

Family Separation and Expatriate Stress: A Conservation of Resources Perspective

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Abstract

Family Separation and Expatriate Stress: A Conservation of Resources

Perspective

Haotian Zhang

Expatriates often face considerable stress due to family-related challenges, particularly the emotional and psychological strain caused by geographical separation from spouses, children, and other close family members. This study examines the effects of family-related stressors and the moderating roles of pre-assignment training and family connection. Using survey data from 189 expatriates and immigrant workers, hierarchical regression and moderation analyses reveal that family separation significantly increases stress. Although pre-assignment training appeared to offer only marginal relief from stress, consistent engagement in family communication was associated with noticeably lower stress levels. This contrast points to the value of integrating relational support into organizational practices, not as an afterthought, but as a central component complementing professional preparation. These findings contribute to expatriate well-being research and provide practical insights for organizations. Companies should implement holistic support programs that integrate professional preparation with concrete measures to sustain family relationships.

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Introduction

Globalization has driven the rapid expansion of multinational corporations (MNCs), necessitating the deployment of expatriates to manage international operations. According to a report (*Overview of China outbound investment of 2021*, February 10, 2022) from Ernst & Young Global Limited, China's outward direct investment (ODI) reached \$145.2 billion, underscoring the significant scale of international business operations. While these assignments provide career growth opportunities, they also present significant personal challenges. Among these, family separation is a critical issue, as expatriates frequently leave their partners, children, and other close family members behind when relocating abroad. (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Shaffer et al., 2001). This physical and emotional distance can contribute to psychological distress, affect job performance, and even lead to premature termination of assignments (Caligiuri et al., 1998).

Among these challenges, the mental health and stress levels of expatriates have drawn increasing attention. Existing research highlights the adverse effects of stress on expatriates, such as depression, anxiety, and reduced productivity (e.g., Sincero, 2012). Furthermore, immigrant workers are reported to be particularly sensitive to stress in host countries due to cultural and environmental differences (Williams, 2005). Research highlights the significant role of family-related factors in influencing expatriates' success, yet these aspects often remain underexplored in the literature (Caligiuri et al., 1998; Hobfoll, 1989). This study addresses this gap by introducing a theoretical model that examines family-related stressors and their impact on expatriate outcomes. Additionally, it evaluates moderating factors such as pre-assignment training and family connection in reducing stress levels. Practically, the goal of this study is to

provide insights for expatriates, policy-makers, and organizations to develop effective strategies for managing expatriate stress and enhancing well-being in international assignments.

Literature review

The increasing globalization of business has led to a growing body of research on expatriate management, with a significant focus on the challenges and stressors inherent in international assignments (Takeuchi, 2010). While traditional models have emphasized workplace adjustment and cultural shock (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991), recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the profound impact of non-work factors, particularly those related to family, on expatriate well-being and assignment success (Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). Expatriates frequently undertake assignments without their families, leading to geographical separation from spouses, children, and extended relatives. This separation disrupts established family systems, eliminates daily emotional and instrumental support, and has been consistently linked to negative outcomes such as increased psychological distress, reduced job satisfaction, and higher rates of premature return (Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, & Bross, 1998; Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001). Despite its established importance, the specific mechanisms through which family separation influences stress, and the factors that may mitigate this relationship, remain underexplored and warrant further investigation.

To address this gap, this study draws upon Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. COR theory offers a parsimonious yet powerful framework for explaining psychological stress. Its central tenet posits that individuals are motivated to obtain, retain, protect, and foster what they value, which are termed resources. These resources can be object

resources (e.g., physical possessions), condition resources (e.g., employment, marriage), personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, coping skills), or energy resources (e.g., time, knowledge) (Hobfoll, 1989). A fundamental proposition of the theory is that psychological stress occurs when an individual's resources are threatened with loss, are actually lost, or when invested resources fail to yield adequate returns.

The experience of international assignment presents a potent context for applying COR theory. Geographical separation from close family members represents a significant loss of condition and energy resources, specifically the loss of consistent emotional support and stable familial relationships. This resource depletion is hypothesized to directly increase vulnerability to stress, aligning with COR's proposition that resource loss is a primary antecedent of psychological strain (Hobfoll, 2001).

In response to this potential loss, individuals and organizations can initiate strategies to mitigate its impact. In this model: Pre-assignment training is conceptualized as an investment in personal resources (e.g., coping skills, cultural knowledge). By providing these tools, organizations aim to arm expatriates with new resources to prevent the rapid depletion of their existing psychological reserves upon encountering challenges abroad (cf. Black & Mendenhall, 1990); Family connection operates as a critical effort to conserve and substitute the lost social support resources. In this study, "family" refers primarily to an expatriate's immediate family members, such as a spouse/partner, children, and parents, from whom they are geographically separated. Frequent and meaningful communication acts as a compensatory mechanism, helping to maintain the feeling of intimacy and emotional stability despite physical distance, thereby replenishing diminished resources (Lester et al., 2015).

