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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

IMPACTS OF EXPATRIATES' INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE ON SELF-IDENTITY

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organization Change

by

Mandy M. Chan

August, 2014

Kay Davis, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## THESES

Impacts of Expatriates' International Experience on Self-Identity, Doctoral Dissertation, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

Differences in Perceived Ethical Behavior from Students of Different Racial Backgrounds  
MBA Thesis. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA

## ABSTRACT

Expatriation is becoming an attractive career path for many people due to the global economic movement. People experience career transitions due to change of organization, locations, responsibilities, reporting structures, and work groups. Expatriates in particular experience more extreme changes because of challenges they encounter from language differences, geographical distance across countries, culture, habit, and life style. These changes influence people's perspective in seeing things, including their self-identity. The aim of this research was to explore the evolvement of expatriates' self-identity.

A qualitative research design using reflexive narrative inquiry was employed. Seven current and former expatriates from Australia, Japan, Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States participated in this study. Through an interview process, these individuals reflected upon and shared their international experience retrospectively. Using expatriates' own narrative, an individual identity transformation story was constructed in order to answer the research question of this study: How does international experience influence a person's self-identity?

Participants noticed significant and previously unknown changes in their behavior and outlook from their assignments. These varied based upon their motives for accepting the assignment, social interaction, work requirements, and personal attitudes. The study reveals that international assignments help expatriates discover the identity that they may not have recognized previously, and affirms and transitions their already known identity to a different level through new learning and relationships from their experiences. Expatriates' enjoyment of their experience is highly influenced by their social interaction and dialogue with others. One of the drawbacks from expatriation, especially for those who are on long-term international assignments and deep immersion in the local culture, is the losing of their definition of home.

As a result of this study, recommendations include an opportunity for organizations to conduct a fit-gap analysis with employees. Results can provide information on employees' level of readiness to take on an international role, and for organizations to better support employees' preparation needs. Onsite coaching and support groups for expatriates can be beneficial to alleviate the stress that occurred during their on-boarding. In addition, expatriates are encouraged to establish their social network in the host country.

Keywords: culture, expatriates, identity, international, learning, self-understanding

## **Chapter 1: Purpose of the Study**

“Who am I? How do I identify myself?” People answer these questions differently depending upon the context. For example, keynote speakers at a conference may answer with their credentials to support their status as speakers. In contrast, when people are introduced at a party, they may respond to these questions with information about their socio-economic status, such as their profession, why they are at the party, their native country of origin, the city they live in, their marital or family status, and so forth. Their responses may be based on their conception of self, how they wish others to view them, or how they choose to identify themselves with a particular identity or group (Woodward, 2000, 2002).

### **Identity**

Identity can be viewed as an understanding of self (Gergen, 1991), self-concept, or “a socially constructed definition of an individual” (Weigert, Teitge, & Teitge, 1986, p. 34) that is subject to constant reconstruction (Gergen, 1991). McCarthy and Moje (2002) argued that identity matters because identities shape people’s practices and “because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positionings” (pp. 228-229). Identity represents how one perceives oneself, the value system a person espouses, and how a person represents himself or herself in a social group. In addition, one’s behavior and attitude towards others can be a reflection of one’s self-identity and how one wants to be perceived by others. Therefore, identity can become a connection between a person and other people in the formation of his or her self.

The contemporary understanding of identity has evolved from a philosophical concept of a fixed, stable, and directly observable self, into a sociological concept in which identity is formed through a process of conscious reflexivity (Woodward, 2002) within a framework of

social relations – construction over time through an interaction with others (Bruner, 1990; Kellner, 1992; Woodward, 2002) and influenced by social environment, culture, work, level of education, politics, and family upbringing. Identity transformation may be triggered by a single incident or may emerge over a period of time. Mohandas Gandhi serves as an excellent example of identity transformation (Nair, 1994). When Gandhi was studying law in England, he was very frugal for economic reasons. He refrained from eating meat and eggs due to a vow he made to his mother to be a vegetarian along with his religious beliefs, there were not many vegetarian restaurants in his neighborhood. Most of his friends were not vegetarians, but he adhered to his vegetarian diet even around them. He also stopped eating sweets and condiments when cooking at home. According to Gandhi, by upholding his principle of being a vegetarian, his change of diet and lifestyle harmonized his inward and outward life. His experience made him realize that he was choosing to be himself even in an unfamiliar foreign country; the real taste was not on the tongue but in the mind. His upbringing shaped his personal values but his experience in England helped him better understand himself and the choices he made in his life.

When Gandhi was thrown out of a first-class railway compartment car in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa despite holding a first-class ticket, he started to reflect on his experience of racism and the inequities to which people are subjected on the grounds of color. He had an awakening; consequently, Gandhi embarked on a life journey to search for truth and non-violent change. Gandhi's school experience in England and the incident in South Africa triggered an identity transformation which resulted in Gandhi's becoming a major political leader, as well as his beliefs in integrity derived from the absolute values of truth, non-violence, and service to others (Gandhi & Desai, 1996). In Gandhi's own narrative (Gandhi & Desai, 1996), he gave meaning to the events that happened to him. His identity had transformed from an

educated and ambitious professional to a victim of racism and inequality to an advocate in the fight against injustice. His story shaped his identity and who he decided to become. He provided his own interpretation of events in his life and transformed a traumatic experience into something meaningful.

### **Expatriation**

When a person adjusts to transitions in life, it can be viewed as personal development. Transitions in life include role transition, which can be a change in job, responsibilities, or geographical location. Role transition may amplify personal development through the process of moving from a familiar location (real or metaphorical) to an unfamiliar one (Nicholson, 1984). People working on international assignments often go through this transition because of the nature of their work. Employees assigned to work at overseas subsidiaries of multinational companies are so-called *expatriates* (Brewster & Scullion, 1997; Dowling & Welch, 2004; Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997; Suutari & Brewser, 2000); therefore, they temporarily or permanently reside in a country and culture different from their upbringing. During the assignment, expatriates' lives are stressful because they need to adjust to a change in their environment. They leave their familiar routine behind to face a new one. The new assignment may force them to develop a new way of learning and thinking due to the change in physical work location, colleagues, peer groups, language, living environment, food, dress codes, and cultural habits (Kohonen, 2004). If expatriates go abroad with their families or significant others, they will also carry the additional burden of helping their family adjust to the new environment. As a result, expatriates need to be emotionally prepared and have the ability to adjust to new challenges. Such adaptation has the potential to foster positive personal development (Antal, 2000, 2001; Peltonen, 1998; Sanchez, Spector, & Cooper, 2000).

