riusala and Suutari, 2000) has on the family and vice-versa. Ten research participants (66.66 percent) perceived the interface between work and family as a trade-off between career and family. This trade-off could come in either direction, in favor of the family or the job, as is reflected in the statements below (see Table IX). The first quotation (see left column, Table IX) reveals that the assignment enabled the expatriate to turn a work-to-family conflict into a work-to-family enrichment. The second statement (see right column, Table IX) emphasizes the essential role of the family in the assignment process. Notably, it reveals that there are mutual influences not only during the assignment itself, but also prior to the assignment. This second quotation corroborates the finding in existing research (e.g. Lê *et al.*, 2010) as well as in business relocation surveys (e.g. GRTS, 2010) that family is one of the main reasons for turning down the offer of an assignment.

5. Stressors and resources in the work and family domain

The interviews revealed that social support, development opportunities at work, family social support and family adjustment were perceived either as important stressors or resources in the work context. The following paragraphs

Skill transfer	Mood-transfer
But, yeah, so it [home life with spouse] taught me patience and just to sometimes don't try to fix every problem and [...] some things are just outside your control and maybe just listen and don't try to solve everything. So I learned that [...] I applied that at work as well [American male expatriate, 38 years, married, no children]	I think you do take your emotions from, it doesn't matter whether you're, you know, it's in your private life or when you're at work. You know, how you're feeling, you know, will impact, you know, getting your job done [British female expatriate, long-distance relationship, 27 years, no children]

Table VIII.
Family-to-work enrichment

Trade-off family vs. career	Trade-off career vs. family
The good side about my previous job was, it was good career-wise, but all consuming. I mean, I was not home often, I was gone a lot and my little girl was growing up and I thought it was maybe time to spend some more time there and so this [the assignment] was a less stressful job and that was part of my motivation actually... I actually got to spend more time with my family, which was part of the reason. I could have done that in the US, too, but this was sort of the vehicle that made it happen. So [...] I do spend more time with family now than I used to. So I consider that a positive [...] Here I have no possibility for advancement... If I work, you know, 40 hours or 100 hours it won't make any difference [...] I am out of sight, out of mind, [...] so that is a difficulty [...] [American male expatriate, 52 years, married, 1 child]	None of them wanted to come [...]. My daughter, I knew, did not really want to come and I did not really know how bad she did not want to come. But she had her friends back in high school, [...] My daughter never liked it here... Personally if it was only my choice to come over here, I would still want to do it again. But the way, if I take it for the whole family, I would say no [...] No, definitely a family reason. Professionally it is still a great thing for my career [American male expatriate, 47 years, married, 2 children]

Table IX.
Trade-off career vs. family

present some indicative passages from the interviews illustrating how these findings were derived.

5.1 Stressors and resources in the work domain

Social support at work. The interviews revealed three sources of support in an expatriation context: perceived organizational support, that is, support from the organization as a whole, perceived support from the interviewees' supervisors, and perceived support from their co-workers. The interviews also revealed three different types of support that can be given by each source: instrumental or practical support, i.e. receiving advice on how to solve a particular problem; emotional support, i.e. having the feeling that other people care and are concerned with the expatriate's well-being; and informational support, i.e. receiving information about certain issues that help in dealing with them.

For ten interviewees (66.7 percent), perceived organizational support was a major resource. According to the interviews (see Table X), this holds particularly for instrumental support from the organization. All ten interviewees, male and female alike, seemed to appreciate instrumental support the most, as it helped with practical issues related to the expatriation like finding a house or administrative issues like doing taxes. When talking about instrumental support, all interviewees were referring to the organization as a whole rather than to a particular person or department.

By the same token, the absence of organizational support was experienced as a stressor. Eight interviewees (53.3 percent) identified this lack as a severe source of resentment and stress. According to the statements about the perceived absence of organizational support (see Table X), instrumental and informational organizational support to help solve problems in the private or family domain would have been more important to the interviewees than support at work itself. However, as the statements below (see Table XI) reflect, lack of support was primarily perceived as a stressor at the beginning of the assignment. The particular importance of perceived organizational support related to family issues is highlighted by the following quotations, which show that its absence is a stressor.