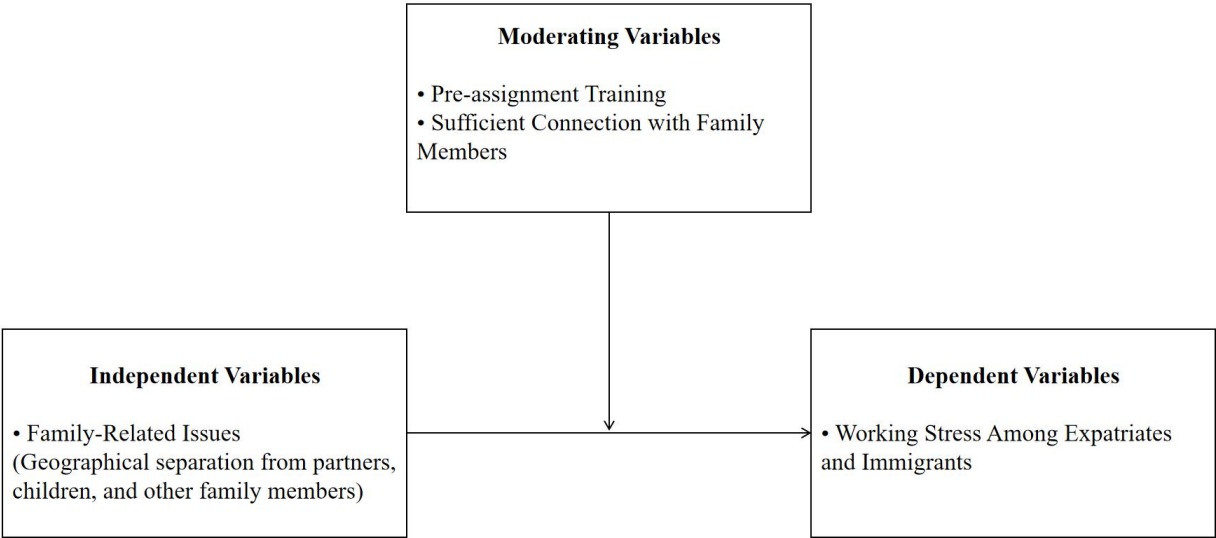
Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Guided by this theoretical framework, the present study examines not only the direct effect of resource loss through family separation on stress but also how resource investment (pre-assignment training) and resource conservation (family connection) may buffer this relationship.

Therefore, the present research model and the hypotheses are derived from this theoretical foundation. The proposed model (presented in Figure 1) explores the relationships among family-related issues, support mechanisms, and working stress experienced by expatriates and immigrant workers. In this framework, family-related issues—especially being geographically separated from partners, children, and other family members—serve as the independent variable (IV). These issues are posited to significantly contribute to the dependent variable (DV), namely, working stress, which manifests during international assignments.

To address and alleviate the negative impact of family-related stressors, the model includes two essential moderating factors: pre-assignment training and family connections. Pre-assignment training aims to prepare expatriates for the cultural and professional demands of working abroad, equipping them with coping strategies to manage stress more effectively. Meanwhile, maintaining consistent and meaningful connections with family members serves as a source of emotional support, helping expatriates remain resilient during extended periods of separation. Together, these moderators are expected to buffer the influence of family-related challenges on stress levels.

Figure 1. Research Model Showing the Hypothesized Relationships



Source(s): Author’s own creation

Leaving a child or spouse behind in order to work and migrate internationally is a painful process. Many immigrant workers and business travelers reported that it’s hard for them to keep in touch with their families due to time zone difference and inconvenience and high cost of communication (Rosenbusch et al., 2015). Some parents who migrate across international borders and leave their children or ageing parents behind reported that their children may not respond positively to their attempts to work transnationally, since that their children render themselves as passive receivers or victims of adult decisions (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012). It would make them feel disappointed and guilty that they cannot accompany with their children and other family members, and, with such dispersion in space, the notion and feeling of “being family” is challenged (Asis et al., 2004). Geographical separation would lead to heavy investment to maintain and reinforce family bonds or divergence of family expectation. Parent-child relationship is challenged while geographically separated and this would lead to great

mental pressure on both sides. COR theory establishes that the loss of valued resources is a primary mechanism leading to psychological stress (Hobfoll, 1989). For expatriates, geographical separation from immediate family members (e.g., partners, children) constitutes a profound loss of key social and emotional resources, which traditionally provide stability and support. This resource depletion is expected to directly increase the experience of stress. Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize:

H1. Family separation is positively associated with stress among expatriates and immigrant workers.

Some transnational firms have recognized that migrant workers and expatriates may encounter problems of language barrier or cultural shock. Consequently, some employers have introduced preparatory programs to facilitate adjustment to foreign environment. Given the inability to settle into a new country is a key reason for most expatriate failures (Harzing, 2004), well-designed pre-departure training can be highly beneficial. Such training typically provides a detailed overview of cultural differences between home and host countries and often includes basics of the host country's language to improve expatriates' communication skills. By enhancing an expatriate's overall adaptability and self-efficacy in navigating the host country, this training can free up psychological resources that would otherwise be depleted by daily hassles. This, in turn, may allow them to better handle the emotional and logistical challenges of family-related issues while working abroad. Grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which posits that the negative impact of resource loss can be mitigated by the strategic investment in new resources (Hobfoll, 1989), pre-assignment training represents precisely such an investment, aiming to equip individuals with personal resources prior to encountering the challenges of an international assignment (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). These newly acquired

resources should, in theory, buffer the impact of family-related resource loss. Consequently, we propose the following moderating effect:

H2. Pre-assignment Training moderates the relationship between Family Separation and Stress Level, such that the positive relationship is weaker for individuals who have received training compared to those who have not.

Family connection, which refers to the frequency and quality of communication between expatriates and their family members, plays an essential role in easing the stress caused by family separation. Beyond initial resource investment, COR theory also emphasizes the role of resource conservation and substitution in preventing well-being deterioration. Maintaining frequent and meaningful connections with family members serves as a critical strategy to conserve the relational resources that are threatened by geographical distance and to substitute for the lost resource of daily familial support (Hobfoll, 1989). This process of sustaining relational resources is not merely a matter of frequency but of quality and meaningfulness, which helps to replenish emotional reserves and provides a stable foundation for coping with stress.