While on an international assignment, expatriates are exposed to new experiences on a daily basis. Their various encounters may have an impact on their perspective and self-understanding due to anxiety, challenges and unfamiliar obstacles (Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Osland, 2000). This experience may also cause them to expand their world view. Their existing beliefs about the way the world “is” and how things “should” be done may change. They learn why people in other countries behave the way they do. They learn how things need to be done in a foreign land. They come to recognize the differences and similarities between themselves and the people of their host country. Their mental development may become more mature as a result of trying to meet the demands of their new assignments (Kohonen, 2004). Their identity may be transformed over time during the assignment. Expatriation can be a life-changing experience for many people. It can also be an excellent opportunity to explore and understand one’s self-identity (Peltonen, 1998).

### **Research Purpose**

The conceptual framework of this research study is to explore expatriates’ perceived self-identity with a focus on changes in individuals based on their lived experience. The purpose is to understand the changes that occur to expatriates as a result of their international experience; how these experiences can shape their self-identity and whether international experience will increase their awareness of self-identity. Through expatriates’ own narratives, the researcher will analyze and identify a plot of their life episodes in order to construct an identity transformation story.

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation involves two research questions:

*Primary question:* How does international experience influence a person’s self-identity?

*Sub-question:* Does working in another country increase one’s awareness of self-identity?

## Research Method Summary

This study will be based on a qualitative research design using a reflexive narrative method to explore how expatriates' international experience influences their self-identity. '*Reflexive*' in this context refers to ways of seeing things in multiple dimensions and reflecting on existing ways of seeing (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000); it represents multiple levels of reflection (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Reflexivity is a personal awareness of oneself (James, 1961[1892]). It involves exploring one's place in the world, and seeing how one may make sense of and construct one's social and organizational experience (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004). In narrative analysis, researchers collect descriptions of experiences as expressed in stories told by individuals. They examine discern meanings from individual narratives, then analyze how they are put together (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2002).

The qualitative narrative analysis approach is appropriate for this study because it is aimed at understanding a concept or phenomenon (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006; Zikmund, 1984), how meaning is constructed, and how people make sense of their lives, their experiences and their world (Merriam, 2009). Riessman (1993) commented, "narratives are representations" (p. 2) and individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct lives (Riessman, 2002). Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) commented that:

How individuals recount their histories – what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between the teller and audiences – all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are means by which identities may be fashioned (p. 1).



People reveal themselves to others through the stories they tell (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, & Tamar, 1998). Narratives go beyond storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); they involve people trying to make sense of their lived experiences. Chase (2005) supported this notion and emphasized that research using narratives can help reveal cultural and structural features of individuals' everyday social worlds. Chase further argued that narratives may reveal any suppressive meta-analysis data that establishes rules of truth, legitimacy, and identity. Encouraging and allowing people to talk about their life stories allows them to negotiate their identities and create meaning from their experiences (Riessman, 2008); therefore, the approach is suited to the purpose of this research study.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is intended to contribute to the expatriate literature and help both individuals and organizations understand the change that may occur in expatriates as a result of their international experience, to capitalize on the personal and professional growth of expatriates and how their self-identity change may impact the retention of expatriates after the completion of their assignments. A substantial amount of expatriate-related literature has focused on the area of knowledge transfer (Antal, 2000, 2001; Downes & Thomas, 2000; Fink, Meierwert, & Rohr, 2005), cultural adjustment (Mendenhall, 2001; Osland & Osland, 2005; Peltokorpi, 2008; Pudelko, 2006) and career development (Bolino, 2007; Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Gregersen, Morrison & Black, 1998; Halpern, 2005; MacDonald, 2005; Selmer, 1999; Tung, 1988; Wittig-Berman & Beutel, 2009). Although some attention has been paid to self-identity issues, more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of how international assignments can influence an expatriate's transformation of identity (Hartl, 2004; Kohonen, 2004; Siljanen, 2007).

Identity defines who a person is and how a person understands him or herself from both a psychological and sociological standpoint because the understanding of self may determine how an interaction between two people occurs. From a personal perspective, the trigger and influence for self-transformation may provide individuals with insight into how an international experience can enhance their self-understanding. In addition, it is important to explore whether participating in an international assignment increases a person's awareness of self-identity and whether identity transformation impacts expatriates' professional and personal lives. For example, it may be valuable to learn whether the perspective of expatriates' value systems or the recognition of their foundational understanding of themselves (Taylor, 1989), which they may not have been aware of prior to their assignments, changes as a result of an overseas assignment.

People's value systems can be greatly influenced by the norms of the society in which they are raised. Centuries ago when international business was not as common, people did not have as many opportunities to experience different cultures. However, as travel became more convenient and society more globally oriented, people began to interact more and make connections across countries when conducting business or traveling abroad. From a personal perspective, people became more interested in exploring different cultures. In addition, immigration has increased. Hence, traveling abroad is becoming more frequent for leisure, family visits, or exchange studies. From an organizational perspective, companies are establishing businesses in different countries and are sending their employees overseas to establish and conduct business.

According to Hall (1989), the nature of thinking is greatly influenced by culture. An excellent way to develop self-knowledge is to pursue a cross-cultural experience because it promotes self-reflection. Through self-reflection, people may gain a better understanding of

themselves in terms of their value systems, their behavior, and their priorities in life. One of the goals of this study is to help expatriates who participate in this research to recognize their identity transformation. It will also hopefully help other expatriates to start reflecting on their experience and attain clarity of their self-identity. A deeper understanding of individual identity can benefit an organization as well. Interactions among people are always one of the key factors for the success of any organizational change initiative. If organizational leaders have a better understanding of how international work experience will influence a person's self-identity and utilize this understanding to promote change initiatives or organization development, it may increase communication effectiveness.

Expatriation literature also shows that approximately 25% of repatriates leave their company within two years of their return (Black, 1989; Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Geodesy, 2005; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Tyler, 2006). *Repatriates* are former expatriates who have returned to their home country after completing an international assignment overseas. This is a relatively high turnover rate given the significant financial investment made in these employees during their overseas assignments. These financial investments include recruitment, training, housing, compensation, travel and other perks provided to employees to take on the assignments abroad. More critical is the loss the employee's newly-gained international knowledge during the assignment. Additionally, if repatriates leave the company with their newfound knowledge to work for a competitor, it will create a competitive disadvantage for the home company. One of the reasons for such high turnover is that expatriates often feel disconnected from their home offices, families and friends when they return home (Adler, 1981). As mentioned earlier, when people have greater clarity of their self-identity, including their personal value systems and their beliefs, then the way they behave, how they interact with others

and their priorities in life may change. This may create a feeling of disconnection for expatriates when they return to their home country.