To six of the interviewees (40 percent), it was also very important to feel that their supervisors, as a second source of support, cared about them and their well-being. Although suggestions and advice as types of supervisory support are appreciated, what appears to be crucial is that supervisors see their employees as human beings with all their needs and worries. Hence, with respect to types of support from the supervisor,

Perceived organizational support

The expat thing, they help you how to find a house, they sort out all these bits and balls which is very difficult, very daunting and time-consuming to do it in a different language, and you need to know the country. So, all that kind of stuff is just sorted out [British male expatriate, 38 years, married, 2 children]

At XY we have an expatriation policy that is very well structured, with fixed conditions about time, compensation, and the additional support one can receive, like on tax returns, moving, or the housing agencies. So, the whole package is there, and I would say that we are lucky here at XY, it also includes a trip home every year [...] Well, I find that this offer or this opportunity is really great. That we realize that really is the philosophy of XY and also that XY values [the expatriation] [Own translation] [French female expatriate, 45 years, married, 2 children]

Table X.
Perceived organizational support

 Lack of perceived organizational support

So, we had quite a few problems when we first moved over, with various things. I found that a lot of the things that were in the policy from the company were from people both in the UK and in Germany that had never lived abroad [...] I think it would have been more exciting at the start, if it hadn't been so badly planned by the company [British male expatriate, 31 years, cohabiting, no kids]

[...] [B]ut when we came here there was very little support for making the transition [...] I would say it was minimal support [...] I didn't know enough German at the time, so of course then someone would come. But there was no formal program to, [...], put you into your apartment, help you find a place, orient you in the city [...] But one of the negatives was, I think, many of the things that we had to ask for should have been offered [...] Not just say, yes, if you need help let us know. To me that was very irresponsible [American male expatriate, 38 years, married, no kids]

Table XI.
Lack of perceived organizational support

 Emotional supervisory support

[...] [Y]our boss understands that you are more than just an employee like you are there and he cares more about you... Like when we first came here, my boss, he came to our place, he drove us around the city, showed us where everything was [American male expatriate, 27 years, married, no kids]

My boss. He is very good at human interaction and in a personal relationship. So he is very supportive. He gives me a lot of recommendations, a lot of suggestions [American male expatriate, 47 years, married, 2 children]

Table XII.
Perceived supervisory support

emotional support seems to be more important than instrumental support. In contrast to perceived organizational support, supervisory support seemed to be important throughout the assignment, rather than only during its initial phase (Table XII).

With regard to co-workers as a third source of support, the emotional component of support seems to be the most important resource for ten interviewees (66.7 percent). The quotations seem to indicate that expatriates value the feeling that their co-workers care about them and listen to their worries if needed (see Table XIII). Notably, there was no gender distinction in the ten interviewees who valued emotional support the most (five male and five female).

Development opportunities at work. For many interviewees (11 out of 15: 73.3 percent) the opportunity to develop professionally as well as personally during their assignment was perceived as a resource. Therefore, the quotations presented below (see Table XIV) are also divided into career and personal aspects. With regard to the professional aspect, development took place at work and was perceived as a way to

 Emotional co-worker support

[...] [Y]our co-workers care more about you[...] it helps with the whole feeling that [...] we are not just here for work [American male expatriate, 27 years, married, no children]

I have co-workers here [...] with whom I can talk a little bit about private things, because at home, no. They [my family] said [...] My husband comes along, but I have to cope. If I want it, I have to cope [Own translation] [French female expatriate, 45 years, married, 2 children]

Table XIII.
Perceived co-worker support

Table XIV.
Development
opportunities at work

Professional growth	Personal growth
<p>It's been the best thing for my career. Certainly did me [...] totally boosts my career and my colleagues that have all done the same thing it, yeah, totally boosted their careers and it's been [...] It's been a good thing [British male expatriate, 38 years, married, 2 children] [...] [T]his was something completely new for me to do and it ticked lots of boxes, because it was, it was, you know, for my CV [...] You know, working internationally as well so it ticked lots and lots of boxes in terms of my career [British female expatriate, 27 years, long-distance relationship, no children]</p>	<p>Otherwise I wouldn't do it. If it, if we were not fully convinced that it is not only enriching for the career but also for oneself as a human being [Own translation] [French female expatriate, 45 years, married, 2 children] I would definitely accept the assignment again. It's been a huge fantastic opportunity because I've grown so much. I learned a lot [...] I got tons of opportunities [American female, 41 years, long-distance relationship, 2 children] I suppose you do learn a bit about that, I mean, the whole experience, I mean isn't that the whole fun of being an expat, the whole experience is cultural [...], that's one of the reasons why I wanted to be out here, is because you go, hah, they do things differently here, isn't that interesting? [...] I suppose it has affected me, I mean, it would be strange if nothing rubbed off on you. I mean, if you come to a country and it has absolutely no effect on you, don't bother going, [...] you want to be changed, a little bit, by the experience, otherwise why bother having the experience? You could go, you know, watch a film [British male expat, 38 years, married, 2 children]</p>

