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Revisiting the Expatriate Failure Concept: A Qualitative Study of Scandinavian Expatriates in Hong Kong

Abstract

This article advances the understanding of expatriate failure, which remains a contested social phenomenon in international work life as well as scholarly research. The study challenges the definition of expatriate failure and its inherent biases, i.e., the epistemological primacy of the firm level and the failure/success binary. We argue that this qualitative study of 51 Scandinavian expatriates in Hong Kong can contribute to advancing theory on the expatriate failure concept by asking individual expatriates what constitutes failure to them. By applying social constructionist and social anthropological ideas to the expatriate failure concept debate, we develop the internationality thesis which demonstrates a discrepancy between the expatriates' perceptions of successful international assignments and the actual nature of their lived lives; many expatriates desire to enrich their lives through experiencing an international/intercultural and adventurous lifestyle, but, in fact, living lives with limited intercultural exposure and interaction. We conclude by proposing a reconceptualisation of expatriate failure in terms of offering both a new definition and approach to researching expatriate failure in which time/duration, context, and geographical location need to be taken into account. We believe the new approach can overcome some of the empirical unsoundness of mainstream definitions.

Keywords: Expatriate failure; social constructionism; firm-level bias; interview; qualitative; critique; Scandinavian expatriates; Hong Kong.

Revisiting the Expatriate Failure Concept: A Qualitative Study of Scandinavian Expatriates in Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Expatriates are the costliest group of employees in multinational enterprises (MNEs); they receive high compensation, and many studies suggest that they often fail resulting in even higher financial costs, negative psychological impact on the expatriates and their family members, and threats to the organisation's reputation and ongoing operations (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Minbaeva & Michailova, 2004; Nowak & Linder, 2016). Challenges relating to moving people across country and cultural borders make successful expatriate management a crucial task for international companies (Harzing, Pudelko, & Reiche, 2015; Holopainen & Björkman, 2005). It is therefore important to manage and to comprehend expatriate failure (EF) as a social phenomenon for the betterment of both the social and corporate lives of expatriates and for researchers who study the issue.

Mainstream research efforts in International Business (IB) and, particularly, International Human Resource Management (IHRM), have for more than three decades predominantly assumed, and studied, EF as meaning the return home of the expatriate before the end of the contract (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2017; Naumann, 1992). Ontologically speaking, the firm level dominates as the analytical level in IB/IHRM research (Buckley, 2002) which is reflected in the firm-level bias in the EF concept: failure as defined and understood by the firm is when an expatriate does not complete the plan (i.e., contract) that was laid out by the firm. In extant IB/IHRM literatures, failure and success factors have largely been studied as antonyms, where success, in effect, has been considered as *not* having ended the contract prematurely (Canhilal, Shemueli, & Dolan, 2015). Thus, the issue of

actual performance and whether the expatriates themselves consider the experience successful have largely been ignored. Hemmasi, Downes, and Varner (2010) pointed out the need for expatriates themselves to define what constitutes failure. However, the call remains unanswered. By focusing on individual expatriates and how they socially construct failure and success, our article responds to various calls for focusing on expatriates' actual lived experiences during their international assignment (McNulty & Brewster, 2016) – as opposed to approaching failure merely as a yes/no outcome from the firm-level perspective (see Bonache, Brewster, Cerdin, & Suutari, 2014).

In this article, we focus on how and why individual expatriates socially construct assignment failure for themselves. Working from a social constructionist theoretical framework, we define and develop the concept of EF through the use of qualitative data collected directly from working expatriates.¹ On this basis, we argue that the conventional definition of EF is contestable, as previous research has overemphasised the view of the firm at the expense of the individual expatriate viewpoint. By focusing on individual expatriates' social construction of failure, we are able to make a theoretical contribution to the extant IB and IHRM literatures, as well as the specific subject areas of global mobility and expatriate management, by considering how failure is defined at the individual (expatriate) level (see Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Hitt & Smith, 2005). Furthermore, an additional contribution relates to challenging the ontological premise (i.e., firm level) of EF (see Corley & Gioia, 2011; Kilduff, 2006) as we seek to leave behind the unhelpful dichotomy of success/failure as the most important outcome of an expatriate assignment.

¹ Our working expatriates came from both corporate and non-corporate sectors and included individuals who had been working in Hong Kong but were currently in transition/on maternity leave/homemakers. Aligned with our theoretical framework (social constructionism) the above sample reflected the composition of the Scandinavian expatriate community and how these individuals themselves socially constructed each other as expatriates.

The structure of the present article is as follows. First, we elucidate the epistemological, ontological, and empirical shortcomings of the EF concept in extant IB/IHRM literatures and explain our use of social constructionism as the theoretical framework. Second, in the methodological framework, we respond to the firm-level bias in the literature by explicating our qualitative in-depth interview approach. This approach captures individual expatriates' perceptions of EF. Third, we focus on how the expatriates as individuals socially construct what failure and success mean to them within their natural context. This leads to discussing how the EF concept can be reconceptualised. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining theoretical contributions, managerial relevance, research implications, and limitations.

2. Critique of the current conceptualisations of EF within IB/IHRM research

A critique of the current conceptualisation of EF can be made from four points of view. The first avenue relates to the definition itself. As can be seen in research articles and textbooks on the subject, business school academia has for nearly four decades embraced “premature return of an expatriate” as the definition of EF (cf., Dowling et al., 2017, p. 125; Naumann, 1992, p. 499; Simeon & Fujiu, 2000, p. 594). The definition implies that the return takes place before the end of the contract (Hill, 1998). Since a definition forms the meaning of the phenomenon which it is attempting to define, it thus becomes unavoidable that the definition itself heavily influences and shapes the emergent research agenda connected to this phenomenon. We argue, therefore, that the EF definition has limited the study of EF to encompass only one aspect of the actual phenomenon.

Second, the focus on the premature ending of the contract has plausibly led to a three to four decade long research emphasis on expatriate employee selection as a means to

decrease EF (Harvey, 1985; Torbiörn, 1982). Failure has also been connected to poor job performance, including cases where there is no premature return (Tarique, Briscoe, & Schuler, 2015). In addition, EF has been studied with respect to expatriate characteristics (Naumann, 1993); satisfaction (Downes, Thomas, & Singley, 2002); the psychological contract (Pate & Scullion, 2009); turnover (Naumann, 1992); withdrawal intentions (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005); intention to quit (Gregersen, 1992); and various aspects of international and cross-cultural adjustment (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Church, 1982; Tung, 1981). Additionally, failure has been studied in relation to single factors, such as pay and compensation systems (Black, 1992; Black & Gregersen, 1991).

However, there is an unhelpful commonality across all these studies: they focus on failure merely as an outcome (see Takeuchi, Marinova, Lepak, & Liu, 2005). The expatriates' perceptions are included in a very few prescribed independent/dependent variables or used as antecedents/predictors. We believe that this research tradition reflects a major gap in the research agenda as far as EF is concerned, namely that expatriates' own lived experiences *during* their international assignments have been understudied, and instead, researchers have focused on finding links to failure, such as selection or satisfaction, that occur before and after the expatriate moves abroad (McNulty & Brewster, 2016).