In addition, today's society features many diverse cultures. Employees often interact with expatriates and repatriates in the workplace who may feel disconnected from employees in their home office. Employees in the home office may also have the same disconnected feeling towards these repatriates. In host countries, local employees may have a difficult time working with expatriates because they may not realize that these expatriates are undergoing a self-identity change internally. If organizations are aware of their expatriates' self-identity change, they may consider these factors when planning their organizational support program in order to better manage expatriates' internal process changes and encourage them to remain with the organization. An employee development plan can also include an emphasis on improved communication among workgroup members coming from different backgrounds.

It is hoped that this study will not only benefit organizations, but also expatriates who are on assignment, repatriates who have completed their assignments and returned home, people who are thinking of becoming expatriates, and people who are interested in knowing how international assignments may impact a person's self-identity.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are commonly used in this study. Their definitions are provided below:

- *Expatriates*: Employees who are assigned to work at overseas subsidiaries of multinational companies (Brewster & Scullion, 1997; Suutari & Brewser, 2000). In this research, the term "expatriates" refer to employees who accepted an assignment from their employer, and the assignment requires him or her to work abroad, or employees

who have completed an international assignment sponsored by their employer and returned to the home office or left the company.

- *Identity*: An understanding of self (Gergen, 1991), self-concept, or “a socially constructed definition of an individual” (Weigert et al., 1986, p. 34) that is subjected to constant reconstruction (Gergen, 1991). Self-identity in this research refers to expatriates’ sense of self through their own reflexive narratives.
- *International experience or international assignment*: In this study, these two terms are used interchangeably. They correspond to an assignment an individual accepts from their employer and where the assignment requires an employee to work in a country other than their home office’s country for a period of 10 months or longer.
- *Narratives*: In this research, narratives are descriptions given by expatriates about life episodes that occurred during their time abroad.
- *Repatriates*: In this research, repatriates are expatriates who have returned to their home country after completing an assignment overseas.
- *Reflexive*: Ways of seeing things in multiple dimensions and reflecting on existing ways of seeing. It represents multiple levels of reflection (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). In this study, participants will reflect upon their life episodes in multiple dimensions and describe their experiences to the researcher.
- *Reflexivity*: A process to explore one’s place in the world, to see how one may make sense of and construct his or her social and organizational experience (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004). This is the method to be used by participants when describing their experiences.

## **Delimitation and Limitations**

The international experience in this study will be limited to the expatriates' assignment, and the participants are limited to expatriates on international assignment with their employer. This study will not include participants whose international experience is from voluntary work and not initiated by their employers.

One of the constraints of this study is the ability of participants to describe their lived experiences through oral narratives and their willingness to disclose their inner thoughts to the researcher. The narratives that participants provide will be based on their own interpretation of their experiences. The researcher will examine individuals' experiences and analyze how they are connected in order to identify a broader theme.

Another limitation of interpretive research is that researcher bias may influence the conclusions drawn from the study. A *researcher identity memo*, which is a personal memo written by the researcher to engage in self-reflection and describe background, biases, prejudices, and orientations that may likely shape the interpretation, is included in Appendix A.

## **Summary**

International work assignments are becoming increasingly popular as socio-economic exchanges become more widespread around the world. More change initiatives that involve people working beyond the borders of their own countries are underway. When people accept international assignments, they undergo many changes in life – geographical location, life style, work responsibilities, personal and professional networks, just to name a few. Often times, they may not readily notice a change in their self-identity resulting from their international experience. The purpose of this study is to investigate how international work experience may influence one's self-identity transformation. It is the researcher's intention to utilize this research

to help people achieve a greater clarity of their self-identity from an international experience, and also to raise awareness within organizations to recognize changes in their expatriates' internal process.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews literature concerning how international experience impacts the understanding of self and the construction of identity. The chapter includes three parts: the first part reviews different views of the concept of identity, the second part discusses international experience, and the third part reviews the relationship between identity and international experience. The review of literature in this chapter provides a foundation for the research primary question *How does international work experience influence a person's self-identity?* and, the research sub-question *Does working in another country increase one's awareness of self-identity?* In this study, the terms *international experience* and *international assignment* are used interchangeably. *Sense of self* and *self-identity* are also used interchangeably throughout this research study.

### The Sense of Self and Identity

The concept of identity is complex and has been defined in many ways. Very often, terms such as *self-concept*, *understanding of self*, *self-definition*, *self-identity*, and *personal identity* are used interchangeably in the literature to discuss the concept of identity (Lieblich et al., 1998). This section introduces the basic concept of identity through review of different views on the shaping of identity.

The idea of identity has been debated for centuries. As social and political structures have expanded from authoritarian models, such as monarchies toward more democratic styles, root beliefs about who we are: our self, our identity, have also expanded and changed. And, as philosophy shifted questions about human existence from religious frameworks toward secular speculation, theories were developed about reality and perception that were far afield from a reliance on an outer God or *perfection*. Over time, the concept of self was believed to be more



autonomous and capable of changing. Philosophical speculation about reality led to the great scientific revolution in Europe, and other fields such as anthropology and sociology studied individuals in relationship to their surroundings in new ways (Baumeister, 1986; Hall, 1996; Woodward, 2002). A key development in the nineteenth century was the birth of psychology and an attempt to discover the components of the psyche in order to help individuals know themselves as well as to understand society from a humanistic point of view. The intertwining views among anthropology, the Enlightenment, psychology, philosophy, sociology, cultural, and post-modern observations led to the concept of identity becoming more complex and interesting.

**Anthropology perspective.** From an anthropological perspective (Kellner, 1992), in traditional societies, one's identity is fixed, solid, and stable (Baumeister, 1986; Kellner, 1992; Woodward, 2002). It is a function of defined social roles. In pre-modern societies, identity is not subject to reflection or discussion. Identity is non-controversial. One does not undergo an *identity crisis* - a problem of defining self (Baumeister, 1986; Woodward, 2002). In this traditional perspective, a person has a sense of continuity between the past and the future based on their identification with their social group (Erikson, 1968). Consistent with characteristics from the anthropological perspective about a person's identity as stable and fixed, cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1992, 1996) differentiated identity in three different views: *enlightenment subjects*, *sociological subjects*, and *post-modern subjects*.