enhance career prospects. With regard to personal aspects, opportunities to learn were found at work as well as outside of work. Since the assignment itself falls under the professional environment, we labeled the category as development opportunities at work, despite the fact that personal growth was caused by experiences in the professional as well as the private domain. The expatriation was clearly valued as a career booster by the interviewees. However, the younger expatriates in particular (six out of nine interviewees (66.7 percent) below the age of 40) saw the assignment as an opportunity to increase their skills professionally and move up the career ladder after repatriation. Naturally, the career aspect is more important for younger individuals, because they are at an earlier stage of their career (Demerouti *et al.*, 2012). These 11 interviewees also valued the personal growth opportunity their assignments presented in gaining new experiences with other cultures and being challenged on a daily basis. The personal aspect in fact seemed even more important to the interviewees than the career aspect, being referred to by all 11 interviewees independently of age. The last statement in the right column of Table XIV succinctly expresses the perception that personal growth was valued primarily in terms of cultural learning, and additionally as increasing openness toward and appreciation of other cultures.

5.2 Stressors and resources in the family domain

Family social support. Family social support was perceived as an important resource for 14 (93.3 percent) of the research participants. Lack of family social support was identified as a stressor, but only by one female expatriate. The interviews also revealed that there were two types of particularly valued family social support: instrumental

and emotional support. To increase transparency, the quotations substantiating these findings will be divided into statements that can be attributed to instrumental support and those attributable to emotional support. All quotations in Table XVI were given by female interviewees. These answers were much more elaborate than those of the male interviewees, which could be indicative of a gender difference rooted in traditional gender roles. When being asked about who supported them in dealing with stressful experiences, men only mentioned the family, primarily the partner. Furthermore, three of the male interviewees indicated that they felt supported by their families, but tried not to bother them with their problems (see Table XV). This could be caused by the traditional view that as the breadwinner, the man has to take care of his family, not the other way around (Greenhaus and Powell, 2010).

The female expatriates differed from the men by expressing high appreciation of help with language problems as well as support with childcare and everything that comes along with family life. They also appreciated emotional support that reflects caring and love as well as mutual trust (see Table XVI). The first of the two quotations in the right column of the table reveals that supporting the expatriate's decision of going abroad clearly entails trusting the other with respect to making the right decision. The second quotation in that column shows that the love within a family, from the expatriate's husband and son, can serve as a source of stress reduction.

Family social support	
I talk to some of my friends here as well, you know, as well as my wife [British male expatriate, 38 years, married, 2 children]	When it's real stressful, you know, my wife likes to, she's the one who's going to step in and do that, you know, and my little girl, too. But (laughs) I am also a bit of, I am pretty independent, you know, the whole day, I ... she would sometimes want to help and I don't want it, you know [American male expatriate, 52 years, married, 1 child]

Table XV.
Family social support
(Male expatriates)

Family social support (instrumental)	Family social support (emotional)
It is good in that respect. It is really good to have someone. Like his [her boyfriend's] German is quite good and he knows how much it frustrates me, so he is willing to sit down and figure it out [Canadian female expatriate, 29 years, cohabiting, no children]	I have to say that I felt really supported by my husband in such a job-related context [meaning the expatriation in general]. That he supported such a decision with every "what if" and "but" and with all problems that might occur during that time. I perceived that as great support [Own translation] [German female expatriate, 44 years, married, 2 children]
[...] [A]nd then there was this opportunity and he said "That is [...] you did the first four years of our family life and now we will switch [...] and I will take care of the kids more than you can in your position now." So we kind of switched and [the expatriation] was an adventure for me, now [...] That was an interesting step for me job-wise and he was willing to support that. I gave him a lot of credit for that [Own translation] [German female expatriate, 44 years, married, 2 children]	My husband has been extremely supportive, really patient, really understanding. And then I think my family, my son. Seriously, many times, when I am really pissed off, I am really tired when I come home and my son is just like [yells] "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy!" That helps. Then I'm like, who cares? So I think yeah, my family, this is the main source of help [Spanish female expatriate, 36 years, married, 1 child]