Third, the properties of the EF definition are shown as a particular ontological assumption of what failure as a social phenomenon looks like. The over focus on failure as an outcome variable has led to, by default, the implausible binary assumption that *presence* of success means an *absence of* failure (Canhilal, Shemueli, & Dolan, 2015) and/or the assumption that failure exists only on the basis of being deemed to be so *by the firm* (Harzing & Christensen, 2004). The broader IB/IHRM research agendas share a strong firm-level focus

(Buckley, 2002; Delbridge Hauptmeier, & Sengupta, 2011; Keegan & Boselie, 2006), which has led to little consideration of the larger society within which the firm operates (Harzing & Christensen, 2004). Moore (2003) also underscores the issue concerning the dominance of the firm level in her case study of a foreign branch office of a German MNC which failed to consider internal subculture diversity. Again, the firm level is granted primacy at the expense of the individual expatriates and their personal social construction of what constitutes failure for themselves. For example, a study on EF by Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, and Stroh (1999) reflects the firm-level bias as they only examined failure in relation to organisational factors. We are not arguing that the definition (i.e., premature return) is wrong – as firms will define what a failure is to them. However, as demonstrated above, the EF definition has ontologically discounted the viewpoints of the individuals in question (expatriates) which our research focuses upon.

Fourth, the ontology underlying the EF definition is also responsible for a particular body of literature relating to the concept of EF, i.e., the reported high failure rates which are increasingly being disputed. Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991) reported failures in the range of 16-40%, and in early studies, high failure rates were considered a particular problem for U.S. multinationals (Tung, 1981). Harzing's commendable scholarship has illuminated stark fallacies concerning alleged EF rates, showing the limited empirical foundation for such claims, and the poor referencing of those making them (Harzing, 1995; Harzing & Christensen, 2003). Harzing (1995) meticulously provided evidence by following the reference trail back through leading academic journal articles and found that most reported (high) failure rates were unsubstantiated, speculative, and sometimes the result of poor or lazy referencing. Moreover, it was suggested that an underperforming expatriate could also logically be considered as a failing expatriate in accordance with the above stipulated

definition because it would be detrimental to both the individual as well as the firm (which relies on the performance of said expatriate). Harzing and Christensen (2004) noted that, even after they pointed out the above shortcomings, contemporary academics continued to report fictitiously high failure rates. The findings indicated, on the contrary, very low failure rates (most rates below 5-7%), with American firms only occasionally facing somewhat higher failure rates than their European counterparts (Harzing, 1995). Exceptions to poor referencing and empirically unsound claims included articles by Tung (1981) and Torbiörn (1992) – however, the findings of these two authors were drawn from limited survey samples.

Subsequently, Harzing and Christensen (2004) asked whether the concept of EF should be abandoned altogether when analysing turnover and performance management in favour of the general Human Resource Management (HRM) literature. Harzing and van Ruysseveldt (2004, p. 274) rejected such a notion by proclaiming:

“So should we conclude we can disregard expatriate failure? On the contrary! Further and more sophisticated research into expatriate failure is long overdue.”

Our inquiry into EF responds to the above-mentioned call. We argue that such sophistication could be partly achieved by incorporating the expatriates’ own lived experiences from which they socially construct what constitutes failure to them. We also argue that establishing an EF definition which does not require universality would be helpful, as it seems illogical to assume that one expatriate would consider a failure to have the same meaning to her or him irrespective of the geographical location, local culture, career stage, and other constantly changing aspects of context. However, the voice of individual expatriates is still not heard if they themselves have not been asked to discuss their own experiences.

3. Theoretical framework of social constructionism

We turn to social constructionism to provide the theoretical foundation for our research question, emphasising that the ontological social reality suggested by a definition can often be in disharmony with how individuals construct their own reality and thus what they consider to be failure and success factors. Crotty (1998) defines constructionism as:

“the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 62).

Constructionism claims that there is no such thing as an objective world detached from what is in people’s minds. In constructionism, humans do not create but construct meaning in relation to the world and objects present in the world (Crotty, 1998). This perspective supports our research well as EF is a social phenomenon with an intercultural context where social actors (Scandinavian expatriates) produce and are produced by social reality (in Hong Kong). Experience is the basis for knowledge. Indeed, according to Bourdieu (1977), human beings engage in sense-making through conscious experiences of the social world. Human studies rest on experiences and knowledge about the world (Giddens & Turner, 1998). Thus, when aiming to investigate the expatriates’ social construction of failure/success factors, it becomes necessary to also appreciate the context within which such constructions are happening and to capture the expatriates’ accumulated knowledge through their experiences of being exposed to what is being studied.

4. Methodology

As part of a five month field study in Hong Kong, data were collected from 51 Scandinavian expatriates via in-depth interviews and informal conversations during events within the Scandinavian expatriate community. To understand the context faced by the Scandinavian expatriates, they were part of approximately 2,100 individuals and 250 firms from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden who make the Chinese cosmopolitan and global financial territory of

Hong Kong their home and/or place of work. The Hong Kong job market features high turnover rates due to economic factors such as a low unemployment rate (Hong Kong - Unemployment rate, 2018) and cultural factors such as low uncertainty avoidance and masculinity (Hoftsede, 1980) which encourage constant movement for better job opportunities. There are approximately 100 regional offices and headquarters of Scandinavian organisations overseeing activity, not just in Hong Kong, but also in East Asia and Southeast Asia more generally (*Invest Hong Kong*, 2017). In addition, all three countries are represented through various social clubs, schools, chambers of commerce, consulates general, and non-governmental, interest, and religious organisations.

In our study, the cyclic research process was aligned with the social anthropological tradition to give primacy to field data and the expatriates' own construction of social reality (Andersen & Skaates, 2004). This type of process relates to commencing the investigation with field data as opposed to an established body of theory. Empirical data were used to challenge existing and uncontested mainstream understandings and the definition of the concept of EF by focusing on the field data and the research subjects rather than only limiting the study to factors previously established in the literature (Brewer, 2000; Burgess, 1984; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Keesing & Strathern, 1998; Thomas, 2004).

The in-depth interview was the predominant research technique. It is acknowledged to be a powerful technique to elicit in-depth understanding of context (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2004). In this study, context is understood as the holistic surroundings of the social phenomenon in question and traverses both the contexts of being an expatriate and a Scandinavian as well as that of Hong Kong society and culture within which they live and work. The in-depth interviews followed the principles of the

constructionist symbolic interactionist model (Thomas, 2004). This is a particular advantage when aiming to obtain rich and deep knowledge about a little understood social phenomenon. The aforesaid model of interviewing rests on symbolic interactionism. The model takes into account that human beings interpret stimuli, rather than responding to them as a merely physical phenomenon: human action and interpretations are structured by dynamic factors such as intentions, motives, beliefs, rules, discourses, and values (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) which are embedded in the qualitative research paradigm when analysing human behaviour and culture (Geertz, 1973; Keesing & Strathern, 1998). Such an ideational approach (as opposed to behaviourism) reflects an epistemological divide, but also intellectual divergences between social psychology (and behaviourism) and sociology/social anthropology disciplines in terms of understanding culture. This approach reflects the intellectual foundation for pursuing a more qualitative understanding of the EF concept as extant research has only very recently focused upon expatriates' own perceptions and social constructions of the reality they live within in this regard (e.g., Selmer & Luring, 2009).