The enlightenment perspective emphasizes that a person is born with an inner core that remains essentially unchanged. This *inner core* is the person's identity. From the Enlightened view, one can assume that everyone is born with a core identity that is permanent, stable, and unchanged throughout a person's life term. The question that may be raised from this view is can additional identities be added to a person? The idea of a person having multiple identities is

described in the sociological and post-modern views discussed in subsequent paragraphs to follow. Hall's *sociological subject concept* claimed that a person's inner core (identity) was formed in relation to others who influenced this person's personal values, meaning, and culture of their world. The post-modern subject perspective from Hall's *post-modern subject concept* described identity as non-fixed, non-essential and non-permanent. It can be formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways one is represented in cultural systems surrounding this person. These two views by Hall will be explained in more detail in the sociological and post-modern perspectives later in this chapter.

**Philosophical perspective.** Many philosophers have delved into the discussion of the nature of self and identity. French philosopher Rene Descartes' (1596-1650) established a whole new world view, the Cartesian view, often referred to as Cartesian dualism. He believed that the mind and body are separate entities that intersect. To prove the existence of mind, he claimed in his well-known statement, "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito, ergo sum*); he established the idea that even though much could be doubted in our perceptions, there was one thing of which a person could be certain—that an individual existed because that individual was thinking (*cogito*). Descartes' argument may have drawn much criticism largely because people do not learn that they exist from observing that they think (Baumeister, 1986); yet, Descartes' conclusion established a basis for identity formation that a person's existence is not in relation to another individual or a whole community. In the 1690s, when British philosopher John Locke (original 1689/1959) presented his idea of personal identity, he also asserted that an individual's identity remained the same over one's lifetime. His concept of identity was linked to a person's sense perceptions. One's self-knowledge came from his or her sense. Locke argued that consciousness unites all the different actions an individual performs and accounts for the persistence of one's

identity structure (Korfmacher, 2006). German philosopher Immanuel Kant (Baumeister, 1986; Woodward, 2002) offered a crucial point to the notion of identity after Descartes and Locke's philosophical concepts. His view was that the understanding of self can only be noticed in the process of doing something else because a self cannot perceive itself directly. The self can only be perceived in relation to the world. One can notice or imagine oneself doing various things or being at different places but one cannot perceive or imagine oneself completely separated from all social context or situations. Therefore, the unity of self is somehow woven together across time and situations.

**Psychological perspective.** Social psychologist Baumeister (1986), who is well known for his work on self, defined identity as an interpretation and definition of the self. Bird, Osland, Mendenhall, and Schneider (1999) and McCarthey and Moje (2002) asserted that identity comprises a way of understanding who a person is. Names and addresses are labels providing identification about the self; they help to define identity (Baumeister, 1986). Identification is unique, a characteristics to a person, and one of the major manifestations of culture (Hall, 1989). Homi Bhabha (1994), one of the most important figures in post-colonial studies, argued that identification is not an affirmation of an identity. To understand one's identity, one will need to first understand self; identity is a concept of self, therefore, self and identity are inseparable.

Prior to 1800, a person's identity was seen as a stable and fixed. Since 1800, it has become more difficult to define the concept of identity (Baumeister, 1986). Moving forward into the contemporary world, the postmodern perspective of identity contains hybrid, fluid, and constantly changing characteristics. It constantly shifts and transforms (Juhasz, 1983; Hall, 1992) out of a person's experiences and situations. Postmodern perspective asserts that identity can be constructed and reproduced around different relationships, such as personal and the social, self

and others (Gergen, 1991, Weigert, et al., 1986; Woodward, 2002) and across time and space (Hall, 1992). Not only is identity an understanding of self, a definition of who a person is (Bird et al., 1999) and a way of understanding of who a person is (McCarthy and Moje, 2002), identity becomes a socially constructed self (Weigert et al., 1986).

**Sociological perspective.** In modernity, identity becomes mobile, multiple, personal, and self-reflexive, it is subject to change and affected by innovation (Kellner, 1992). As asserted by Kant in Baumeister (1986), the self cannot be perceived directly; it has to be induced or deduced. The self can only be perceived in relation to the world (Baumeister, 1986, 1998). This means that one can notice or imagine oneself when doing activities and in various places. People cannot understand their self until they are in a situation or reflect upon their behavior, for example, noticing one's shyness when he or she is feeling uncomfortable in a group situation. Identity is constructed each time the self transcends or arises within a situation. Therefore, identity as an understanding self is formed through a construction process over time and in relation to the world. This leads to the sociological view of identity which bridges the gap between inside and outside, between the personal and the public worlds (Hall, 1992).

American philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934) characterized identity in terms of mutual recognition. Its existence depends on recognition from others, combined with self-validation of this recognition. Mead (1934) and American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1964) asserted that interactions between self and society through communications produced identities. Based on his seminal theory titled Symbolic Interactionism, a term coined decades later by Herbert Blumer (1969), Mead (1934) suggested that people developed a set of symbols (gestures, words, rules, roles) to give meaning to the world and shape their behaviors. In order to understand human behavior, one must learn how people define these

symbols through interactions with others “because people can be understood by others in particular ways and people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positionings” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 228). Relationship between self and society is dynamic (Mead, 1934). It is through interactions that humans develop a concept of larger social structures and also their self-identity. An individual’s interpretation of the meaning will guide and determine their action and practices (McCarthy & Moje, 2002).

Drawing from the foundation of Mead’s (1934) concept where identities are formed in the relationship between self and society, philosopher and psychologist Rom Harré (1998) presented a “standard model” to discuss a person’s singularity, individuality, and uniqueness. A person’s singularity is attached to his or her actions and forms identities with rules and cultural resources that underlie these actions. His model suggests that a person has multiple selves – Self1, Self2 and Self3. Self1 is the sense of self as a singularity with a position of space and time. Self2 is the totality of personal attributes such as physical makeup, pattern of thought and action, abilities, skills, and beliefs about him or herself. Self3 is the publicly presented self. A person will show his or her singularity by expressing each different Self, which is unique only to him or her as identity. Harré’s standard model illustrates the notion that a person’s identity is in relation to others but its attributes are unique to an individual.