Table XVI.
Family social support
(Female answers)

Family adjustment. The interviews revealed that all interviewees except for those who were not accompanied by their families (three interviewees, 20 percent) or whose partners were German (two interviewees, 13.3 percent), were concerned about their families feeling comfortable in their new environment, i.e., about them being well adjusted. Adjustment can be defined as “the degree of comfort and absence of stress associated with” expatriation (Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005, p. 257). Both statements in Table XVII show that where the family, particularly the children, were well adjusted to the host country, the interviewees felt relieved. The quotation in the right column of Table XVII implies that successful adjustment could even be a source of happiness. This is expressed particularly clearly in the tone used by the female repatriate when speaking about the experience of seeing her children adjusting gradually to the new environment. This shows that family adjustment can go from being a stressor to a resource over the duration of an assignment. Additionally, both quotations reveal the importance of language proficiency in the adjustment process. The children of one interviewee (see left column, Table XVII) were born in Germany and grew up bilingually with French and German, so never experienced any language problems. Compare this to the other (see right column, Table XVII), whose daughter grew up with German as her native language. Her lack of French language proficiency impeded her adjustment process. The daughter’s adjustment problem was a source of stress for the interviewee in the beginning of the assignment. This is quite representative for all ten interviewees, who were either at the beginning of their assignments or were looking back on their initial phase in retrospect. All interviewees reported this initial lack of adjustment as a stressor. However, the duration of this initial adjustment phase varied among the accompanying families and was reported by the interviewees as lasting between three months and one year.

6. Discussion

Our work identifies two sides to the work-family interface: work-family conflict and work-family enrichment. However, existing work-family research focusses on the conflict side of work-family interface, neglecting positive interactions between the work and the family sphere. Therefore, existing research in both the domestic and

Family adjustment from the very beginning	Change of family adjustment over time
Both [children] were born abroad. My daughter was born in XY, my son here in YY. That means they are not teenagers who left all their friends behind. There is no stress at all because both speak German, go to the kindergarden and have German friends. So, integration was there from the very beginning [Own translation] [French male expatriate, 36 years, married, 2 children]	Our daughter was four and spoke very well of course. So we took the language away from her from one day to the next, and with it all that children do at that age [...] There were times where she woke up in the morning and started crying before she opened her eyes. That was stressful for her. Luckily, that was over quite fast and we tried to support her during that time and be close to her. And in the end it worked really well (smiles) [...] [a]nd she felt really comfortable. But the beginning was really difficult for us, for all of us [...] She didn't know a single word before and then all of a sudden it started flowing [Own translation] [German female repatriate, 44 years, married, 2 children]

Table XVII.
Family adjustment

international context paints an incomplete picture of the work-family interface. Furthermore, the role of the family during international assignments, particularly the work-family interface, remains rather under-researched. The impact of spouse adjustment (e.g. Caligiuri *et al.*, 1998) is the only factor belonging to the family sphere that has been researched well with regard to its influence on expatriate success. The lack of female representation in expatriate studies and the inconsistent results on gender differences in domestic studies leave gaps that must be filled by more research on female perceptions of the work-family interface in an expatriation situation (e.g. Mäkelä *et al.* 2011) as well as in a domestic context (e.g. Greenhaus and Powell, 2010). Our research attempts to fill these gaps by conducting 15 semi-structured interviews with international workers. It contributes to existing research in three ways.