The importance of such relational resources is further underscored by recent cross-cultural research. For instance, Chen et al. (2024) demonstrated that high-quality social resources (e.g., *guanxi*) are crucial for sustaining well-being and career satisfaction among professionals, even in the face of countervailing pressures. Translating this insight to the expatriate context, we argue that high-quality family connections function analogously to other forms of vital relational capital. They provide a conduit for emotional support and a sense of belonging, thereby attenuating the strain caused by separation. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3. Frequency of Connection with Family Members moderates the relationship between family separation and stress levels, such that the positive relationship is weaker for individuals who report higher-quality family connection compared to those who report lower-quality connection.

Method

Data Collection Procedures The data for this study were collected through an online survey, distributed to expatriates and immigrant workers across various industries, including technology, finance, and manufacturing. The measurement scales for key constructs were adapted from established instruments in the expatriate literature to ensure content validity. Specifically, the core items measuring family-related stress were drawn from the work of Fukuda and Chu (1994), whose study on expatriate family dilemmas provides a foundational framework for assessing separation-related strains. This process ensured that the questions accurately captured the experiences of contemporary expatriates and immigrant workers, accounting for modern communication technologies and current mobility patterns.

Participants were recruited using professional networks and online platforms, ensuring diversity in demographics and professional backgrounds. The survey was administered between January and July 2024 using a combination of online platforms, including SurveyMonkey, SurveyPlanet, and Google Forms. A total of 677 responses were collected, predominantly (approximately 99%) through the SurveyMonkey platform, for which a promotional service was purchased to reach a wider audience. All participants were anonymous and received a \$2 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time, a measure implemented to encourage participation and improve response rates. To ensure data quality and target the correct population, the survey

began with a screening question to confirm that respondents were indeed expatriates or immigrant workers (i.e., individuals who had relocated to a foreign country for work). After applying this screening criterion, 487 respondents were excluded for not meeting the definition of an expatriate. A further one response was excluded due to incomplete data, resulting in a final valid sample of 189 responses for analysis. The qualified respondents mainly came from Asia, Europe, and North America, representing a diverse demographic. Most participants were businessmen aged 25 – 54, with over half being married and raising children. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, addressing any ethical concerns and encouraging honest responses.

Measures The study measured key constructs based on established scales and adapted them to the specific context of expatriate stress and family-related issues:

1. Stress levels were measured by a global self-assessment item designed to capture the overall perceived stress associated with the international assignment. Participants were asked, "To what extent do you think that working in the current host country is stressful?" This single item measure, while concise, has been effectively used in prior stress research (e.g., Elo, Leppänen, & Jahkola, 2003) and is aligned with the core construct of perceived stress examined in multi-item scales like the PSS. The item was framed to reflect the expatriate context, consistent with research on overseas assignment-specific stressors (Fukuda & Chu, 1994). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not stressful at all, 2 = Only a little pressure, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Stressful, 5 = Very stressful), with higher scores indicating greater stress levels.

2. Family-Related Issues, specifically referring to family separation in this study, were assessed by a single binary question: "Are you working alone in the current host country? In

other words, have you currently been separated from your family due to work-related reasons?” Responses were coded as a dummy variable (1 = yes, experiencing family separation; 0 = no, not experiencing family separation). This coding allows the coefficient to represent the difference in stress levels between those who are separated from their families and those who are not.

3. Pre-assignment Training was measured through two primary questions. First, to assess the presence or absence of training, a binary (dummy) variable was created based on the question: “Did you receive any pre-assignment training in your home country?” Responses were coded as 1 = yes and 0 = no. This dichotomous measure was used as the moderator variable to test Hypothesis 2. To gather richer descriptive data on the nature of the training received, respondents who answered "yes" were directed to a follow-up question: “To what extent do you think that these pre-training programs are useful and necessary?” Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very helpful, 5 = Not helpful at all). This continuous measure of perceived usefulness is analyzed separately for descriptive purposes and to provide richer context for interpreting the main findings, but it was not utilized in the primary moderation analysis for the hypothesis.

4. As the Second Moderator, Family Connection was measured by the question: “How often do you interact with other members of your family?” Responses were recorded on a 5point Likert scale (1 = Not often at all, 2 = Not very often, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Often, 5 = Extremely often), with higher scores indicating more frequent interaction. This continuous measure of communication frequency was used as the moderator variable to test Hypothesis 3. To complement this measure and gain insight into the subjective evaluation of the communication, participants were also asked, “Are you and your family satisfied with the current frequency of

contact?" with response options (Yes, Neutral, No). This categorical satisfaction measure is analyzed separately to provide a more nuanced understanding of the family connection dynamic but was not used in the primary moderation analysis.

Control Variables Demographic variables, including age, gender, and parental status, were included to account for potential confounding effects. Each variable was operationalized as follows:

1. Gender was assessed with a binary response option (Male/Female). For the purposes of this analysis, responses were coded as a dummy variable (0 = Male, 1 = Female). It is acknowledged that this binary measure does not fully capture the spectrum of gender identities, representing a limitation of the current study; future research would benefit from more inclusive measurement approaches.

2. Age was measured by asking participants to select their age group from the following ranges: *Under 18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64,* and 65 and above. These ranges were treated as an ordinal variable in the analysis.

