**The moderating effect of co-worker support on role stress and work adjustment:**
**A comparison of national and international assignments**

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Keywords: role stressors, social support, work adjustment, domestic and international assignments.

This study contributes to the field of international human resource management and the literature on expatriation and work adjustment (e.g. Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Glazer, 2006; Stroppa & Spieß, 2011) by examining the effect of role stress on work adjustment and whether this effect can be mitigated by co-worker support, comparing domestic and international assignments. Specifically, we examine how role novelty, role conflict and role ambiguity affect adjustment during domestic and international assignments and to what extent co-worker support moderates this relationship, assuming that role stress has a negative effect on work adjustment which is stronger for international assignments and that co-worker support has an alleviative effect on this relationship for both types of assignment which is stronger for international assignments, too. Theoretical implications for the concept of social support in adjustment research are discussed. Finally, this study discusses practical implications for companies that send their staff on domestic and international assignments.

In the last decade work role transitions to national and international assignments continue to be a key theme in the human resource literature against the backdrop of an increasing globalization of the business world. These developments are based on the phenomena that the environment of organizations is highly variable (Castells, 2003), and companies have an interest in assigning mainly high qualified personnel (Lee & Van Vorst, 2010: 628) which stimulates career mobility on an individual level (Baruch, 2003; Cascio, 2000). „Having the right people in the right places at the right times could be the key to a company's success in the international arena" (McEnery & DesHarnais, 1990: 43). So far, scholars have investigated the challenges of employees that go through expatriation, and how organizations can manage those employees more effectively (e.g., Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004; Mol, Born, Willemsen, & van der Molen, 2005; Morris & Robie, 2001).

In line with international developments also in the Austrian context for a long time expatriation was an opportunity for employees to work abroad. Mainly MNCs used expatriation assignments to send highly qualified personnel abroad for at least one year. In general, expatriation programmes are characterized by an international assignment of between one and five years (Harris, Brewster, & Erten, 2005). Expatriation is very costly for companies. Moreover in the last few years many organizations reported difficulties finding and motivating suitable people to undertake international assignments (Baruch & Altman, 2002; Doherty & Dickmann, 2012). Thus a trend towards reducing expatriation programmes can be observed (Erten, Schiffinger, Mayrhofer, & Dunkel, 2006). Since Austria's economy is dominated by small- and medium-sized companies, the group of large MNCs able to offer expatriate programmes is limited in any case and domestic assignments are a possible human resource strategy. However, for many of them expatriation still is an essential part of their international expansion (OMV Group, 2010; Wienerberger, 2010).

One issue relating to the success of international assignments are determinants of work adjustment. Expatriate assignments demand a considerable amount of adaptation, so perceived work adjustment would seem to be an outcome of considerable importance, especially since international assignments are often accompanied by a high turnover of former expatriates which is particularly damaging for companies because these often take positions in competitor firms. Stress in transitioning can have an negative effect on individual and on the success of the overall assignment (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002).

In particular, the psychological withdrawal can have a number of negative effects and cognitive outcomes for expatriates and the organizations that employ them. This can include reduced confidence and trust in the employee as well as strained relationships with co-workers abroad and can have an negative impact on the company's reputation (Black & Gregersen, 1991). The magnitude of these consequences illustrates the importance of better understanding work adjustment of assignees in order to have successful assignments. Especially, work-related adjustment is an essential theme that contributes to successful assignments (Black, 1988a). Furthermore, such signs of adjustment difficulties, work stress and dissatisfaction can also have a negative impact on the desire of other employees to agree to go on assignments, international and domestic (Feldman & Tompson, 1993).

While the impact of work role stress on outcomes such as adjustment and the potentially mitigating effect of social support have been intensively examined for international assignments (e.g. Kraimer & Wayne, 2004), less attention has been given to the question to which extent the same effects can be observed for domestic assignments. The present paper explores this research gap, investigating the effect of role stressors and its moderation by co-

worker support on work adjustment for both domestic and international assignments among a sample of expatriates with recent experience in both types of assignments.