British social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1981, 1982) introduced the concept of social identity. Similar to Mead and Cooley’s concept, Tajfel (1982) suggested that part of a person’s identity derives from the social groups to which he or she belongs. Tajfel (1981) proposed that the social aspect of an individual’s identity is “derived from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). Therefore, according to Tajfel, a person’s identity not only reflects

personal traits and characteristics but also the values and culture of the social group(s) to which one belongs.

According to Juhasz (1983), a person's identity is a life process and a dynamic source of change and growth in being a human. It is an interpretation of historical styles of human experience. Self is integral in all human undertakings. One's behavior and reactions can be seen as reflections of one's identity (Gergen, 1991; McCarthy & Moje, 2002). According to Edward Hall (1989), what gives a person his or her identity is not where he or she is born; it is the culture he or she learned and absorbed into their own self-identity. Once learned, behavior patterns, habitual responses, and ways of interacting gradually become part of the person's individual identity. Human experience can vary among different cultural systems and times; therefore, Stuart Hall (1992) suggested that identity is formed and transformed continuously depending on the representation of different cultural systems and time spans. He further claimed that identities are constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions.

Edward Hall (1989) and Stuart Hall's (1992) explanations of identity formation can be further supported by the conclusions of a research study conducted by Ghosh and Wang (2003) which investigated identity formation through their experience of living between Canada and their home countries of China and India. One objective of Ghosh and Wang's study was to find out when and how their identities first begin to change. They reflected on the acts they had performed across borders and thought about the ways in which those acts may have shaped who they were and who they wanted to be. Their findings centered around the following concepts: (a) fundamental differences in their motives to have an international experience may have played an important role in shaping their identities, (b) their level of insecurity about losing their cultural

identity, (c) degree of acceptance by the people in the foreign country, and (d) use of social media to stay connected with people in the home country. They found that their identities were formed through a continuous process and became more of a hybrid style rather than a single root or stagnant self. Their hybrid identities often switched positions in accordance with the demands of the context (place and time). They also noticed that people's perception of them changed as time progressed. Their self-perception of who they are and who they want to be, the conscious and unconscious balancing of social and material circumstances in foreign and home country, helped them to realize the boundaries of who they can be and how they can be both here and there. With cultural meaning changing across time and space, and the influence between self and society, woven through discourses, practices, and positions, identities are therefore, constantly in the process of change and transformation; hence, multiple identities are created.

**Psychoanalytical influence.** Postmodern perspective also has been influenced by psychoanalysis, which proposes that adult identities are derived from childhood experience and understanding of choices made in adulthood (Baumeister, 1986; Woodward, 2002). Individuals gain access to their unconscious self through their personal stories based on lived experience. As discussed by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1976, 1990), who was famous for developing philosophical anthropology, stories not only help us make sense of other's actions but also shape our identities.

Narrative identity is grounded in the notion that selves are made up of stories that are told by the narrators and stories that are told about others and narrators. Ricoeur and others (Browning, 1991; Ezzy, 1998; Mead, 1934) have suggested that identity is a narrative construction. Individuals construct and orchestrate meaningful identities as representation of their life episodes through their own narratives (Gregg, 2006; Ricoeur, 1976, 1990; Riessman,

2002). A person's narrative through language translates how a person makes sense of both individual's experience and social interaction (Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004). When people tell their stories, it is not only the events and characters that are interesting, but also the way people construct their stories, their experience; this is how they lay claim to their lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

Also, importantly, representation can influence meanings, contribute to change, and reformulate not only the narrative, but also the meaning being created. Therefore, representation becomes a vehicle for the construction of identity between the personal and the social. Identity through narrative represents a person's uniqueness and individuality.

Supporting the notion by Ricoeur (1976, 1990) and in line with Hall's (1992) theory that identity is formed across the span of time and culture, sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) suggested that individuals create their own self-identity as a narrative that presumes continuity across time and space. Giddens claimed that self-identity becomes a reflexive project—an endeavor that a person continues to work and reflect on. People create, maintain, and revise a set of biographical narratives—the story of who they are, how they came to be, where they are, and what they want to become.

Contrasting to Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory and the sociological perspective, Giddens (1991) argued that identity is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a product of the person's reflexive beliefs about his or her own biography. A self-identity is based on accounts of people's life, actions and influences that make sense to them and can be explained to other people without much difficulty. An identity describes their past and is oriented towards an anticipated future. As supported by Benhabib (1999), identity created through narrative allows



a person to develop the capacity to generate meaning over time so as to hold past, present, and future together. Giddens (1991) wrote:

A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self. (p. 54)

Giddens (1991) further claimed that when a person's reflexive project continues, his or her self-actualization is realized. Self-actualization, according to Giddens, refers to different choices of being and acting in the world in order to gain a balance between opportunity and risk, as well as to be authentic. During the self-actualization process, an individual goes through different transitions and creates a personal lifestyle by integrating his or her life experiences with the narrative of his or her own self-development. This lifestyle reflects the different choices one makes to reach self-actualization and includes life planning and preparing for future actions. Life plans are revised and reconstructed as the reflexive process continues.

Giddens (1992) argued that the rapid social changes of the 21st century have heightened people's sense of risk and anxiety and thereby, have increased their creative ability to construct selves. Unlike the medieval or pre-Enlightenment period when society was much more rigidly structured and inflexible, large areas of a person's life in current society are no longer set by pre-existing patterns and habits. Because there are more choices available in modern society, an individual is continually obliged to negotiate lifestyle options in their self-actualization process. Moreover, such choices are not just external or marginal aspects of an individual's attitudes; they define who the individual is. In other words, lifestyle choices are constitutive of a reflexive self.

People construct their identities through social interactions and repeated self-reflexive projects (Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 1996; Nord & Cox, 1996), which means identity becomes something unique to the individual. It is a person's individuality that separates her or him from others.

Giddens stated that people make lifestyle choices during the self-actualization process, and their identity evolves through repeated self-reflexive projects; therefore, active participation seems to be essential for identity change (Baumeister, 1986) even though people may not always realize how their actions can influence the process of identity change. As a person's personal choices and value system continue to change through the self-actualization process, his or her identity will continue to reshape.

Based on Giddens' reflexive identity framework, Lindgren and Wahlin (2001) also investigated the phenomenon of identity construction as related to boundary-crossing, focusing on individuals who changed organizations frequently. Their work is based on newer developments that modern individuals distinguish themselves from each other via identity construction through social interaction and repeated self-reflection, that is, reflexive identity construction. Their finding is "reflexive identity is constructed inwardly and outwardly through a person's own reflections and transformations of categories and typifications" (Lindgren & Wahlin, 2001, p. 360). This result is consistent with Giddens' that the narrative of life episodes through self-reflection and pattern of life events shapes one's identity.