The interview questions were mainly open-ended and focused on the respondents' construction of meaning and social reality as they identified failure and success factors for themselves as expatriates. Thematic questions with improvised follow-up questions, as well as probes and prompts in an unstructured fashion were used (Thomas, 2004). The thematic question "From your perspective, what would constitute a success and a failure in terms of the purpose of your stay?" was used to open the discussion of the EF topic. (See Appendix A for a list of all thematic questions, in addition to examples of some of the probes and prompts used). Although interviews took place while the subjects were having their expatriate experiences in Hong Kong, we considered this to be optimal as our investigation was not limited to failure and success merely as an outcome of the assignment. If instead we

interviewed expatriates who had already returned back to Scandinavia, it would be very difficult to identify larger groups of Scandinavians who had lived and worked in Hong Kong at the same time. Furthermore, asking expatriates on assignment made it easier for them to recall potential failure factors.

The 51 formal interviews were held in various settings and times based on the interviewees' preferences and convenience. Most interviews took place in the expatriates' offices or during lunches in restaurants, while a few were conducted at cafes or in the subjects' homes. They lasted on average approximately 77 minutes. All interviews were digitally audio recorded. Tables 1-4 depict the background profile of the interviewees.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The first author used his native Norwegian language (which is very similar to Danish and Swedish) and subtly encouraged the interviewees to converse in their native Danish/Norwegian/Swedish mother tongue. With the main focus on social construction of meaning and considering the importance of language as a sub-system of culture (Keesing & Strathern, 1998), nuances in how people talk (and, indeed, what they say) are central to the analysis and access to meaning-contents (Fjellström & Guttormsen, 2016; Zhang & Guttormsen, 2016). As the three Scandinavian languages are very similar, and more to be considered as different dialects or pronunciations of the same language, translation between the languages was not deemed necessary.

Both purposeful sampling, which captures the diversity among research subjects (Ghauri, 2004) and the snowball sampling technique, which involves locating new interviewee subjects through other respondents (Welch & Piekkari, 2006; Wilkinson & Young, 2004), were used to collect data during 2008-09. In order to be included in the sample, the subjects had to be of Scandinavian nationality (Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish) and currently working in Hong Kong (including living there due to work of another, such as the spouse) (see Craig and Douglas, cited in Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005).

As the focus of the study was to investigate expatriates' own lived experiences and perceptions within their own social reality, the first author carried out purposeful sampling such that the range of those interviewed reflected the diversity of that social reality. For example, as there existed both female and male Scandinavian expatriates in Hong Kong, both sexes were invited to take part. Based on observation and research into the expatriate community prior to entering the field, it also became natural to approach expatriates of varied ages and to include those who were working in both corporate and non-corporate organisations. In practical terms, the first author sourced eligible interviewees by using email addresses featured on the websites of Scandinavian organisations in Hong Kong, such as companies, chambers of commerce, embassies/consulates general, the Scandinavian Christmas Bazaar, universities, Swedish Women's Educational Association International, and Danish Seamen's Church, in addition to non-governmental and religious organisations. The snowball sampling technique was often deployed at the end of the actual interview with the question "Are you willing to introduce me to other Scandinavians in your network?" Searching for more subjects also took place through emails when either sourcing a potential interviewee or following up after an earlier interview. Some interviews were secured by attending Scandinavian events and asking for a future interview.

The analysis was carried out using an iterative hermeneutical approach. Data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously during all stages of the investigation. Findings were juxtaposed with relevant literature in order to challenge the current conceptualisation of EF and as a basis for proposing a reconceptualisation (Brewer, 2000; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005; Thomas, 2004). Hermeneutics relates to interpreting meaningful human actions from the perspective of the agent (i.e., Scandinavian expatriates) (see Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The hermeneutical analysis process is not merely about eliciting the ascribed meaning of an incumbent who has experienced an ‘objective’ external or internal event or to be a mirrored account of what an expatriate has experienced. It concerns making sense of the data collected from the expatriate within his or her context (and its structural conditions) where ‘subjective’ meanings are produced (Noorderhaven, 2004). Interpretations can therefore not be certain, but a high probability of correctness is attainable. Emerging meanings alter preconceived understanding of the meaning (Thomas, 2004). Frequent interaction through interviews and public events with Scandinavian expatriates allowed the first author to receive feedback on his initial understanding of the phenomenon and conveyed meaning. What constitutes meaningful data is not always known prior to engaging with it iteratively during data construction processes, and meaning is attributed to the data by the researcher (Brewer, 2000).

Depending on how the ‘data speak’ (Weick, 1995), the analysis unveils possible categorisation. Interviews were reviewed up to four times, and subsequently summarised through mind-mapping where data was categorised based on emerging relevance. The internationality thesis (which will be discussed in the Findings and Discussion section) was identified by using the background information of the expatriates which was collected as part of the in-depth interview (often before the thematic, open-ended questions). The proposed

reconceptualisation of the EF concept was achieved by juxtaposing the empirical data concerning what failure and success meant to the expatriates vis-à-vis what existing research assumed it to be – integral to the cyclic research process.

5. Findings and Discussions

a. Empirical evidence: expatriates' lived experiences and social construction of failure

The notion of EF in the eyes of the Scandinavian expatriates will be linked to an internationality thesis that is developed below. The relevance of this linkage relates to the discrepancy between how the expatriates themselves define failure/success in terms of their preferred ways of living and the type of lives many of them live. During the interviews and informal conversations at various Scandinavian events taking place in Hong Kong, expatriates were asked about their perceptions surrounding failure in regard to their ongoing international assignments. No expatriates expressed even a single specific factor which had materialised, either as a failure or a potential failure, and the responses from the expatriates reflected widespread and very high appreciation of living in Hong Kong, as well as their experience of successful overall adjustment to local society. As a Norwegian female manager said: “Everything is at your fingertips, whatever you need for a comfortable life, including lots of Scandinavian expatriates” whilst pointing at a large group of Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes heading out to Lamma Island to dine at a seafood restaurant with the Scandinavian Social Club. A Swedish middle manager who worked in a factory said: “Even as a woman I don't find it problematic to work in a factory as culturally the workers follow instructions without questioning”. A Swedish worker expressed her ‘no problem’ attitude to Hong Kong society, by referring to her move between the Swedish cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg as ‘the big move.’