**Work adjustment**

In general individuals exhibit insecurity when entering a new environment (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991: 302). Berry (1992) defines adjustment as „a state whereby changes occur in the individual in a direction of increased fit and reduced conflict between the environmental demands and the individual attitudinal and behavioural inclinations" (Aycan, 1997: 436). According to Torbiörn (1982) a successful adjustment process is characterized as the retention of a balanced psychological condition which leads to effective functioning (Aycan, 1997: 436). Additionally, Torbiörn (1982) describes adjustment as „a dependent relationship, in which changes take place in the individual as a result of new conditions in his surroundings" (Kittler, Rygl, & Puce, 2008: 63). In contrast Black (1988a) defines adjustment according to the new work role as „the degree to which the person has mastered the role requirements and is able to demonstrate that adjustment via his or her performance" (278).

Specifically, literature on work adjustment deals with questions of how individuals accept new work roles and how they adjust. Based on processes of work role adjustment during assignments in general, scholars have explored work adjustment during international assignments, too (Black et al., 1991: 313f). Both streams of literature describe the basic process individuals leave their confident environment and enter a new, unfamiliar terrain. In unknown situations old routines are abolished which leads to psychological uncertainty. In these situations individuals aspire towards reducing uncertainty. Thus, doubtfulness challenges new forms of behavior because new behaviors are needed and expected while old routines are considered as inadequate and inacceptable (Black et al., 1991: 301f). In line with the abovementioned emphasis of adjustment processes during international assignments as opposed to domestic assignments, cultural novelty has been found to play an important role during adjustment processes on international assignments (Ward, 2001). According to Black et al. (1991) cultural novelty plays a major role for adjustment processes on international assignments due to the magnitude of external disruptions for familiar practices. Adjustment is therefore especially an issue for successful work transitions on an international level (Morley & Flynn, 2003: 43). Especially for organizations that send assignees the consequences of adjustment are important (McEvoy & Parker, 1995) and to understand how adjustment can be triggered. As assignments are cost intensive it is beneficial to find out about predictors of adjustment to adapt human resource practices and policies (Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002).

**Role Stress in work settings**

One of the most mentioned causes for work stressors is the transitioning from one workplace to another (Litzke & Schuh, 2005: 2f; Aryee & Stone, 1996: 151). In particular for assignments, both national and international, that are defined as work role transitions (Nicholson, 1984), role conceptualizations are a important anchor to describe the transition process and to identify differences. Particularly, for expatriates work adjustment is central and has an impact on their performance as well as well being. During national and international assignments work role transition is a main predictor for role stress (Litzke & Schuh, 2005:  2f; Aryee & Stone, 1996: 151) because of uncertainty about adequate behavior and how to adjust to new roles. According to Brett (1980) role novelty, role conflict and role ambiguity as well as novelty of work settings are influencing factors increasing uncertainty and thus negatively affect adjustment (Brett, 1980; Black et al., 1991: 301). Moreover, the first three dominant factors describing role conditions trigger conditions of increased uncertainty, unpredictability, lack of control, unfamiliarity of new work roles.

Again, while extant research acknowledges the impact of role stress on adjustment for national as well as international assignments (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), the emphasis appears to lie with international assignments (Black et al., 1991: 280f)., with consensus that international assignments especially come along with stressors and that adjustment can be identified as inevitable coping strategy for stress (Wang, 2002: 323).

*Role novelty* is defined by the difference between the previous and the new work role. This deviation causes a high degree of uncertainty (Black, 1988a: 280; Aryee & Stone, 1996: 152f). and unpredictability (Black, 1988a: 280). This tightens to difficulties which are essential for dealing with new situations. According to Andreason (2003) role novelty not only includes differences according to the task, but also differences according to circumstances and condition like e.g. technical facilities, society and economy (46). Some research results are contradictive. While Shaffer et al. (1999) posit a negative relationship with work role, Black (1988a: 289) finds no relationship which is explained by the complexity during international assignments dealing with many novelties not only on the dimension of role novelty (see also Rygl, Wiedemann, Schillo, & Kell, 2008: 117f). By contrast, Feldman und Tompson (1993) even found role novelty to be supportive of work adjustment (522).