Similarly, many narrative identity researchers, Mishler (1999), Sarup (1998) and Woodward (2002) suggest that identity is about relation (Mishler, 1999) and differences (Sarup, 1998; Woodward, 2002). Mishler, known for his work based on crafting people's personal stories, provided data to support the argument that settings and practices define who they are and aspects of their multiple identities may conflict with one another. Mishler argued that individuals

make claims about who they are by aligning or contrasting themselves with others. He posited an emergent perspective to study the concept of identity development as an interpersonal rather than intrapersonal process where identities are defined and expressed through how people are relative to each other along with other dimensions that constitute their networks of relationship. His concept shifts the focus of identity development from inner conflicts and their resolutions to the social production of multiple sub-identities and the dynamics of their relationships. Mishler emphasized that the attention of theory and research on identity has changed from “assessment of personality variables to the study of forms and contexts of discursive genres, such as personal narratives and life stories through which identities are produced and performed” (p. 16).

When people tell their stories, it is not only events and characters that are interesting but also the way people construct their stories and their experience. This is how they claim their lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Sarup (1998) suggested people are not born with an inherent sense of identity. Sarup, like Mead (1934), Cooley (1964), and Giddens’ (1991) theories, noted that identity is constructed in and through language. It is always within the publicly represented self (Harré, 1998) that their identity is perceived. Sarup supported the notion that identity is constructed via interconnections among race, gender, class, culture and religion. As Mishler asserted that people make claims of themselves by aligning and contrasting with others, Sarup and Woodward claimed that identity is related to how an individual is different from others. They believed that identity requires a classification system that picks out individuals who share an identity and distinguish them from those who do not. Identity involves setting boundaries that locate the parameters of difference and sameness. Therefore, identity involves the management of differences and different selves. Identity provides links between the personal and social, self and society, the psychic and the social. Conforming to Mishler’s (1999) conclusion, both Sarup

and Woodward stated that identity is considered relational. It is constructed through relations of difference, such as *us* and *them*.

In summary, there are different views that attempt to understand the sense of self and identity. Identity can be viewed as a sense of self, an interpretation of a person's nature of self, a self-definition, or a narrative of a person's life experience. Identity can be shaped through an individual's inner process or as influenced from society and its institutions. Identity is relationship, about sameness or differences (Mishler, 1999; Sarup, 1998; Woodward, 2002). It is through synthesis of different views that one can adequately understand a person's identity and get a sense of self.

### **International Experience**

In the past few decades, globalization has created new international experience and opportunities for many people who are willing to leave their comfort zone and experience a new adventure by living and interacting with people in a country other than their home. This section first explains the two models of international experience by Inkson and colleagues (1997). It is followed by a description of an expatriate's roles, opportunities, and challenges that had psychological and social impact. At the end of this section is an introduction of the U-Curve Adjustment model that many researchers adopt to explain about the adjustment process of a person during their transition from one familiar environment to a foreign one.

**Two models of international experience.** There are two broad models of international experience (Inkson et al., 1997): expatriate assignment and overseas experience. Based on a study by Inkson and his colleagues (1997), the major differences between these two types of international experiences are: (a) source of initiation, (b) source of funding, (c) goals for the international job, and (d) career type. Expatriate assignments are initiated by a company which

operates internationally, for internal transfer to a subsidiary in other countries (Inkson et al., 1997). The goal of the assignment is to carry out an organizational project. Company will select employees to work in their subsidiaries for a certain period of time. Ideal candidates are employees who are knowledgeable about organizational strategies and procedures, capable of performing the required tasks to successfully carry out the project, and able to live overseas (Brewster & Scullion, 1997; Dowling & Welch, 2004; Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Expatriates are expected to return to their home country or home office after the assignment is completed; therefore, the assignment is temporary. Although expatriates' personal initiative to work abroad is required for this type of international experience, this type of assignment is originated by the company as an internal transfer.

The source of initiation for overseas experience, however, is different. While expatriate assignments are initiated by the employer, overseas experience assignments are initiated by the personal motivation of an individual who is interested in living or working in a foreign country for personal reasons, whether for leisure or work. Their transition to another country is initiated autonomously and not by a company.

Expatriate assignments are funded by the employer, with salary and all expenses paid during the assignment (Inkson et al., 1997). Sometimes expenses may include other allowances or perks to the employees in order to persuade employees to accept the assignment (Brewster & Scullion, 1997; Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). In contrast, overseas assignments are funded by individuals who will sponsor the journey themselves.

Expatriate assignments normally fulfill company projects, whereas overseas experience are mainly intended to achieve the personal goal of living overseas (Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000) or to pursue a *boundaryless career* (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Banai &

Harry, 2004) in which an individual's career path shifts from external to internal (Stahl, Miller & Tung, 2002; Tung, 1998; Weick, Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). An externally focused career describes career advancement within an organizational hierarchy, whereas an internally focused career refers to how individuals view their career movement in their unique work life (Schein, 1996). For individuals pursuing an internally focused career, their work life may no longer be perceived as a progression of jobs within a single organization. Rather, these individuals will move from one company to another to pursue the best opportunities for their professional development. Thus, career progress no longer comes exclusively from intra-company hierarchical advancement, but rather from inter-company self-development (Parker & Inkson, 1999, Stahl et al., 2002; Weick et al., 1996). This perspective defines the notion of a boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Banai & Harry, 2004; Weick et al., 1996).

Kohonen's (2004) study of expatriates suggested that some employees accepted expatriate assignments primarily due to their interest in international culture. Given their personal interests in exploring other cultures, accepting the assignment is not a difficult decision. Their passion to learn about the host culture enhances their relationship with colleagues in the host country. The soft skills such as social skills, communication, and language that they learn become a part of their self-development in their career path. Upon their successful completion of their assignment, many of them will continue to carry out international assignments, either within the same organization or with a different company.

Inkson et al.'s study (1997) provided a fundamental understanding of the two models of international experience in terms of initiative, motives, career type, and funding. More recently, there is an indication that people who participate in international experiences tend to shift their career focus from external to internal (Banai & Harry, 2004). Therefore, the motives and goals

for people in Inkson et al.'s traditional expatriate assignments and overseas experience models are intertwined. For the purpose of this study, the international experience is the expatriates' assignment, and the participants are expatriates on their international assignment from their employer. This study will not include participants from the overseas experience selection group.