3. Parental Status was assessed with the question: "Are you a parent or caretaker of children?". Responses were coded as a dummy variable (0 = No, 1 = Yes). This variable captures the unique caregiving responsibilities that may influence stress levels independently of family separation.

Results

This study explored the effects of family-related issues on stress levels among expatriates and immigrant workers, with pre-assignment training and the frequency of connecting with

family members examined as moderators. Control variables such as gender, age, and parental status were also included to account for their influence. The results are presented in three steps: (1) Assessing the effects of control variables; (2) Adding the independent variable to evaluate its direct effect while taking control variables into consideration; (3) Testing moderation effects by including interaction terms and control variables. The analysis followed a hierarchical approach:

Step 1. Control Variables The initial model included the control variables only. As shown in **Table 1**, this model explained 5.9% of the variance in stress levels, and the overall model was statistically significant, $R^2 = 0.059$, $p = 0.010$. Among the control variables, parental status emerged as a significant predictor ($B = 0.402$, $p = 0.007$), indicating that expatriates with children reported higher stress. Neither gender nor age had significant effects on stress levels. The Collinearity Diagnostics were also conducted to detect multicollinearity among independent variables in the model. The results show that all variance inflation factor (VIF) values of the three control variables are below 1.05, which is well below the common threshold of 10 established in the literature (e.g., Kutner, Nachtsheim, Neter, & Li, 2004; O'Brien, 2007), suggesting that there is no significant multicollinearity among the predictors. The highest condition index is 12.603, which approaches 15 but remains within the acceptable range, indicating no severe multicollinearity concerns.

Table 1. Effects of Control Variables on Stress Level (SL)

Variables	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	VIF
Constant	2.447	0.382	6.412	0.000	-
Gender (GEN)	-0.206	0.137	-1.503	0.134	1.004
Age (AGE)	-0.050	0.051	-0.976	0.330	1.047
Parent (PON)	0.402	0.147	2.729	0.007**	1.046

Note: $N = 189$, $R^2 = 0.059$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.044$, F Change = 3.888, $*p = 0.010$; $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$

Step 2. Adding the Independent Variable In the second step, Family-related Issues (FRI) were added to the model. The addition of Family-related Issues significantly improved the explanatory power, increasing R^2 from 5.9% to 8.9% (F Change = 4.508, $p = 0.002$). The results in **Table 2** show that Family-related Issues is a significant predictor of stress levels (B = 0.109, $p = 0.015$), suggesting that separation from loved family members, contributes to increased stress, which provides support for H1. Parental status remained a significant control variable (B = 0.346, $p = 0.020$), reinforcing its unique impact, while gender and age continued to have no significant effects. Regarding the results of the collinearity diagnostics, all VIF values remain below 1.08, and the condition index increases slightly to 13.656 but still within acceptable limits. These results confirm that multicollinearity is not a concern in either step.

Table 2. Effects of Family-Related Issues (FRI) on Stress Level (SL)

Variable	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	VIF
Constant	2.341	0.379	6.176	0.000	-
Gender (GEN)	-0.191	0.136	-1.406	0.161	1.006
Age (AGE)	-0.059	0.051	-1.172	0.243	1.053
Parent (PON)	0.346	0.147	2.347	0.020*	1.073
FRI	0.109	0.044	2.460	0.015*	1.029

Note: N = 189, $R^2 = 0.089$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.069$, F Change = 4.508, $*p^* = 0.002$; $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$

Step 3. Moderation Analysis The third step involved testing the moderating effects of preassignment training and the frequency of connecting with family members to collect data to explicitly test the moderating effects proposed in Hypotheses 2 and 3.

The overall model was significant, explaining 15.2% of the variance in stress levels ($R^2 = 0.152$, $p = 0.0009$), which means that the final model, comprising the control variables, main effects,

and the two interaction terms (FRI \times PAT and FRI \times FCFM), was statistically significant. Contrary to Hypotheses 2 and 3, the results did not reveal a significant moderating effect for either pre-assignment training or family connection. The interaction between family-related issues and pre-assignment training (FRI \times PAT) was not significant (B = 0.097, p = 0.216). Similarly, the interaction between family-related issues and family connection (FRI \times FCFM) was also not significant (B = -0.004, p = 0.948). Despite the lack of significant moderation, parental status remained a consistent and significant predictor of stress levels across all steps of the analysis (B = 0.340, p = 0.024), reinforcing its substantial influence in the model.

Table 3. The Moderation Effects of Pre-assignment Training (PAT) and Frequency of Connection with Family Members (FCFM) on FRI-Stress Relationship