In fact, 90% of the interviewed Scandinavians did not mention premature return as a current or potential issue concerning their stay in Hong Kong – even when asked directly in a follow-up question regarding the potential prospect of premature return. *Not to be exposed to, or experiencing, international/multicultural environments*, was the understanding of what would constitute a failure among the majority (60%) of the Scandinavian expatriates; the absence of this experience would have meant that they might as well have stayed at home. As a Swedish manager in the finance industry put it: “No, premature does not exist as a possible failure for me as I simply would find another similar job in another bank in Hong Kong ... or in Singapore”. Even a Swedish expatriate entrepreneur, who survived based on company growth, did not endorse the mainstream definition of EF:

“What is a failure, really...? I came here to have an adventure. A failure would have been if it turned into a boring endeavour. The job is part of the adventure and I want to make money of course, but that is not why I came to Hong Kong. If not exciting me, then it would become a failure.”

Furthermore, a majority of the interviewees was not able to pinpoint any reason at all which could potentially lead to a failure. As a Norwegian homemaker explained: “How can we fail? We live amazing lives, and with a maid I suddenly had a lot of free time on my hands to pursue all the hobbies, like singing, which I never had the time for back home in Norway”. The social construction of failure among Scandinavian expatriates stands in stark contrast to assumptions in the IHRM literature that EF is solely constituted by premature return from the international assignment. For example, a Swedish female expatriate said, “...but failure means different things to different people,” and she also found it difficult to pinpoint potential failure factors because they would be balanced by international/intercultural learning. Additionally, a male Norwegian expatriate dismissed the relevance of the question in its entirety.

“Almost difficult to ... well, it is not a good question. I have my tasks, but if not achieving them that would probably not be a function of being here in Hong Kong. It would be more a question about if my brain worked to carry out my tasks. But, I do not feel the combination of success and location is relevant (...) in my line of work, I just happen to be here in Hong Kong. I could have lived in Japan or Singapore; the answer would have been the same.”

The above statement reflects another appropriate ontological critique towards the EF concept; failure cannot always be assumed to function as an isolated relationship merely between the outcome of the assignment (failure) and the geographical location of the expatriate. A Danish male corporate expatriate raised a similar point. A factor that could lead to a failed stay would be if his wife did not feel comfortable, or missing children and grandchildren too much led them to return. The job was also mentioned, but not the one in Hong Kong. “It would be a failure if the company could not continue back home and generate profit, although we moved out to expand the business. But the experience and family are much more important than the job.” Thus, although work-related, it cannot be assumed that the perception of failure relates to the job in the host country. A Norwegian male expatriate working in the finance industry emphasised the facet of change over time as another ontological shortcoming of the EF concept: “Well, it also depends on the family situation in two to three years. Then, all of the children would have left home with just me and my wife left in Hong Kong”. What might constitute a failure today (e.g., children not able to adjust at school), would disappear when said children had left the home for university studies.

Another facet of the EF concept which can be criticised is the ontological assumption in the mainstream definition concerning the zero sum dynamics. A Swedish male expatriate working in the media and entertainment industry commented,

“Well.... If I get fired and lose my job and have to return home....or if my relationship with my girlfriend ends... but it is difficult to see the job thing as a failure after several years living in Hong Kong contemplating on all the things I have experienced – the only thing might be if

I run out of money and have to return home with my tail between my legs (...) the job is probably more important here but that is mostly because I am now in a management position. Before I was promoted, the job in Hong Kong was very secondary to my social life.”

Here, although losing one’s job is significant, it does not necessarily mean it represents a more significant potential failure factor than social ones. His utterance also reflects the importance of context and that things change with time; without the promotion, his answer would likely not relate to the job. Similarly, as explained by a Swedish male expatriate working in an American MNE, even losing your job might not necessarily be thought of as a failure:

“If you don’t enjoy spending time at work, when the job is such a big part of your life when living in Hong Kong...not enjoying your work, yeah, then that would be a failure. And of course getting the sack is some sort of a failure too. But in this type of market, where so many people are fired all the time, even losing your job is not necessarily a failure. If somebody is tasked to reduce costs, and you happen to sit in that department, you lose your job but you can be as good as anybody else – nothing personal. ”

The meaning of failure, according to the expatriates, related to their social lives – and not their jobs or general work environment. Not to be exposed to, or experiencing, international/multicultural environments reflected how the expatriates socially constructed failure in their minds. In the words of an expatriate in a Swedish multinational enterprise’s (MNE) top management:

“... we had never thought about moving to Asia until we did a summer holiday of sailing. So, now that we are living here, that’s what it’s all about: to give our teenage children an upbringing in a different culture, to give them an international outlook beyond just thinking about their home country as the centre of the world. If we don’t achieve that, then we’ll just go home”.

Thus, the absence of such acquired experience would have meant that they might as well have stayed at home. As it was, success was a state where expatriate, spouse, and/or children were exultant. A Norwegian male expatriate explained.

“Having to go home, not that dangerous. It is about the *experience*. The most important thing, essential, is that the family is happy. What most expats face issues with relates to feeling uncomfortable and especially if that is the wife. The job in Hong Kong came at a time when I had worked for a long time in Northern Europe. We discussed it. My wife was excited.”

This enthusiasm may have been generated as a result of three factors: first, the vast majority of the expatriates initiated their expatriation themselves within their own organisations; second, they were willing to move; and third, international assignments are often considered prestigious and career enhancing in Scandinavian work cultures. This Norwegian manager illustrates the point, “my small company in Norway needed somebody to be in Asia so I ended up running the office here in Hong Kong and travel to most surrounding countries to do sales. I thought it would be a great experience for my family.” This therefore makes the important point about why a definition of EF based on universality is troublesome and why we need to examine the context specific facet of Scandinavian-ness.

International assignments and accumulated cultural learning are perceived with respect to career and personal prestige in addition to the opportunity to live sought after international lives enriched by multicultural exposure. The actual job is often mentioned as secondary in importance compared to the international and intercultural experiences. It is not unlikely that individuals from organisation cultures where expatriation might be considered as stalling one’s career would have a very different outlook if they did not have a personal interest in gaining international/multicultural exposure.

Although the Scandinavian expatriates in our study focused primarily on the benefits expatriation had for their social lives, they also talked about work, but just not in relation to premature return. An expatriate working in the transportation industry declared: “If I don’t feel appreciated at my work any longer, or if I don’t feel I’m learning or being challenged, I’d

consider moving”. A female Swedish expatriate showed in practice how the failure/success binary does not apply:

“I have great difficulties in thinking about my stay here becoming a failure. Sure, you could say that I have lost out in terms of my career progression. I was on a completely different trajectory back home and now am doing very different things. So, if I look purely at the job situation, I probably have lost something. But we are winning from all the things we are experiencing! Asian culture, having lived here, it is a win, and although I might have been in a higher position back home, I believe this experience will bring me to something exciting in my future career. Without this experience I would never have been in this position, so it is not really possible to think about it as a loss.”