**Expatriates' role.** The international experience that expatriates gain is created from the new work role, increased challenges, opportunities, and prestige, as well as greater responsibilities and pressure to perform (Harvey, 1985). Expatriates are destined to carry out certain tasks connected to the management of operations and people overseas. This is an expectation from the parent company. Therefore, an expatriate's role in the assignment becomes a liaison between the two organizations—parent company and subsidiary in the host country.

**Expatriates' paradoxes.** Having a liaison role is not an easy task and often creates contradictory demands in situations. While expatriates are assumed to share the same attitudes and values from their home country and their parent companies (Torbiörn, 1982), there are different demands placed upon expatriates from interested parties such as colleagues, customers, and authorities, as well as stakeholders such as employees at the host country. Due to the cultural difference between the host country and the home country, the values and habits expatriates carry over from the home country may not always fit the culture in the host country. Therefore, expatriates often find themselves in challenging situations, mediating between two cultures and two organizations. This is the so-called *expatriate paradox*. Quinn and Cameron (1988) defined expatriate paradox as “a situation involving the presence of contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that operate equally at the same time” (p. 2).

According to Osland & Osland (2005), expatriates often experience one or more of the four categories of paradox: (a) *social acuity paradoxes*, (b) *marginality paradoxes*, (c) *mediation*

*paradoxes*, or (d) *identity value paradoxes*. Social acuity paradoxes refer to an expatriate's interaction with people or in a situation that requires cultural understanding. One type of paradox in this category occurs when expatriates feel powerful and at the same time feel powerless to some degree. A reason for this scenario would include the fact that expatriates generally are in a management role or subject-matter-expert role. From an organizational level at the host country, they have organization power as well as experience in the business; however, they are also in the host country and they are extremely dependent on their local subordinates' knowledge for the local culture and governance, a sense of powerlessness may surface. This feeling may lead them to become more participative and concerned about gaining commitment from their subordinates, so that they can better control the situation and make business decisions. Another type of the social acuity paradox is stereotypes versus individual differences (Osland & Osland, 2005). Expatriates have a general stereotype of other cultures. Their pre-determined perceptions may affect their behavior. However, when they have more exposure to individuals in the host country, they realize that many people in the host country do not fit into the stereotypes they had originally held.

Marginality paradoxes (Osland & Osland, 2005) refer to expatriates' relationships with the host culture as a whole. One type has to do with expatriates feeling positive about people in the host country, yet at the same time, they are cautious about being taken advantage of by people in the host country. The second type of the marginality paradoxes is that expatriates on the one hand become comfortable in the host country and on the other hand, they feel like an exile in their home country. They feel that they are compromising their natural or unconscious fit within their own culture while they are situating themselves in the host country.



Mediation paradoxes (Osland & Osland, 2005) refer to expatriates feeling caught between contradictory demands of the headquarters and people in the host country. The headquarters and host country have two different cultures, and the expatriate may not fully understand the difference between the two, or somehow ends up working to please or interpret issues on both sides. Therefore, when operational style at headquarters does not agree with the host country, conflict occurs and the expatriate feels caught in the middle. Another mediation paradox is when the expatriate feel that they must be the *ambassador* and represent their company as best they can in order to succeed; however, they realize that the ideal values they act out in the host country may not exist at headquarters.

Identity value paradoxes (Osland & Osland, 2005) refer to expatriates who feel that they need to give up some of their personal values and their identity in order to be accepted or successful in the host country. Some reported that their personal values strengthen at the same time. Expatriates may also feel that they become more world-minded when their personal value system has been expanded by being exposed to and sometimes adopting some of the host country's values and practices not found in their home country. While they feel that they are becoming more world-minded, they sometimes start to also doubt the values they held before, such as religion, meaning of basic assumptions, and their understanding of self (Kohonen, 2004).

Osland and Osland's study (2005) found that expatriates, who integrate more with the people and culture in the host country, while continuing to embrace their home culture, are more successful in their assignment and can better manage paradoxical situations.

**Expectation versus reality.** Regardless of the initiatives motivating an employee to accept an international assignment, expatriates usually find international assignments challenging (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Black, Morrison & Gregerson, 1999). Stahl

el al. (2002) found that 59% of expatriates believe that an expatriate assignment would help them advance their career within their organization. Human capital theory predicts expatriate assignments provide valuable experience in new skills development (Benson & Pattie, 2008). Some people consider international assignments as a means to develop leadership abilities (Gregersen et al., 1998; Mendenhall, 2001). Many of them accept an international assignment for their personal development and career development (Tung, 1988). Therefore, it is not surprising that despite all challenges that expatriates' experience, many of them are still willing to accept the assignment because many of them view international assignments as a career move that will facilitate career advancement upon return to the home office (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002; Sanchez-Vidal, Sanz-Valle, & Barba-Aragon, 2008; Wittig-Berman & Beutel, 2009).

Unfortunately, research indicates that very few expatriates are promoted when they return to headquarters after completion of the international assignment (Black et al., 1992). Studies also showed that approximately 25% of repatriates leave their company within two years of their return to the home office (Black, 1989; Black et al., 1992; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Tyler, 2006). Perhaps one of the reasons for this phenomenon is due to the fact that many organizations do not discuss with employees how the international assignment fits into the employee's career path (Wittig-Berman & Beutel, 2009) before or during their assignments and hence creating room for a mismatch between the expectation of career advancement from employees and the plans of the home organization.

Social exchange theory (e.g. in Blau, 1964) and equity theory (e.g. in Stroh & Brett, 1994) perspectives can probably explain the link between managers' commitment to their organization and their attachment to their company. Blau (1964) expanded the social exchange

theory originally created by George Homans in the 1960s. According to social exchange theory, people weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships. When the risks outweigh the rewards, people will terminate or abandon that relationship. In the expatriation case, employees perceive their sacrifice to be enormous as they disrupt their social network and devote their personal time and resources to take on the risk of accepting an international assignment (Harvey, 1985; Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). As a result, they expect adequate compensation from their company for the risk they take (Guzzo, Noonan, & Elron, 1994).