First, we answered the question of how the work-family interface is perceived by international workers, thus expanding the research object from a pure work-family conflict perspective to a more complete picture of the work-family interface. Apart from showing that work-family conflict and work-family enrichment do occur in an expatriation context, we revealed how it is perceived by expatriates. The interviewees perceived work-to-family conflict predominantly as a time-based conflict, whereas family-to-work conflict was perceived as an energy-based conflict. Most expatriates perceived work-to-family enrichment and family-to-work enrichment as a transfer of skills and mood. We also found that the work-family interface is reflected in more reciprocal influences than are currently represented in the existing concepts of work-family conflict (e.g. Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) and enrichment (e.g. Hanson *et al.*, 2006). Other mutual influences manifest themselves in changes within the family system, a family-career trade-off and, for younger expatriates, in considering when to start a family. We can conclude that this at least appears to hold true for international workers. However, despite the international dimension of our sample, we think that these types of dynamics do not solely apply to internationally mobile workers. Our findings could also be transferred to employees who relocate within a country, although the impact on the decision of when to have children might be the exception; this seems to be primarily influenced by cultural influences and the proficiency in the language of the host country.

Second, we identified stressors and resources in both the work and family spheres that may trigger work-family interaction. We identified support at work, development opportunities at work, family social support and family adjustment as either resources or (where perceived as absent) as stressors. Additionally, we point to the role of the assignees' age in valuing development opportunities as a career-booster. Furthermore, our findings about social support echo the call by Wang and Takeuchi (2007) for an account of which sources and types of social support at work and at home expatriates perceive as important resources, because this differentiation is lacking in existing research. By recognizing family adjustment as a resource, and lack of family adjustment as a stressor, we contribute to existing research by illustrating that it is important to consider the adjustment of the whole family, and not only the adjustment of the spouse as the majority of existing expatriate research does (e.g. Shaffer and Harrison, 1998; Caligiuri *et al.*, 1999; Kraimer *et al.*, 2001; Shaffer and Harrison, 2001). Our findings show that alongside the adjustment of the spouse, the adjustment of the expatriates' children might also serve as a major resource. We also showed that the perception of family adjustment as a stressor or resource can change over the course of the assignment. Last but not least, we underscored the role of language proficiency in the adjustment process.

Third, we included male as well as female expatriates in our sample to reveal initial evidence of potential gender differences in the perception of the work-family interface. As a result, we gave a more balanced picture of both sexes. Work-family conflict was perceived as a problem by female expatriates, whereas male expatriates experienced the interference between work and family but did not perceive it as a problem. Moreover, the conflict between work and family seems to be more intense for women than for men. This may be rooted in prevailing societal values in western countries that tend to impede women's careers (Peus and Traut-Mattausch, 2008), e.g., the negative attitude toward working mothers and the belief that childcare by a person other than the mother harms children. In addition, as has been noted by Peus and Traut-Mattausch (2008), these value constellations may make it more difficult for women than men to balance work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, male interviewees perceived family-to-work enrichment primarily as a transfer of skills, whereas female interviewees perceived it as a transfer of mood and energy. Additionally, family social support as a resource seems to be more important to women than to men.

Admittedly, there are some limitations to our study. Since the interviews were conducted and analyzed by the first author, the results rely on the analysis of only one rater; consequently, inter-rater-reliability could not be tested (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 248). Another limitation is the composition of our sample. As we considered it important to conduct the interviews personally, the decision to interview foreign expatriates currently on assignment in Germany rather than German expatriates abroad was based on simple pragmatic considerations – expatriates from other countries currently on assignment in Germany were easier to access than German expatriates abroad. A possible consequence of this approach, however, is that some of the findings could be biased due to specifics of German culture. The male breadwinner model is still prevalent in Germany (Gottschall and Bird, 2003), and consequently, support and acceptance of working mothers there is still comparatively low. We would therefore expect perceptions of female expatriates with respect to organizational support or work-family conflict to be biased by the German context. This bias was reflected in some of the responses given by female interviewees. Similarly, the perception of antecedents as well as the work-family interface could be biased by the particular cultural backgrounds of the individual expatriates. Existing research shows that culture does have an impact on the perception of the work-family interface as well as on its antecedents (e.g. Spector *et al.*, 2007; Hassan *et al.*, 2010; Lu *et al.*, 2010). The influence of culture becomes particularly apparent when comparing the conflict between work and family among women in different cultures (e.g. Peus and Traut-Mattausch, 2008). Additionally, theoretical saturation with respect to cultural differences was not reached. However, we did not explicitly examine cultural differences in perception and therefore consider theoretical saturation in this respect irrelevant. Finally, although we identified important stressors and resources in the work as well as in the family domain and assume that these could serve as antecedents of work-family interaction in an expatriation context, a direct relationship between each stressor and each resource and work-family interaction could not be established on the basis of our interviews.