The actual lived experiences of the Scandinavian expatriates cannot be detached from the social and cultural contexts within which failure has been socially constructed. A female expatriate working in a Chinese company noted the important facet of time/duration:

A failed outcome...hmmm. I can really only come up with things relating to work. If I had performed poorly in the beginning when I moved here six years ago, at that point in time I probably would have considered it a failure if I had to move home. But now, after living here for six years I cannot really see how work things would relate to a failure. I *did not* fail, because the first years went well, so as per definition, I have not failed. In the beginning, I did not have a boyfriend but socially an amazing time, so if the job was only average why stay? Because overall, my stay here was OK. Now, with a partner, I would have chosen to stay, feeling as a success, even if the job is so-so because I have a great life socially. But if the latter had deteriorated, then a great job would not have helped me to stay. I think, the older you get, the more important your private life becomes.

A Swedish senior manager in a Swedish MNE demonstrated that even though the job could constitute a partial failure, it is not the most significant one:

“How will I define failure?If I cannot handle the job and not live up to the expectations placed upon me – that would be a partial failure. Another partial failure would be if we were not able to integrate the children into local society and everyday life. If it did not work with school and friends, etc, that would have negatively influenced my job as well (...) But family is definitely more important. New jobs exist out there, but if you do not take care of your family, it [the family] might not remain.”

In fact, job-related factors can lead to failure. A Swedish female corporate expatriate highlighted the importance of doing well on the job and having a smooth social life where the job was the most important potential failure factor. However, she emphasises that her

viewpoints are heavily related to her particular context. She relocated for the sole purpose of the job, coinciding with a break-up with her partner of nearly a decade, which made a conflict-free social life so important for achieving the much needed stability in her life. In addition to context being important, we argue that failure also needs to be understood in relation to why the expatriate was motivated to relocate.

Another Swedish female manager in a foreign MNE emphasised the intrinsic values and experiences of life, which also in her mind rendered the binary obsolete, “even if we were forced to move tomorrow, it has been fantastic, the opportunities for fun working here, the children were born here, I made new friends, met my current husband...it has been a privilege to live here. If anything, what I would take with me would be the pulse of the place, the intensity at work.”

Particularly, observations and informal conversations collected whilst in the field (as well as the interviews) are valuable to draw upon. Scandinavian expatriates reported that they were well adjusted to Hong Kong culture and society across both work and social spheres, despite almost completely opposite cultural profiles (Guttormsen, 2015; Hofstede, 1980) as well as vast linguistic distance (Selmer & Luring, 2012). What the expatriates expected to get out of the international assignments at the pre-entry stage was largely met. They greatly appreciated Hong Kong and enjoyed the experience of a new society and interacting with people from another culture. That is what they principally expected, and these expectations were fulfilled to a very high degree, leading to strong feelings of gratitude for what they experienced whilst living in the Territory. The majority did make the move for work, but it was evident that wanting to live an international/multicultural life was a catalyst or even the driving force.

It is notable that most of the Scandinavian expatriates possessed little knowledge about Hong Kong prior to moving there. With regard to failure, the lack of preparation described below could be expected to be a prelude to misery and despair, in the shape of unsuccessful international assignments with ensuing high EF rates. On the contrary, however, the Scandinavian expatriates reported a high level of satisfaction with living in and experiencing Hong Kong, and they were not ignorant of their new environment or unaware of how profoundly it differed from Scandinavia. The Scandinavian expatriates seemed to enjoy exploring this unknown other place. They also were open about how their future lives might develop and subsequently were less bothered about the move to Hong Kong – indeed, a culturally very different location.

Answers to the question of what they knew before they came frequently revolved around tall buildings and an expansive skyline. Most were aware that Hong Kong was part of China and was previously a British colony, and they knew that Hong Kong was a modern city of global financial importance. Many an expatriate was surprised, when looking back, at how limited their prior knowledge about Hong Kong had been. There were few signs of any lengthy deliberations prior to the move and few signs of any regret thereafter. As a Norwegian male expatriate explained it, “I asked a bit from a colleague in the office in Norway who had been here [Hong Kong] before but was not in contact with any in the office here.”

In terms of previous experience with Hong Kong, the vast majority of the Scandinavian expatriates had not visited or lived in the Territory before nor had they resided anywhere else in Asia. The rather narrow exposure to Hong Kong contextuality (and to Asian culture in general) does not appear to have created the need for them to prepare themselves

more extensively, for example, by using literature or culture and language courses. Exposure was often limited to brief encounters with a *Lonely Planet* guidebook or the 1957 novel *The World of Suzie Wong* (or subsequent movie), which an expatriate engineer reflected upon: “In hindsight, it is kind of strange and scary to think about how little I prepared myself”. Some expatriates, however, had taken up offers from their employer to visit Hong Kong prior to making the decision to move there (mostly those working in larger MNEs). These visits were often experienced as (too) touristy. A Swedish expatriate in the finance industry explained, “you are driven from A to B, quickly out and in, so you don’t really learn much about the culture and society.” Hence, some abstained from this offer as they preferred to experience Hong Kong at their own pace.

We also asked if prior learning took place via other sources. Some expatriates mentioned work colleagues in their home countries as sources of advice. However, only those working for large MNCs had such a resource available. The avenues for acquiring advice were also substantially influenced by type of organisation where the expatriate worked. For example, if expatriated by a Christian/missionary or diplomatic employer, training was provided. In the corporate sector, the courses were often superficial and limited to very general cultural dos and don’ts. Many found these programs less useful due to lack of depth and cultural specificity.

The first author presented some academic talks on culture for the expatriate community. Surprisingly, the expatriates found the complex social anthropological ideas to be more fascinating than the cross-cultural training they had received (even though they had no subject-specific background). “Listening to you [first author] talk about the social construction and identity stuff, it is very interesting, it makes me think, it makes me feel

young again,” a Norwegian director commented at the Scandinavian Social Club’s Christmas Dinner.

Pre-arrival initiatives from employers revolved mostly around the physical move and concerned such things as paid relocation package and practical assistance in regard to taxation and acquiring a visa. “Sure, there are quite many of the typical expatriates where everything is organised for them, on big contracts,” noted a Norwegian expatriate manager. But, among our sample, the international assignment was largely handled by the expatriate him- or herself. Most of their learning was a result of discussing issues with peer nationals at their work place or other social arenas after arriving in Hong Kong. After they began their new jobs, only a couple of expatriates, affiliated with large MNCs, reported any formal cross-cultural training.