*Role conflict* occurs when there are mixed or incompatible messages about how to satisfy expectations for a single role. In specific, there are often contradictory signals respectively messages of expected behavior perceived. Consequently, individuals are constrained in their ability to appraise those messages and to judge which messages they shall ignore and which they shall follow (Black, 1988a: 281). Role conflict encompasses bundles of roles that are not

adjusted (Handy, 1985: 63) and which leads to uncertainty for developing attitudes (Black, 1988a: 281). This also encompasses the congruence and/or incongruence or incompatibility of role requirements (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970: 155). Specifically, there are four forms of role conflict: intra-sender conflict, inter-sender conflict and inter-role conflict (Weirich, 1979). Again, extant literature posits that these effects are particularly important for expatriates (Rizzo et al., 1970: 151) (partly) owing to the new cultural environment (Black & Gregersen, 1991).

*Role ambiguity.* Rizzo et al. (1970) describe role ambiguity as referring to the (lack of) existence and clarity of behavioral requirements as well as the predictability of the behavior of others (155). An increase in role ambiguity goes with a diminished ability to predict certain behaviors. Consequently, the ability to use and rely on successful behaviors from the past to predict and shape future events is reduced (Black, 1988a: 281). As a result this can lead to dissatisfaction and anxiety as well as distorted perceptions of situations and to a decrease in efficient activity (Rizzo et al., 1970: 151). Similar to role novelty, research findings in connection with work adjustment are inconsistent. According to Black and Gregersen (1991) role ambiguity has an negative effect on adjustment in work settings, while according to a study by Aryee and Stone (1996) it has a positive relationship (158).

**Social support in the work setting**

In general social relationships are seen as essential components of daily life and also for work life. Adelman (1988: 183) states that "our ability to cope with daily stressors, critical life transitions, and environmental or cultural change is inextricably tied to the social ecology in which we are embedded." Several research results come to the conclusion that employee who receive social support adjust to a new and unfamiliar environment more easily than those who do not (e.g. Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). When we talk about social support, we refer to social ties as an important resource between assignees and their co-worker in their work settings. The definition of Albrecht and Adelman (1987) underlines that social support as the "verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience" (185).

Previous conceptual and empirical research has focused on the social support provided to expatriates (Lee & Van Vorst, 2010) and to employees in general (Lawrence & Callan, 2011). Due to the nature of transition of especially international assignments, this often implies that expatriates have to leave friends and their social life behind as they move to a new country.

Thus, they need to seek out for new support systems (Adelman, 1988). Furthermore, social context is central element of the abovementioned role stressors, in particular the social support received from co-workers and/or supervisors. Generally, social support can refer to four areas: emotional support (caring, empathy, trust), instrumental support (providing tangible aid or goods), informational support (assisting in problem solving), and appraisal support (affirmation or communicating self-evaluation) (Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997). Accordingly, social support constructs and measures are not always well defined (Thoits, 1982 ).

Moreover, social support at work by co-workers and/or supervisors has been found to be an important buffer against stress (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Haines, Hurlbert, and Zimmer (1991) posit that social support plays an important role in stress-strain concepts. According to those models high levels of stressors are likely to produce strain in individuals who are receiving low amounts of social support, but not for individuals with high social support.

**Hypotheses**

There is a consensus in the literature that role stressors like role novelty, role conflict, and role ambiguity lead to uncertainty, unpredictability and to lack of control of the current work-role which has an negative impact on of work adjustment. Concerning role conflict the negative relationship between role conflict and adjustment is consistently confirmed by the literature on work adjustment (Aryee & Stone, 1996). New work settings national and international are engraved by conflict and also leads to high uncertainty for involved people (Black et al., 1991: 309). Research states inconsistent results about the effect of role conflicts especially for adjustment in different cultures. Role ambiguity is characterized by a lack of clarity and uncertainty regarding role expectations and requirements (Rizzo et al., 1970. An increase of role ambiguity restricts the individual predictability for behavior because experiences from the past cannot be projected (Black, 1988b).