Despite the above limitations, our research yields several practical and theoretical implications for organizations, international workers and their families. According to the interviewees, even though organizations seem to be well aware of the fact that families have a significant effect on expatriate success, this knowledge is not expressed in adequate support for families on the assignment. In this regard, our paper provides organizations with a better understanding of the complex interdependencies between work and family during an international assignment and how the family itself can be a

contributing factor in expatriate success, e.g. via work-family enrichment. As a consequence, our findings can help companies to implement support strategies that foster a positive interaction between the work and the family domain which, in turn, will enhance expatriate success. Moreover, our findings could help companies to support any employee relocating with family, independently of context, to make the relocation successful. Future quantitative research could build on the insights provided by our approach and examine further what types of organizational support, particularly which types of family organizational support are antecedents of work-family interaction and are thereby contributing most to expatriate success.

International workers could use our findings to gain a more realistic picture of what it means to relocate with one's family to another country, and so help those considering international assignments to evaluate whether they and their families are suitable candidates. Our findings could be of particular relevance to female international workers in enabling them to anticipate and solve the difficulties that are triggered by the simultaneous burden of being a wife and/or mother and a full-time working foreign employee in an unfamiliar context. This strain can be intensified by prevailing traditional gender role ideologies in some countries, such as Germany. Accordingly, future research could explicitly examine cultural differences in the perception of the work-family interface and its antecedents (though this would clearly require a larger and more culturally diverse sample than the one in our study). Additionally, future research could explore our research findings among corporate and self-initiated expatriates, as it can be assumed that in this group work-family conflict will be more intense due to the lack of corporate support. Moreover, quantitative research could test if our findings about a broader perception of the work-family interface among international workers are robust and generalizable. If this is the case, a broader theoretical conceptualization than the existing one of the work-family interface is needed, at least in an international context.

Last but not least, our findings could help the accompanying families to get a realistic picture of the advantages and disadvantages of an international relocation. Hence, our findings could help families to prepare themselves for a foreign assignment, e.g. by taking language courses in advance to increase their language proficiency. Surprisingly, our interviews revealed that this was not done by the majority of the accompanying families of our interviewees. Future qualitative research could focus on the perception of the work-family interface as well as of stressors and resources in each domain among the accompanying family members. This is an area which seems to be completely ignored in existing research.

Note

1. Content within square brackets within the quotations are insertions by the first author. Content in parentheses indicates emotions shown by the interviewee which added further meaning to the statements.

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Further reading

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Appendix. Interview guideline

Demographics: Nationality, age, company size, current position, duration of assignment, accompanied by spouse, working situation of the spouse, number and age of children

Warm-up questions: How did the assignment come about? Did you decide to accept the assignment right away? How long have you been (in Germany)?

- (1) Do you experience or perceive a negative influence of your family life on your work life?
- (2) How does your family life here differ from your family life in your home country?
 - (a) What do you experience as particularly stressful ... (a1) ... with your partner, (a2) ... with respect to your children, (a3) ... other?

Follow-up questions after each sub-question: How do these stressful experiences affect your work life? Have the experiences you perceive as stressful changed over time since you have been here?

- (3) Do you experience or perceive an enriching influence of your family life on your work life?

- (4) What is enriching (a1) ... with respect to your partner, (a2) ... with respect to your children, (a3) ... other?

Follow-up questions after each sub-question: How does this enrichment affect your work life?
Has the enrichment changed over time since you have been here?

- (5) What is enriching ... (a1) ... regarding the requirements of your position, (a2) ... in dealing with your superiors and co-workers, (a3) ... other?

Follow-up questions after each sub-question: How does this enrichment affect your family life?
Has the enrichment changed over time since you have been here?

- (6a) How do you perceive the relationship between work and family here?
(6b) Is there a difference between how you perceive it here and how you perceived it in your home country?

- (7) What do you do to deal with these stressful experiences or to reduce them?
(a) at work, (b) within your family, (c) other

- (8a) Did you gain more capabilities or competencies by dealing with these challenges?
(8b) What kind of capabilities or competencies are those?

- (9) Who supports you in dealing with these stressful experiences?

- (10) Are there any differences in how you deal with these stressful experiences here in contrast to how you deal with them when you are in your home country?

- (11) Are there any aspects that we have not considered yet?

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