Responses from the expatriates also revealed that contextual factors were in play. Many reported living in a bubble, which served as a mechanism through which many Scandinavian expatriates could remain less exposed to cultural friction when interacting with local Hong Kong Chinese people and society. The expatriates’ lack of local language skills (Cantonese, not Mandarin) and locals’ surprisingly low command of English outside the corporate sector and certain tourist areas made it more challenging for the Scandinavians to interact with locals. Geographically, the bubble took the form of a “golden triangle” where many expatriates from different nationalities live, work, and socialise. This triangle represented a relatively small area in Hong Kong island where much of expatriate life took place. Many expatriates live in Mid-Levels (an upmarket residential area), work in Central (the financial district), and play in Lan Kwai Fong (where there are many bars, restaurants, and nightclubs that cater to tourists and local expatriates). Many Scandinavian expatriates felt a strong sense

of belongingness to local society and culture due to the presence of this large expat community. Within this subculture, it was possible to be totally integrated without speaking a word of Chinese or having any Hong Kong Chinese friends.

b. Formulating the internationality thesis

From our data, we derive four critical aspects of the international/multicultural lives of Scandinavian expatriates in Hong Kong. We refer to this as the internationality thesis. The first aspect relates to language skills. All the interviewed expatriates are confidently multilingual, and almost half of the expatriates speak at least one additional language other than their native and English languages. Moreover, about a third is proficient in two additional languages. Internationality is represented in this aspect by the multilingual skills of the expatriates, which often enhances the ability to appreciate that a perfect “translation” between cultures is not plausible, as languages are a sub-system of cultures (Keesing & Strathern, 1998). (See Table 5.)

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The second aspect relates to the duration and volume of international/multicultural experience. More than 70% of the expatriates had lived in more than two countries, and almost half of them resided in up to five countries (See Table 6). According to Shaffer and Harrison (1998), prior international experience can accelerate interaction adjustment. Considering the Scandinavian expatriates’ high degree of perceived adjustment, it might not be a surprise that their social construction of failure would relate to internationality. This, again, underscores the importance of avoiding an EF definition premised on universal applicability.

[INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

The third aspect relates to more general international/multicultural experience. More than 90% of the interviewed expatriates had travelled to other countries, and 35% of them travelled internationally for their jobs on a monthly (or even weekly) basis (See Table 7). Guttormsen (2017) labelled the above form of expatriates as comb-patriates, i.e., expatriates who can be categorised in multiple expatriation categories (rendering categorisation obsolete): they were conventional long-term assignees staying for multiple years in an overseas location but also traveling frequently within the region.

[INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE]

The fourth aspect relates to the internationality within families. Indeed, more than half of expatriate families are “multinational” in terms of marriage (See Table 8). This more long-term intense international/multicultural exposure as opposed to a limited time expatriate experience can also contribute towards the appreciation of internationality and its important role in life. Collectively, the data depicted in tables 5-8 shows that the Scandinavian expatriates had a more international background in comparison with other available descriptive statistics concerning expatriate demographics (e.g., Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003). The experiential backgrounds of these Scandinavian expatriates as a whole were highly international, and thus consistent with the internationality thesis, as these aspects were significant in terms of what the expatriates expected and actually experienced in relation to their endeavours in Hong Kong.

[INSERT TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE]

This article shows how field data can challenge common assumptions in IB/IHRM research, and how and why conceptual boundaries can be redrawn around what constitutes failure. A high degree of internationality reflects both who the Scandinavians in this study were as expatriates and what they sought for their international assignments as integral to career development. The international element seemed to have priority, superseding even the work aspect. In the move to Hong Kong, the interaction of motivation and expectations in actual lived experiences emerged as the determining structure defining failure and success. The functional reasons for moving to Hong Kong (such as a job) were almost unanimously related to adventure – a desire to experience something different to add to their international and intercultural profiles (e.g., as a gift to their children as part of their upbringing) and to embark on a new chapter in life.

We also would like to suggest that the internationality thesis is a double-edged concept. Based on interfacing and cross-tabulating elements of the data, we argue that the Scandinavian expatriates exhibit a pronounced international profile. However, the interview accounts, profiling of the research subjects' interaction patterns, and observations in the field also noticeably demonstrated a different social reality which conflicted with their own recipe for avoiding failure: the expatriates interacted mostly with other Scandinavians and expatriates of other nationalities and overall had very limited social engagement with locals in everyday life. A Norwegian expatriate felt a bit embarrassed when answering a related question, "I have lived here for many years, but except for some local colleagues in the office, my contact with the locals is actually limited to taking taxis ...". Thus, we argue, the international and intercultural exposure and experience acquired by the majority of the expatriates related chiefly to the international face of Hong Kong.

c. Towards reconceptualisation

In this article, we have argued for the need to change the approach to defining, and studying, EF. We also have criticised the firm-level bias and the premise of universality in the EF definition. To just offer a different definition based on the latter paradigmatic footing could only lead to excluding other important aspects. Thus, on the basis of the internationality thesis explicated above, we call for a reconceptualisation of the definition of EF which does not rely on universality and as a means to better grasp failure as a context-embedded social phenomenon (see Whetten, 2009). Integral to our proposed reconceptualisation, we offer both a definition as well as a research practice which could accommodate the above. Based on a paradigm where an EF definition is not required to have a universal property, we propose that EF should be defined as:

Expatriate failure occurs when the expatriate and/or his/her employing organisation consider(s) that the expatriate assignment was unable to satisfy either/both the individual and the organisation before, during, or after the assignment. The failure can be considered along multiple continua including but not limited to work performance, career development, and life satisfaction.

We also suggest a reconceptualisation in terms of the current binary understanding of failure/success. In the extant literature, the EF concept represents an illogical dichotomised understanding of international assignments. Current research practices treat failure and success as opposites (Canhilal et al., 2015; Holopainen & Björkman, 2005), i.e., that success relates to not having ended the contract prematurely, but if failing, then the expatriate has returned home before the end of the contract (Dowling et al., 2017). Consequently, the simple binary opposition needs to be contested; we need, at the least, to operate with more than one binary. For example, failure and success can be understood as a continuum (rather than a binary), and an individual might socially construct failure on various continua – in the workplace, in personal life, in social life, in family life, etc. This also means that failure and success, as represented by multiple continua, can exist simultaneously in an expatriate's life.

Reconceptualisation of the EF concept can also take place in terms of level, which opens new avenues of research inquiry: is it the inability of the firm or the inability of the expatriate which is causing the failure? If there is failure, whose failure is it? What if the expatriate is the most senior manager overseas? Does this constitute a failure at the individual level (i.e., the expatriate), or can the blame be placed on the firm (failure at the organisational level)? Should an expatriate (or the firm, for that matter) be held accountable for failure in the same way, even if the reasons are related to macro, external events beyond their control (e.g., failing oil prices making thousands of engineers and workers redundant)? And can the individual and the organisational levels be taxonomically distinguished anyway? Is it legitimate to evaluate non-work aspects of what constitutes a failure?

We have also demonstrated that facets such as time/duration, context, and geographical locations play a role but remain excluded by the mainstream EF definition. Additionally, we have illustrated how the utility of failure as a general measure can be contested. We propose personal satisfaction as a more relevant parameter. We avoid dealing with universality by not suggesting a level or value of satisfaction.

Regarding the second part of the reconceptualisation, we encourage scholars and practitioners to devise research designs for investigating EF by employing research practices that include cyclic research processes, granting primacy to the field data and the research subjects which we actually are studying and want to be able to say something about. Social constructionism provides a platform for this and can be deployed in various contexts/cultures. We encourage researchers to solicit information from expatriates regarding failure and success without forcing them into thinking in binary terms, welcoming them to think about their assignments in terms of concepts other than failure and success. We encourage the analysis of expatriate responses in relation to facets such as time/duration, context, and

geographical location as well as motivation for the relocation in the first place, within the conveyed narratives of their lived experiences. Consequently, we also recommend scholars to look for additional categories of failure factors and facets beyond those listed above.