*H1: Role stressors (role novelty, role conflict, role ambiguity) have a negative effect on work adjustment for national and international assignments.*

As already mentioned, cultural novelty is a crucial factor that has an effect on work adjustment. Individuals that transition to new cultural settings have to deal with new circumstances and cross more cultural boundaries which can include e.g. language barriers.etc. (Black et al., 1991; Breiden, Mirza, & Mohr, 2004,). Previous studies have stated that knowledge of the culture where they are assigned to is considered to be an important

individual factor that leads to successful adjustment (e.g. Black, 1988a; Tung, 1988). The knowledge about the appropriateness of social customs, business practices, communicative and social behaviours are beneficial for work adjustment in general (Takeuchi et al., 2002). During transitioning to new work environment people tend to evaluate their new situation in terms of their knowledge. People who have more knowledge about and previous experience with the new working environment are more likely to be familiar with it than others. This is consistent with the concept of culture novelty for international assignments as an individually perceived comparison of commonalities (or differences) of the host culture to the home culture (e.g. Black & Stephens, 1989a; Black & Gregersen, 1991). Following this logic, for domestic assignments this is a great advantage compared to international assignments. For international assignments this can also be applied, the more assignees know about the culture of the host country, the less stress and the more realistic expectations they will have and consequently the better adjusted they will be (Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique, & Bürgi, 2001). Thus we suggest that role stressors are more precarious for international assignees and less for domestic assignments (Baruch & Altman, 2002):

*H2: The effect of role stressors on work adjustment is larger for international than for national assignments.*

Social support can be defined in terms of the sources and quality of helping relationships. Research on social networks has shown that social support from co-worker networks serve as a resource that contributes to adjustment (Johnson, Kristof-brown, Van vianen, De pater, & Klein, 2003). According to the model of stress-buffering studies suggest that increased level of social support moderates the negative effects of stress on long-term outcomes.(Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001) and positive moderation was found (Dunseath, Beehr, & King, 1995). Given the findings cited above which support the notion of social support at work being a potential remedy against the detrimental effects of role stress on work adjustment, we further posit:

*H3: Social support attenuates the effect of role stressors on work adjustment for national and international assignments.*

**Sample**

The analyses are based on responses from 93 ex- and/or repatriates (37% female, mean age 40 years ±10, 79% born in Austria, Germany or Switzerland). Recruitment of participants drew on international organizations in Austria, e.g. UNO, international ministry, embassies and consulates, economic chambers as well as organizations for expatriates which

distributed the questionnaire among their members and international companies. About one-third of the sample reported working for a governmental body or public institution as opposed to a private company.

**Measures**

Respondents' assessments concerning role stress, co-worker support, and work adjustment were collected both for the most recent (or current) national and international assignment, except for role novelty where this distinction was not made as it intrinsically refers to the change between international and national assignment and not to one of the two. The criterion variable work adjustment was measured by a three-item scale based on Black and Stephens (1989b) ascertaining adjustment to job responsibilities, performance standards and expectations, and coordination with others. Cronbach Alpha was .87 for both national and international work adjustment.

Concerning predictor variables, *role novelty* was assessed using the three-item scale by West et al. (1987), measuring the perceived differences between focal and previous job concerning tasks, skills, and methods. Here, the scale consistency is less satisfactory with a Cronbach Alpha of .63. The measurement of *role conflict* was based on Gupta et al. (1999) and consisted of five items (e.g., "I receive incompatible requests from two or more executives"), with a Cronbach Alpha of .65 for the national assignment (NA) and .62 for the international assignment (IA). *Role ambiguity* measurement (four items, e.g., "There are clear planned goals and objectives for my job" (-)) was based on Gupta et al. (1999), too, with Cronbach Alpha values of .84 for the NA and .81 for the IA. Finally, measurement of co-worker support consisted of the four-item "co-worker support" subscale (e.g., "He/She can be relied on when things get tough at work") employed by Lee and van Vorst (2010). Here, Cronbach Alpha was .86 for both national and international assignment. The control variables included were gender, age, whether it was an overseas assignment or not, and the duration of the stay abroad in months.