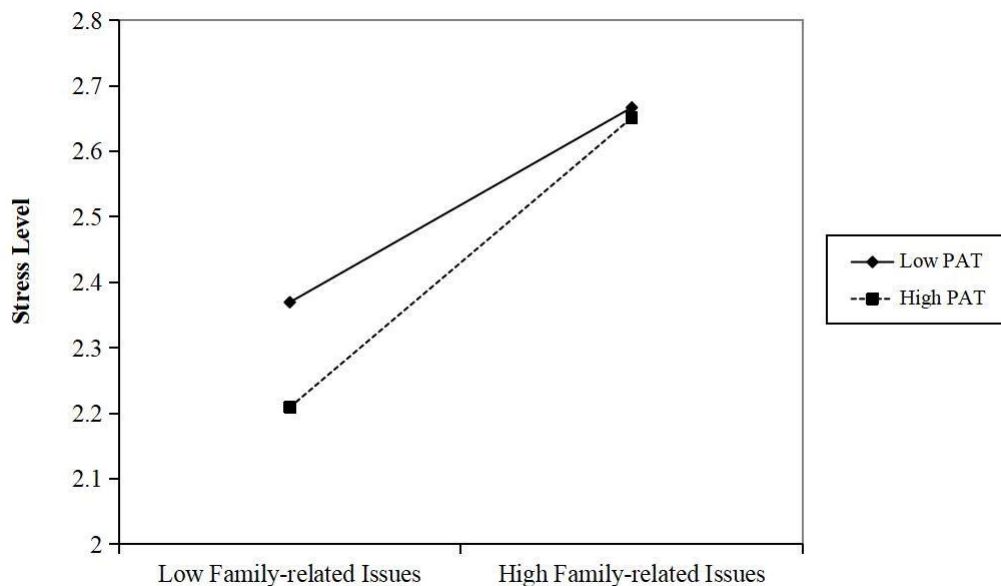
Variable	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	t	p
Constant	2.103	0.580	3.627	0.000
FRI	0.117	0.158	0.743	0.458
PAT	-0.375	0.220	-1.702	0.090
FCFM	0.018	0.168	0.108	0.913
Int_1 (FRI \times PAT)	0.097	0.078	1.241	0.216
Int_2 (FRI \times FCFM)	-0.004	0.057	-0.065	0.948
PON	0.340	0.149	2.283	0.024*
GEN	-0.100	0.137	-0.732	0.465
AGE	-0.041	0.052	-0.801	0.424

Note: N = 189, R² = 0.152, F Change = 3.191, *p* = 0.0009; *p* < 0.05, **p* < 0.01

Despite the non-significant interaction terms in the regression model, we conducted follow-up two-way interaction analyses, using the PROCESS macro for SPSS developed by

Hayes, to visually inspect any potential interactive effects of pre-assignment training and family connection. These analyses examined how variations in these moderators influenced the relationship between family-related issues and stress levels. The results revealed distinct patterns that underscore the critical role of Pre-assignment Training and Frequency of Connection with Family Members in shaping the stress outcomes associated with family-related challenges. The following sections detail these interaction effects, supported by visual representations, to highlight the buffering or exacerbating potential impacts of these moderators.

Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Pre-assignment Training on the Relationship Between Family-Related Issues and Stress Levels

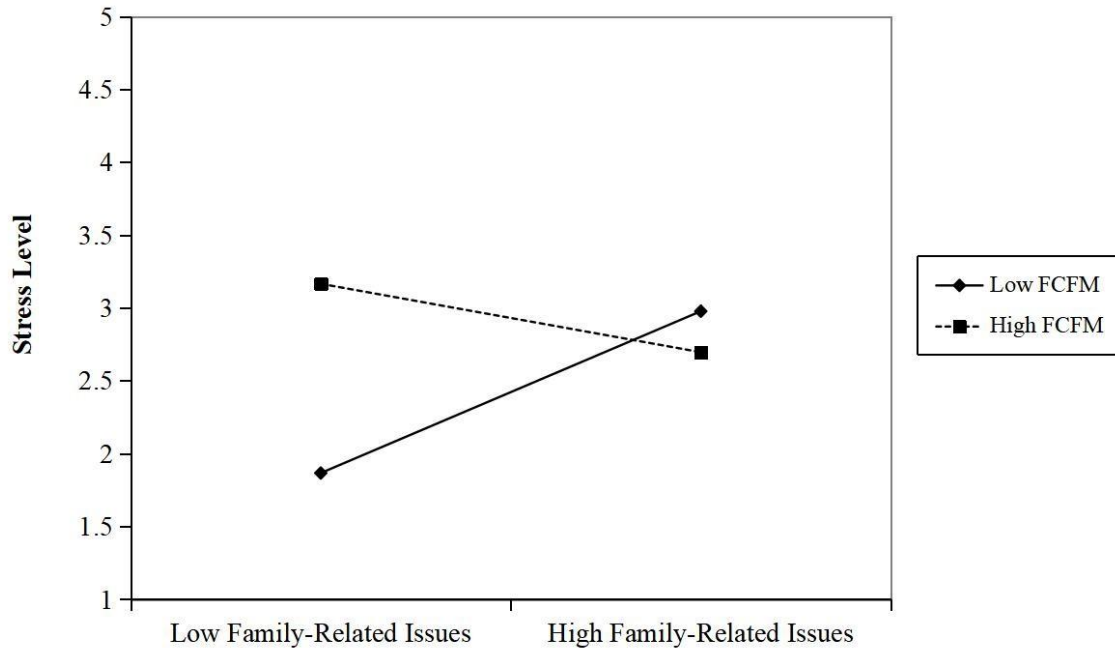


X-axis: Family-Related Issues (ranging from low to high)

Y-axis: Stress Levels (measured on a scale from 2 to 2.8)

Figure 2 illustrates the moderating effect of Pre-assignment Training on the relationship between Family-Related Issues and Stress Levels. As family-related issues increase, stress levels respond differently depending on the level of the received pre-assignment training. For respondents who reported to not take any related training before working abroad (solid line), stress levels rise sharply as family-related issues intensify, indicating a strong positive correlation. In contrast, individuals who have taken such kind of pre-assignment training (dashed line) exhibit a much smaller increase in stress levels, demonstrating the buffering role of pre-assignment training in mitigating the adverse effects of family-related challenges. Interestingly, the two lines converge at higher levels of family-related issues, suggesting that stress levels for both groups become similar when family-related challenges are especially severe. This convergence may imply that the effectiveness of pre-assignment training diminishes under extreme conditions, where stressors such as prolonged family separation overwhelm the benefits of training. Alternatively, this pattern might reflect a universal stress threshold, where all individuals, regardless of their preparation, experience comparable stress levels when exposed to exceptionally high family-related challenges. Additionally, it is possible that, at this stage, individuals increasingly rely on personal coping mechanisms or external resources beyond PAT, reducing the differences between groups.