6. Conclusion: theoretical contributions, managerial relevance, research implications, limitations, and future research

This article has revisited the EF concept debate and demonstrated the need for reconceptualising mainstream approaches in order to understand and investigate the social phenomenon of EF by granting primacy to the social construction of failure by individual expatriates.

a. Theoretical contributions and implications for research

First, our study has demonstrated the credibility of adding the individual analytical level as a missing interrelationship – beyond the concerns of only the firm – to appreciate what constitutes failure/success to actual expatriates (see Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Hitt & Smith, 2005; Whetten, 1989). A second contribution relates to the exposed fallacy of investigating failure as a dichotomised binary of success/failure. In our research, the expatriates did not treat the two phenomena as a binary. For example, the lack of particular failure factors does not necessarily constitute success, and the presence of perceived success factors does not always translate into having removed potential failure factors. Thus, there is a strong need to operate with more than a single success/failure continuum, and these multiple continua can operate at different levels.

The third theoretical contribution reflects an alternative approach to making judgments regarding the EF concept. The application of a social constructionist embedded methodology,

which gives primacy to the field data, allows pre-established theories to be challenged and modified. These efforts show how a holistic social analysis commencing in the field can expose new, relevant avenues for academic inquiry beyond the definitional level. How people interpret what they perceive (Crotty, 1998; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2008) and their meaning-construction become crucial because behaviour as physical observation cannot be understood without meaning. As a result, judging EF only based on a single behaviour (i.e., premature return) falls short of conveying deeper appreciation of the issue and concept.

As far as implications for research, our study has shown the importance of how knowledge is produced and endorses the approach of giving primacy to the research subjects being investigated. Such a social constructionist theoretical perspective can provide new or modified understanding of a social phenomenon. If we had conducted the investigation in a conventional manner, the definition of EF would have led to the discovery of the number of premature returns simply by counting those. This would have denied the agency of the expatriates and marginalised their own lived experiences and voices. Aspects of a very different understanding of what constitutes failure would have remained uncovered. In other words, counting correctly would not mean counting in a meaningful manner. As Ardener (1971a, b) showed some time ago, we cannot have a measure of a social phenomenon until we have a definition. If we use definitions from academic discussion, rather than definitions from the minds and actions of those we are studying, we subsequently risk measuring meaningless things. As Ardener noted, a definition has implications for the count; if we give primacy to the definitions of the people we are studying, then we must count and enumerate within those definitions as well.

The Scandinavian expatriates did not explicitly refer to the mainstream academic definition of EF, but several conveyed their opinions based on failure to mean ‘premature return’. This underscores the practical significance of the present study as expatriates themselves do not seem to be consciously aware of thinking about failure/success as something other than an outcome variable.

b. Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, our study included expatriates from only one region, Scandinavia, who were living in a single place, Hong Kong. We believe that context is important in studying the EF concept, and having a sample that encompasses expatriates from a wider range of countries working in a variety of locations may have provided additional insight. Second, we have not interviewed employers or representatives from HR departments within MNEs that could unveil further nuances in the understanding of the EF concept. We acknowledge that the view of the organisation vs the expatriate could lead to further understanding. Finally, the first author who conducted all the interviews is not a native speaker of Swedish, Danish, or English, hence it could be the case that conveyed meanings, cultural reference points, and linguistic nuances have not been fully appreciated.

c. Future research

Increased attention towards establishing a social constructionist research programme within the purview of the IB and IHRM research agendas, and beyond, is well deserved (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966). To investigate specific criteria for failure and success as well as the relation between them could assist in overcoming the issue of illogical dichotomised binaries. This line of inquiry would be particularly helpful to incorporate when exploring the links between an MNE’s international strategies and the outcomes of its expatriation policies

(Bonache, Brewster, & Suutari, 2001; Bonache et al., 2014; Bonache, Brewster, Suutari, & de Saá, 2010). Additionally, as expatriates enter the host country in various modes (Guttormsen, 2017), e.g., from a third country/another local firm and with various levels of experience, EF should also be researched in relation to the expatriate entry mode. This study could also be replicated with Scandinavian/non-Scandinavian respondents working in a variety of countries to explore the representativeness of the internationality thesis proposed in this article.

We also propose more research on the diverging views of what constitutes failure which highlights reconceptualising EF with a context-embedded approach (Cheng, 1994; Shapiro, Von Glinow, & Xiao, 2007; Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004; Whetten, 2009). This could make the universal definition of failure obsolete as well as recognise that the social construction of failure and success can only be understood in relation to the dynamics of specific geographical locations and cultural environments. Part of this encouragement relates to studying expatriate failure in relation to actual lived experiences during the relocation process (including repatriation) – for example, in relation to the management style which the working expatriate is exposed to within his or her own organisation (see Luring, Jonasson, & Guttormsen *In Press*); within multicultural teams (see Stahl, Mäkelä, Zander, & Maznevski, 2010); their living arrangements (Selmer & Luring, 2009); dealing with identity threats and changes relating to working in organisations undergoing change (e.g., Moore, 2012); and when communicating across cultural boundaries during cross-cultural encounters (Gertsen & Söderberg, 2010; Peltokorpi, 2010).

A quantitative, comparative study (such as a large-scale survey) could examine expatriates' own constructions of failure and success across multiple countries and industries to further explore nuances of the EF concept and to identify specific success and failure

criteria. In particular, constructions of failure/success could be studied in relation to social phenomena as actual lived experiences during the international assignment. Similarly, failure and success could be studied within contexts with higher degrees of uncertainties, such as terrorism (Bader & Berg, 2014). Further understanding of the EF concept could be achieved by comparing perspectives of expatriates and their supervisors within the dyadic relationship which could be designed as a mixed method investigation to obtain further multidimensional understanding (Kiessling & Harvey, 2005).

d. Managerial relevance

MNEs need to understand the actual reasons why particular aspects are considered or experienced as failure or success – as the absence of failure factors does not necessarily lead to a successful assignment, and the continued presence of particular success factors does not always prevent an assignment from failing (i.e., the illogicality of the failure/success binary). Furthermore, what constitutes failure and success would also depend on the context, hence the need for understanding these social phenomena as context-embedded (see Whetten, 2009). It was possible for the Scandinavians to live highly international and intercultural lives in spite of limited contact with the local Hong Kong Chinese due to the existence of a distinct expatriate community. This interwoven tapestry of social realities is a strong signal for international managers, as well as both MNEs and other international work organisations, to better understand both the social and corporate lives of their employees in a more holistic fashion. Thus, when investigating reasons for failure and identifying ways to prevent them, attention needs to be paid to both the social and work environments of the expatriate.