**Results**

Hypothesis 1 posits that role novelty, role conflict, and role ambiguity reduce work adjustment for both national and international assignments. We conducted linear regression analyses with each of the three predictors and the abovementioned control variables for both international and national work adjustment. The results (beta coefficients) are presented in the following table:

| DV: work adjustment (national/international) | Role novelty | | Role conflict | | Role ambiguity | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of assignment | NA | IA | NA | IA | NA | IA |
| Role stressor *(see row 1)* | -.13 | . 00 | -.30 ** | -.12 | -.47 ** | -.26 * |
| Gender (female) | -.02 | -.01 | -.08 | -.02 | -.10 | -.02 |
| Age | .19 | .14 | .14 | .13 | .12 | .12 |
| Overseas assignment | .02 | -.21 * | .02 | -.18 † | -.03 | -.21 * |
| Duration of stay abroad | -.03 | .34 ** | .01 | .33 ** | -.01 | .26 * |
| $R^2$ | .06 | .19 | .13 | .20 | .25 | .25 |

Two-tailed p: † < .10   * < .05   ** < .01

It is apparent that despite a consistent tendency in the predicted sense this assumption is only partially supported. For role novelty, no significant effect was found for either national or international assignments. The effect of role conflict is statistically significant for national assignments only. Role ambiguity is the only role stressor which significantly reduced work adjustment for both national and international assignments.