Figure 3. The Moderating Effect of Frequency of Connection with Family Members on the Relationship Between Family-Related Issues and Stress Levels



X-axis: Family-Related Issues (ranging from low to high)

Y-axis: Stress Levels (measured by Perceived Stress Scale (1-5), where higher values indicate greater stress)

The interaction plot **Figure 3** illustrates the moderating effect of Family Connection with Family Members on the relationship between Family-Related Issues and Stress Levels. As family-related issues increase, the impact on stress levels varies depending on the level of Family Connection. For individuals with low Family Connection (solid line), stress levels rise sharply as family-related issues increase, demonstrating a significant positive correlation. In contrast, for individuals with high Family Connection (dashed line), stress levels decrease slightly as family-related issues increase, indicating a buffering effect. This interaction suggests that strong family connections can mitigate the adverse effects of family-related issues on stress levels. Specifically, high-quality and frequent family communication (high Family Connection)

acts as a protective factor, reducing the negative impact of family-related stressors. On the other hand, low Family Connection exacerbates the effect of family-related issues, leading to significantly higher stress levels. Notably, low Family Connection indicates that respondents maintain low-frequency contact with family members, while high Family Connection represents frequent communication with family members. These findings highlight the critical role of maintaining strong family connections in alleviating stress caused by family-related challenges, particularly for expatriates or individuals in high-stress environments.

Discussion

Overview of Findings Grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this study provides empirical evidence that family separation constitutes a salient resource loss mechanism, thereby exacerbating stress among expatriates. The significant positive effect of family-related issues (FRI) on stress levels ($B = 0.109$, $p = 0.015$) lends support to H1. The absence of close family ties abroad may erode emotional resilience, making expatriates more vulnerable to stress in unfamiliar work and cultural environments (Zentgraf & Chinchilla, 2012; Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). Interestingly, this association remains evident even when controlling for variables such as parental status — a pattern also reflected in previous meta-analyses linking family-related pressures to adjustment challenges (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Takeuchi et al., 2005). The investigation into the moderating roles of pre-assignment training and frequency of connection with family members further explores how well-structured support mechanisms might potentially help mitigate the challenges posed by family-related stressors, although our findings regarding their effectiveness were not conclusive. Taken together, these results support a more integrated view of expatriate stress — one in which

family separation emerges not as a peripheral concern, but as a persistent, context-sensitive factor deserving closer attention.

Interpretation of Results The findings offer support for H1, indicating that family separation has a significant positive association with expatriate stress levels ($B = 0.109$, $p = 0.015$). This result is consistent with a long-standing body of literature emphasizing the psychological strain associated with transnational family separation. Drawing on Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources theory, the absence of immediate family support can lead to the erosion of emotional reserves, which in turn heightens stress, particularly in demanding work environments. These results also lend quantitative backing to earlier qualitative work—for example, Zentgraf and Chinchilla (2012) observed that “transnational parents experience guilt and role strain as physical separation redefines familial bonds” .

Conversely, the hypothesized moderating effects were not supported by the statistical analysis. Although the interaction was not significant, the visual pattern in the moderation plot for pre-assignment training suggests a potential trend where it might be associated with lower stress under moderate levels of family-related challenges. However, the convergence of stress levels across groups at higher levels of family separation suggests that training alone has limitations when facing extreme challenges. This aligns with the insights of Harzing's (2004) observation that even the most well-designed pre-assignment training programs are often insufficient on their own, underscoring the need for complementary support mechanisms that address broader family dynamics. According to the data analysis mentioned above, Pre-assignment training did not significantly alter the relationship between family separation and stress.

Contrary to H2, pre-assignment training did not significantly moderate the relationship between family separation and stress. One possible explanation for this non-significant finding lies in the way pre-assignment training was measured. Using a simple binary variable (yes/no) may have masked important differences in the quality, focus, or depth of the training received. For instance, some programs may have emphasized cultural adjustment or workplace preparation, while giving limited attention to coping with family-related challenges—particularly emotional strain caused by prolonged separation (Black & Mendenhall, 1990).

Another possible explanation relates to the contextual limits of the effectiveness of pre-assignment training. As shown in Figure 2, the buffering effect of pre-assignment training appears to diminish at higher levels of family-related issues. This suggests that while training might help expatriates manage low to moderate stress associated with separation, it may be less effective when the stress becomes more severe or prolonged (Harzing, 2004). In such cases, even well-designed training might be insufficient to offset the psychological toll of intense family disruptions.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while family separation places a clear strain on emotional resilience—consistent with the predictions of H1—the buffering effect of formal support mechanisms such as pre-assignment training appears limited in practice. This contrast invites a more context-sensitive reading of Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory, particularly in transnational settings, where organically maintained family bonds may play a more central role in sustaining well-being than externally structured interventions.

Similarly, H3 was not supported, as family connection also failed to demonstrate a significant moderating effect. The analysis of Frequency of Connection with Family Members

reveals that, although the statistical analysis did not yield a significant moderation effect for family connection frequency on the link between family separation and stress, the underlying pattern remains noteworthy. As shown in Figure 3, expatriates who reported maintaining high-quality family connections tended to experience lower stress levels across varying degrees of separation. Frequent and meaningful communication, whether through family visits or virtual interactions, which provides emotional stability, enabling expatriates to better cope with workplace and cultural stressors (Shaffer et al., 2001), consistently alleviated stress levels, even under severe conditions of family separation. This observation—that sustained family connection can provide emotional stability—is consistent with Lester et al.'s (2015) findings on the value of regular, meaningful contact as a buffer against the psychological strain of physical distance for expatriates.