If MNEs were only to implement efforts to avoid failure by concentrating on work aspects, this study has shown how that might be misplaced. MNEs also need to be aware that

reportedly high levels of adjustment and few/no failing expatriates do not necessarily mean that their expatriates have become strong cultural carriers with the ability to transfer extensive cross-cultural and local market knowledge within the organisation. The perceived high adjustment among the Scandinavian expatriates in our study often did not relate to local colleagues and culture but rather to the international facet of Hong Kong.

We also propose that organisations should map what their expatriate employees would perceive to constitute a failure or a success. The aim should be to record if sufficient congruency exists between all of the following key aspects: the nature of the job; purpose of the international assignment; skills profile of the expatriate; type of expected lifestyle and living standard in the host location; motivation for relocating; and the costs and benefits associated with the assignment both for the organisation and the expatriate as an individual.

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Table 1 Organisational affiliation (by gender)

| Industry | | Male | Female |
|---------------------------------------|---|-------------|---------------|
| 1 | Financial services | 8 | 0 |
| 2 | Diplomacy/Not-for-profit interest organisations | 3 | 3 |
| 3 | Aviation/Tourism/Corporate education | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | Public Education/Academic research | 3 | 1 |
| 5 | Home (Spouse/Family member) | 0 | 5 |
| 6 | Retail/Clothing/Footwear/Sports/Leisure | 2 | 3 |
| 7 | Manufacturing | 2 | 0 |
| 8 | Technology/ICT/Electronics | 3 | 2 |
| 9 | Logistic/Maritime/Shipping | 3 | 0 |
| 10 | NGO/Charity/Religious organisations | 1 | 1 |
| 11 | Media/Publishing | 3 | 1 |
| 12 | Private investors/Entrepreneurs | 1 | 0 |
| 13 | Non-corporate health and medical services | 0 | 1 |
| 14 | Consulting | 1 | 1 |
| 15 | Design | 0 | 1 |
| Gender (male and female) | | 31 | 20 |
| Total (both genders) | | 51 | N/A |
| Corporate expatriates (by gender) | | 24 | 9 |
| <i>Total (corporate expatriates)</i> | | <i>33</i> | <i>N/A</i> |
| Non-corporate expatriates (by gender) | | 7 | 11 |
| <i>Total (non-corporate)</i> | | <i>18</i> | <i>N/A</i> |

Table 2 Distribution of Scandinavians (by gender and nationality)

| Nationality | | | | |
|--------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Gender | <i>Denmark</i> | <i>Norway</i> | <i>Sweden</i> | <i>Total</i> |
| Male | 6 | 11 | 14 | 31 |
| Female | 2 | 5 | 13 | 20 |
| Total | 8 | 16 | 27 | 51 |

Table 3 Scandinavian expatriates by age

| | Both | Male | Female |
|---------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Average age (year) | 40.694 | 43.290 | 36.222 |
| Max value (year) | 67 | 67 | 61 |
| Min value (year) | 17 | 23 | 17 |
| Variance (year) | 50 | 44 | 44 |

Table 4 Categorisation of included organisations

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| Total organisations | 38 |
| Corporate | 26 |
| Educational | 5 |
| Other | 7 |

Table 5 Language capabilities of Scandinavian expatriates

| | Corporate | | Others | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> |
| Native + English or; | 15 | 4 | 3 | 5 |
| Multiple native languages | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| And: | | | | |
| (+1) language | 4 | 3 | 2 | 7 |
| (+2) languages | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| (+3) languages | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| (+4) languages | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Subtotal (>2 languages) | 9 | 4 | 4 | 7 |
| Cantonese | | | | |
| Beginner level | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Conversational | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Fluent | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Mandarin | | | | |
| Beginner | 5 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Conversational | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Fluent | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 6 International exposure (living abroad)

| | Corporate | | Others | |
|-------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> |
| Home country + Hong Kong | 5 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| And: | | | | |
| (+1) country | 6 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| (+2) countries | 7 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| (+3) countries | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| (+4) countries | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| (+5) countries | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| (+6) or more countries | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Category total | 18 | 5 | 6 | 8 |
| Subtotal (>home+HK, SAR) | | | | |
| All categories | 37 | | | |

Table 7 International exposure in terms of travelling

| | | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| International travelling experience (excluding residency) | | | | |
| <i>1 country</i> | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| <i>2-5 countries</i> | 11 | 5 | 2 | 6 |
| <i>6-10 countries</i> | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| <i>More than 10 countries</i> | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Category total</i> | 22 | 10 | 5 | 10 |
| Subtotal (>home+SAR) All categories | 47 | | | |
| International travelling (with Hong Kong job) | | | | |
| <i>Weekly/fortnight</i> | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Monthly</i> | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Every 6-12 months</i> | 2 | 2 | 5 | 0 |
| <i>Category total</i> | 7 | 6 | 5 | 0 |
| Subtotal (travelling in job) All categories | 18 | | | |

Table 8 Accompanied by family

| | Corporate | Non-corporate |
|---|-----------|---------------|
| Spouses | | |
| Married same nationality | 7 | 9 |
| Married with local | 2 | 3 |
| Married with other nationality | 10 | 2 |
| Spouse dual residence | 2 | 1 |
| <i>Subtotal couples</i> | 36 | |
| <i>Subtotal "international couples"</i> | 20 | |
| Children (residing in Hong Kong) | | |
| Children from home country | 5 | 5 |
| Others | 5 | 2 |
| <i>Subtotal - family "units" with children accompanied from home country</i> | 10 | |
| <i>Subtotal - family "units" with children descended from "international couples"</i> | 7 | |

APPENDIX A

In-depth Interview Questions

1. What were your reasons for moving to HK?
 - a) How was it decided that you would move to HK, and how was this organised?
 - b) Did you prepare yourself to move to HK prior to arrival (e.g. pre-training)?
 - c) Did you have any expectations concerning your stay in HK prior to arriving?
2. What were your first experiences of Hong Kong? (e.g. general society, familial relations, work place, people you encountered – locals and/or expatriates from other countries)
3. How do you experience living/working in HK?
 - a) How have you learned about HK society and culture after moving here (e.g. training)?
 - b) Who do you interact with whilst residing in HK?
 - c) How do you deal with challenges relating to living in HK?
 - Any good and bad examples?
4. How would you describe the society and culture in HK?
 - a. Do you have a particular experience which stands out and exemplifies how you perceive the HK society and culture in comparison with your own?
5. How would you describe your own culture?
6. How would you describe cultures in other Scandinavian countries?
 - a) How do you experience Scandinavians in HK, and in Scandinavia?
 - b) Could you please complete this form - How would you characterise an 'ideal leader'?
7. From your perspective, what would constitute a success and a failure in terms of the purpose of your stay?
8. What languages do you use in HK?
9. Taking your experiences in HK into account, what do you think about staying abroad again in the future?
 - a. Have your gained experiences in HK influenced your decisions about your future (e.g. career)?
10. Do you consider yourself a visitor in HK or an individual who has emigrated to HK?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?
12. Are you willing to introduce me to other Scandinavians in your network?