Consequently, the results for all three role stressors contradict our assumption H2 that work adjustment is more strongly affected by role stress during international assignments; rather, we found the reverse: the effect of all three role stressors on work adjustment was stronger for national assignments.
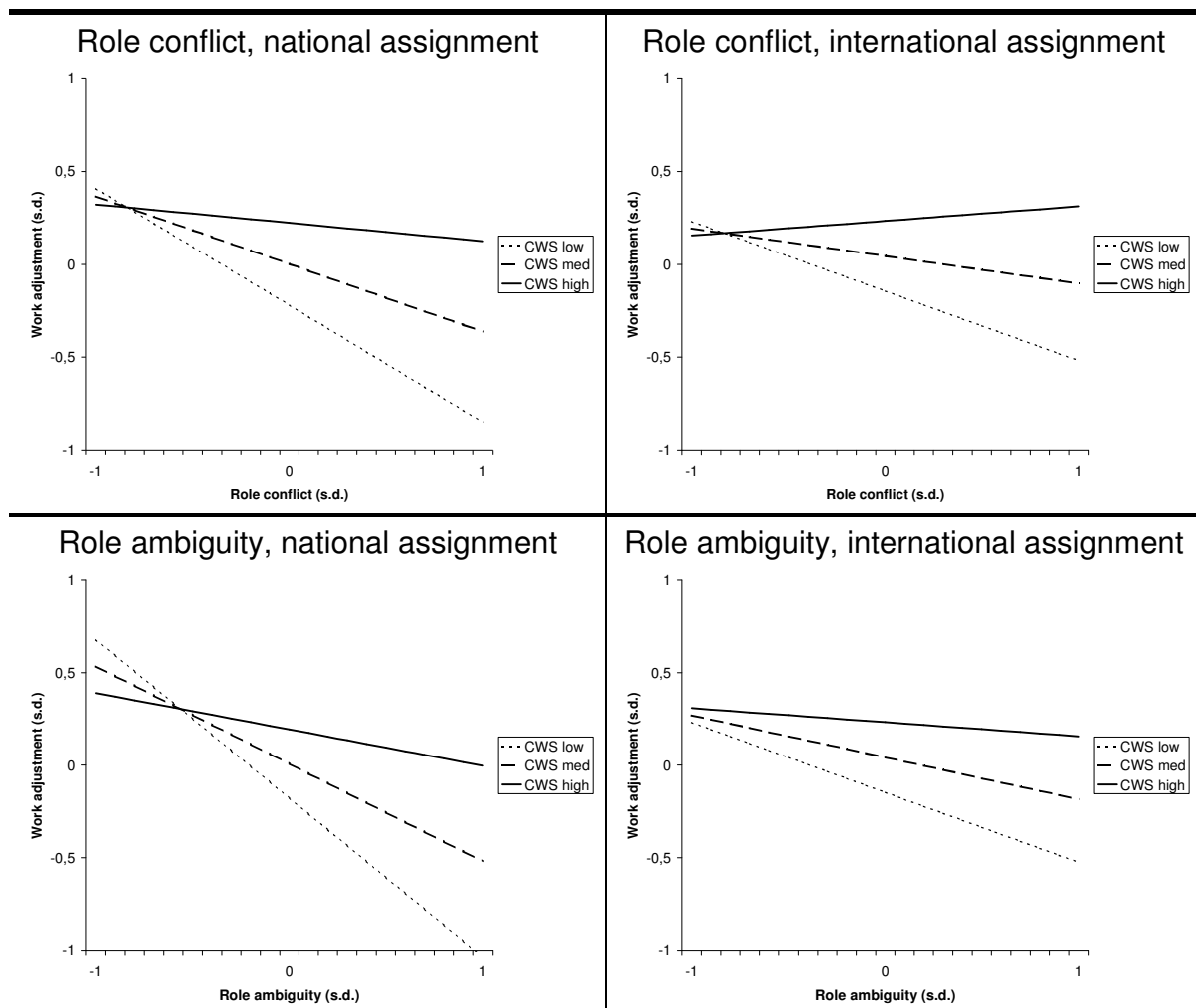
To test for the moderating effect of co-worker support we calculated another set of regression models including co-worker support as well as an interaction term with each of the role stressors.

| DV: work adjustment (national/international) | Role novelty | | Role conflict | | Role ambiguity | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of assignment | NA | IA | NA | IA | NA | IA |
| Role stressor *(see row 1)* | -.12 | .06 | -.34 ** | -.15 | -.49 ** | -.23 * |
| Co-worker support (CWS) | .10 | .23 * | .21 * | .19 † | .18 † | .19 † |
| Role stressor x CWS | -.01 | -.04 | .26 * | .20 * | .32 ** | .17 † |
| Gender (female) | -.01 | -.02 | -.10 | -.03 | -.11 | -.03 |
| Age | .19 | .17 | .18 | .18 | .03 | .09 |
| Overseas assignment | .02 | -.25 * | -.01 | -.22 * | -.08 | -.25 * |
| Duration of stay abroad | -.01 | .34 ** | .01 | .30 ** | .05 | .29 * |
| $R^2$ | .07 | .23 | .20 | .28 | .34 | .29 |

Two-tailed p: † < .10   * < .05   ** < .01

Here, the results mostly support our third hypothesis except for role novelty, all other interaction terms being positive and at least significant at the 5% level (one-tailed). As the beta coefficient of the interaction is hard to interpret, the following graphs show the regression lines of work adjustment on the role stressors for strong, medium, and weak co-

worker support (more precisely: one s.d. above average, average, one s.d. below average; all variables were z-standardized, so the y- and x-axes show standard deviations, too). The insignificant results for role novelty were omitted.



It is apparent that co-worker support reduces the negative effect of role conflict and role ambiguity on work adjustment for both national and international assignments, but again, this moderating effect is weaker for international than for national assignments.