The non-significant finding for family connection, despite the observed pattern in the data, can be considered in light of social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This theory holds that close relational ties can enhance an individual's capacity to cope with stress, suggesting that the quality of support may be a key factor. This mechanism seems especially relevant in the context of transnational families, where geographic distance complicates emotional availability (Furusawa & Brewster, 2016). Notably, the persistent negative association between family connection and stress levels observed in the data suggests that regular and meaningful family connection may function as a compensatory mechanism that helps expatriates maintain psychological stability, even in the absence of a formal moderating effect. Rather than altering the strength of the stressor itself, such connections may buffer its emotional consequences by reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity across distance. This perspective aligns with recent research emphasizing the evolving nature of transnational family relationships, where

sustained emotional engagement— regardless of physical proximity—plays a crucial role in managing stress (Karunaratne et al., 2025). Future research should explore multi-dimensional measures of family connection that assess not just frequency, but also the perceived quality and emotional value of communication.

A pivotal finding was the persistent significance of parental status across all models. This underscores that the resource depletion associated with childcare responsibilities constitutes an independent and potent stressor, exacerbating the challenges of international assignments. This aligns with research highlighting the unique strains faced by parent expatriates, for whom family separation often entails not just emotional loss but also intensified concerns about child well-being and complex care-giving logistics (Haslberger & Brewster, 2008).

Practical Implications These findings offer practical guidance and actionable recommendations for organizations supporting expatriates and international HR practices. Rather than treating family separation as a secondary issue, multinational corporations (MNCs) should recognize it as a central stressor in the expatriate experience. Failure to acknowledge the emotional and relational costs of such assignments can turn well-intended developmental opportunities into costly attrition risks (Caligiuri et al., 1998). organizations should redesign it to include dedicated modules on managing family separation and sustaining relational bonds from afar. This could involve training on navigating time zones for communication, managing guilt and role strain, and leveraging digital tools for virtual family intimacy. Companies should therefore consider implementing supportive measures — such as subsidized family visits or enhanced psychological support — as a core component of their relocation and expatriation policies. Besides, pre-assignment training programs should address both professional and personal challenges, equipping employees with tools to manage family separation and other

potential challenges, such as cultural adaptation issues or language barrier (Caligiuri et al., 1998). For organizations, these findings imply that standardized PAT programs should be complemented by ongoing, family-specific support (e.g., counseling, facilitated reunions) to address severe separation stressors. Second, organizations should actively facilitate family connection by offering resources for communication, subsidizing family visits, or providing flexible schedules to enhance work-life balance. Such measures not only promote employee well-being but also contribute to organizational outcomes by reducing assignment failure rates.

Limitations and Future Directions While this study offers meaningful insights into the stressors faced by expatriates, it is important to consider its limitations when interpreting the findings. The most significant constraint is its cross-sectional nature, which prevents us from establishing firm causal links between family separation and stress. A longitudinal design in future work would be invaluable for exploring how the effects of family-related stressors and support mechanisms evolve over time.

Furthermore, our methodological choices, while practical, present certain limitations. Relying on a single-item measure for stress and a binary indicator for family separation, though common, may not fully capture the nuanced reality of these experiences. We encourage future researchers to employ comprehensive, multi-item scales to deepen the validity of the findings. Complementing this quantitative approach with qualitative inquiries could also yield rich, narrative data on how expatriates personally navigate the emotional complexities of maintaining family bonds across borders.

Looking ahead, our research points to several promising avenues, such as cultural background in the relationship between family separation and expatriate stress. Prior cross-cultural evidence suggests that cultural norms and values may shape how individuals experience

and cope with family-related challenges. For instance, Furusawa and Brewster (2016) found that Asian expatriates reported significantly higher levels of separation anxiety compared to their Western counterparts, possibly reflecting stronger collectivist orientations and family obligations in many Asian cultures. Building on this, a direct examination of how specific cultural dimensions influence the family separation-stress dynamic would significantly advance our understanding.

Finally, our use of Conservation of Resources theory opens up another theoretical possibility. Beyond simply preventing resource loss, it would be fascinating to investigate whether successful coping can initiate a "resource gain spiral." For instance, could the competencies built through training or the security from strong family ties not just buffer stress but also generate compounding psychological resources over time, such as enhanced resilience or self-efficacy? Exploring this positive spiral effect would offer a more dynamic application of COR theory in the expatriate context.

Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the complex interplay between family-related stressors and expatriate well-being, guided by the theoretical principles of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). The empirical findings confirm the theory's central premise that the loss of key social and emotional resources—exemplified by geographical separation from family—constitutes a primary mechanism for heightened stress among expatriates and migrant workers. This direct effect was robust and significant, underscoring that family separation is not a peripheral concern but a core determinant of the international assignment experience.

Conversely, the hypothesized buffering effects of organizational and personal resources—pre-assignment training and family connection—were not statistically supported. These nonsignificant findings, however, do not mean that these things are unimportant. Instead, they suggest that maybe we need to look more closely at what kind of training is offered and how meaningful the communication with family is, not just if it happens. This is an important insight for future studies to explore.