**Limitations**

Our paper admittedly has some methodological shortcomings that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, as data for the dependent variable and predictors was collected at the same time and relied on self-reports by the same persons, single-source bias arguably is an issue here. On the other hand, the respondents apparently discerned, e.g., national and international assignments quite well even relating to the same variables; for instance, the correlation between "national" and "international" work adjustment was a mere .11 (n.s.), suggesting that the potential impact of single source bias on the results obtained is limited here. Second, the Cronbach alpha values for role novelty and role conflict are not

quite satisfactory; the other scales, by contrast, have very good consistency values despite their limited length. Finally, to minimize hassle for the participants, few data were collected on their "expatriation history" and the assignments themselves, increasing response rate but preventing some more refined analyses.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was threefold. First, we investigated the effect of role stressors at work – role novelty, role conflict and role ambiguity – on work adjustment for domestic and international assignments. The second goal was to explore if this effect is mitigated by co-worker support and the third purpose was if there is a difference for domestic and international assignees. Put succinctly, our research was guided by three assumptions: 1) role stress impairs work adjustment, 2) co-worker support mitigates this effect, 3) the effects of both role stress and co-worker support are more pronounced for international than for national assignments.

First, our results provide some support for the effect of role stressors on individual work adjustment while on assignment. Concerning the first assumption, while role conflict and role ambiguity largely had the predicted effect for our sample, no such finding was made for role novelty. For international assignments this would mean that the novelty of role or culture (Black et al., 1991), which refers to the novelty to the subjective notion of this cultural difference between the host and the home culture, is not a considerable barrier. Although Selmer (2001) talks about those barriers our empirical results seems not to be as strong. Furthermore, if assignees are well prepared for their new roles this can also reduce the stress for role novelty (Takeuchi et al., 2002).

Second, looking at the two other role stressors, our results suggest that role conflict and role ambiguity (only for domestic assignees) had a significantly negative effect on work adjustment. Specifically, we found that role stressors for individuals on domestic assignments have a stronger negative effect on work adjustment than for international assignments. These results are contradictory to our assumption. This could be interpreted by the assuming that international assignees are better prepared before they go on their assignment (Takeuchi et al., 2002) which could support adjustment. Furthermore, given the obvious distinctions between the two forms of assignments – domestic and international assignments – it is possible that role stressors are less intense perceived compared to other barriers like different language etc. in an international environment. For domestic assignees differences are less expected and thus, those could feel less comfortable in their role in general. Consequently, less support is provided because the areas of support to adapt to daily life routines are reduced in comparison to international assignments.

Third, according to our results the buffering effect of co-worker support reduces the negative effect of role conflict and role ambiguity on work adjustment for both national and international assignments, but the moderating effect is weaker for international than for national assignments. Also previous research revealed inconsistent evidence about the buffering effects of other sources e.g. perceived available support on the work stress–outcome relationship (Cohen & Wills, 1985;). Results show a positive moderation (e.g. Dunseath et al., 1995; La Rocco, House, & French, 1980), negative moderation (e.g. Dunseath et al., 1995; Terry, Nielsen, & Perchard, 1993) and direct effects (e.g. Shaw, Fields, Thacker, & Fisher, 1993; Terry et al., 1993), challenging the theoretical validity of the stress-buffering mechanism. Moreover, the literature suggests that developing relationships with comparable others, or individuals facing similar situations, can be instrumental in providing social support in mainly cross-cultural settings. This also builds on research conducted by Festinger (1954) which comes to the conclusion that when people experience uncertainty they look to others in similar situations for comparison. So there is a possibility that international assignees run across more opportunities with comparable others, or other expatriates, that may become more important than their co-workers(Johnson et al., 2003) as opposed to national assignees.

## Conclusion

Given that both types of assignments result in the disruption of existing social networks, which seems more prevalent for expatriates, it is important that organizations help to provide employees with the tools to build social networks in their new work settings. In general the results suggest that the relationships formed by expatriates while in the host country or in the home country are important with regard to adjustment. Thus, this study represents an important first step in increasing our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of social relationships for individuals on international assignments.

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