Theoretical and practical implications derived from this study have been discussed in detail. Companies should prioritize the creation of enhanced support systems that directly address the emotional difficulties of family separation. This could include designing training that specifically helps with family issues, and providing real support like helping with childcare or paying for family visits.

In summary, while this study answers important questions about the impact of family separation, it also suggests several fruitful pathways for future studies, particularly regarding the qualitative aspects of support mechanisms and the cultural boundaries of these findings. We hope our findings will help organizations better protect their employees' well-being and reduce the costs of assignment failure.

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Appendix

Table A1. Glossary of Terms

Term	definition
Expatriate Stress	Psychological strain experienced by individuals working in a foreign country, often influenced by work demands, cultural adjustment, and family-related pressures.
MNC (Multinational Corporation)	A company that operates in multiple countries, often sending employees (expatriates) on international assignments as part of global staffing and development strategies.
FRI (Family-Related Issues)	A composite measure capturing the degree of family-related stressors expatriates face while working abroad, particularly those associated with physical separation from close family members.
PAT (Pre-Assignment Training)	Formal training sessions provided to expatriates prior to their international assignment, typically covering cultural adaptation, work expectations, and occasionally, family-related coping strategies.
FCFM (Family Communication Frequency and Meaningfulness)	The extent to which expatriates engage in regular and emotionally meaningful communication with family members during their time abroad.

Appendix

Sample of Survey

Master's Dissertation Questionnaire Research on Working Stress

I. Introduction

This is Haotian Zhang and I am currently studying for a Master in Management at Concordia University. I'm now conducting research into working stress among expatriates so I desperately need help from skilled expatriates who are now working or had got a job in Canada. The questionnaire consists of 24 questions and will take no longer than 7 minutes to complete. Your responses will only be used for survey and academic purposes. All questionnaires are designed to be anonymous to protect your personal information.

II. Questions

1. Are you an expatriate or immigrant worker? In other words, are you currently working in the host country as a foreign-born individual?

Yes

No

2. What is your nationality?

3. What is your gender? Female

Male

Other (specify)

4. What is your age? Under 18 18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54
 55-64 65+

5. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?

Married Widowed Divorced Separated

Cohabiting with a significant other or in a domestic partnership Single, never married

Prefer not to answer

6. Are you a parent or caretaker of children? Yes No

7. What is your educational background?

Bachelor's degree Master's degree Ph.D

Other (please specify)

8. Which of the following best describes the principal industry of your organization?

9. What is your job role?

Individual Contributor Team Lead

Manager

Senior Manager

Regional Manager Vice President

Management / C-Level Partner

Owner

Volunteer

Intern

Other (please specify)

10. Which of the following best describes your current occupation?

Management Occupations

Business and Financial Operations Occupations Computer and Mathematical Occupations

Architecture and Engineering Occupations

Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations Community and Social Service Occupations

Legal Occupations

Education, Training, and Library Occupations

Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations

Healthcare Support Occupations Protective Service Occupations

Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations

Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations Personal Care and Service Occupations

Sales and Related Occupations

Office and Administrative Support Occupations Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations

Construction and Extraction Occupations

Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations Production Occupations

Transportation and Materials Moving Occupations Other (please specify)

11. In what city do you currently work?

12. How long have you worked in the current host country? Less than 1 year

1-3 years 3-5 years 5-8 years 8-10 years

Longer than 10 years

13. To what extent do you think that working in the current host country is stressful?

Very stressful	Stressful	Neutral	Only a little pressure	Not stressful at all
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. Have you ever undergone any of the following expatriate failures because of the stress of working abroad?

- Undesirable premature return
- Ineffectiveness and low productivity Self-isolation
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

15. Are you working alone in the current host country? In other words, have you currently been separated from your family due to work-related reasons?

- Yes
- No

16. How often do you interact with other members of your family? Extremely often

(at least once per day)

- Very often (1-5 times per week)

- Somewhat often (1-5 time per month)
- Not so often (1-5 times per year) Not at all often

17. Are you and your family satisfied with the current frequency of contact?

- Yes
- Neutral
- No

18. Did you receive any pre-assignment training in your home country?

- Yes
- No
- Other (please specify)

19. If yes, what kind of training did you take before departure?

- Systematic language learning
- Temporary posting abroad program
- Study abroad at graduate schools or research institutes
- Other (please specify)

20. To what extent do you think that these pre-training programs are useful and necessary?

Very helpful Helpful Somewhat helpful Not so helpful Not helpful at all

21. What is your current yearly salary?

- Under \$15,000
- Between \$15,000 and \$29,999
- Between \$30,000 and \$49,999
- Between \$50,000 and \$74,999
- Between \$75,000 and \$99,999
- Between \$100,000 and \$150,000
- Over \$150,000

22. For the position you have, how satisfied are you with your salary?

- Extremely satisfied Very satisfied Somewhat satisfied Not so satisfied
- Not at all satisfied

* 23. Please help to fill out the following questionnaire according to your experience of working abroad. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being “strongly agree” and 5 being “strongly disagree”), how do you rate the major cause of stress of working abroad?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Family-related issues (e.g. Being separated from family members)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language barrier	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Culture differences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inability to adapt to a new environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Unattainable KPI goals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 24. Please help to fill out the following questionnaire according to your experience of working abroad. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being “the most important” and 5 being “the least important”), how do you rate the most important factor for the accomplishment of overseas missions?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Sufficient Salary	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technical competence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Support from family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job guarantees after returning the home country	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ability to adapt to a new environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The personal desire of working abroad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

III. End of Questionnaire

Thank you sincerely for participating this questionnaire. Your answers will do great help to my thesis research.