Equity theory was first developed by Adams (1963), who asserted that employees seek to maintain equity between the inputs that they bring to a job and the outcomes that they receive from it against the perceived inputs and outcomes of others. Both perspectives demonstrate a relationship between expatriates' perceived expectation of the assignment from their organization against the reality. When the reality does not meet the expatriate's perceived expectations, psychological or emotional stress may be experienced, which may lead the expatriate to consider leaving the company. Even those who stay in the company may experience other issues, such as having difficulty in readapting to the environment in the home office and home country after being exposed to a foreign culture for a period of time, because expatriates often lack a current understanding of their organizations when returning to their home offices (Adler, 1981). Tung (1988) claimed that this phenomenon could occur because expatriates do not have sufficient trips back to the home countries during the assignments. The correlation between international experience and expatriates' expectations are important to mention because expectation versus reality often creates a psychological impact on people when these two components are not in alignment.

**Balance between work and family.** The impact of taking on an international assignment is not only on the expatriates themselves. An expatriate's spouse and family are important stakeholders in this change. For expatriates who bring their families on assignment, the international relocation creates other critical changes and stress to them in terms of maintaining a balance between work and family (Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001). Not only do expatriates need to manage changes they experience from relocation, they also need to help their families manage the psychological, social and cultural changes that occur to them. Expatriates' families lose their support network from the home country when they move to the host country. They need to learn a new language, make new friends, and adjust to a completely different environment (Cornille, 1993; Munton, 1990). If they are not able to manage these challenges, the result is often loneliness, frustration, and diminished self-esteem (Briody & Chrisman, 1991; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Many cultural adaptation studies have cited the inability of the spouse to adjust as a direct or indirect cause of expatriates' psychological withdrawal and turnover (e.g. Black, 1988; Harvey, 1985; Tung, 1981). However, Tung's (1998) newer research examining expatriates' perceptions of international assignments on career development, stress coping mechanisms, acculturation processes while in the host country, and relationships between their performances and having country difficulty showed a positive development regarding work and family balance. Tung's research was conducted with 409 expatriates on assignments to 51 countries around the world. Contrary to previous research results that a family was a liability to expatriates, Tung's results showed that family has a stabilizing effect on international assignments. Expatriates living with family often found comfort at home and this comfort helped them cope with stress while working abroad. Therefore, work and family balance is one of the

critical challenges that expatriates may face from their international assignment and it may negatively impacts expatriates if their families cannot adjust well to the changes incurred.

**Expatriates' adaptation process.** The subject of expatriates' international experiences has raised the interest of many scholars. Because expatriates' international experience requires physical relocation from their home country to a different country, and it requires adjustment from home culture to a foreign culture; therefore one can view this experience as a cross-cultural experience. Many early cross-cultural studies focused on expatriates' adaptation or cultural adjustment (Holden, 2002; Mendenhall, 2001; Mendenhall et al., 2002; Osland & Osland, 2005; Peltokorpi, 2008; Pudelko, 2006). A substantial amount of expatriate-related literature was focused on the areas of knowledge transfer (Antal, 2000, 2001; Downes & Thomas, 2000; Fink et al., 2005) and organizational development (Bolino, 2007; Feldman & Thomas, 1992; Gregersen et al., 1998; Halpern, 2005; MacDonald, 2005; Selmer, 1999; Tung, 1988, 1998; Wittig-Berman & Beutel, 2009). However, more recent studies have broadened this traditional research focus to individuals' career and personal development (Peltonen, 1998) as a result of the expatriate experience.

In order to adapt to a new environment during an international assignment, expatriates will go through an adaptation process. Kim (2001) defined cross-cultural adaptation as a process of dynamic unfolding of the natural human tendency to struggle for an internal equilibrium in the face of often-adversarial environmental conditions. However, an adjustment process can also foster positive personal development (Antal, 2000, 2001; Peltonen, 1998; Sanchez et al, 2000) due to the learning required to manage new emotional challenges and meet the demands of new responsibilities. Cross-cultural adjustment refers to one's degree of psychological and emotional comfort in a different cultural environment (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Mendenhall &

Oddou, 1988). The most frequently used model to describe expatriates' adjustment process is the U-Curve Adjustment hypothesis (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Black & Mendenhall, 1991).

**U-Curve adjustment to personal and professional development.** The U-Curve Adjustment hypothesis includes four stages of a cross-cultural transition: the honeymoon stage, the culture shock stage, the adjustment stage, and the mastery stage (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). The U-curve can be illustrated as people usually start at a high point during the honeymoon stage of their international experience (the upper left of the U), then they experience a decline in emotion and depression during the culture shock stage (the lowest point in the U-curve). After going through a critical recovery and adjustment stage, they end up more or less balanced, near where they began.

***Honeymoon stage.*** In the honeymoon stage, people are excited about their new adventure and are interested in all the new experiences offered by a different culture. Before people arrive at the host country of their assignments, they may either: (a) prepare well and have a good understanding of the culture in the host country, or (b) lack sufficient knowledge of the host country's culture. Regardless of whether or not expatriates are prepared before their international assignments, they hold certain expectations such as new opportunities in their career and the opportunity to learn about a new culture. The honeymoon stage may only last from a few weeks to a few months. When they start to discover more differences between them and the people from host country, the honeymoon period starts to fade.

***Culture shock stage.*** Once the honeymoon period is over, people will start to get frustrated and uncomfortable with their daily lives in the host country because of the differences in lifestyle and cultural habits, language barriers, and being away from families and friends, especially if some of their expectations have not been met. This is the culture shock stage. The

term culture shock was coined by Oberg (1960) and this concept has since been widely used by many researchers to describe the concept of cross-cultural transitions. Culture shock is a challenging stage that requires strong coping responses. Individuals who learned about the host country's culture before the assignment may be able to cope with this stage better than individuals who did not prepare themselves well. Due to differences in individuals' coping mechanisms, many people may not be able to survive this stage; in this case, they may voluntarily end their assignments early to return home, or they may become unhappy during the assignment. However, those who are able to cope with all challenges can more easily proceed to the adjustment stage.

*Adjustment stage.* Due to the coping skills acquired by moving to a new geographical relocation, expatriates' personal and professional development will intensify. These developments involve new learning that could either be job or culture related (Kohonen, 2004). As an example, job development may be reflected in stronger competency or new skills in performing work-related tasks. Cultural development could be behaviors such as learning to accept cultural differences, learning how to do things differently, and accepting the customs in the host country. Some may interpret this acceptance as compromising their own natural identity (Osland, 2000; Osland & Osland, 2005).

Hall (1989) proposed that the nature of thinking is greatly influenced by culture. He claimed that "if one wanted to fit in, or not appear too conspicuous, it was helpful to begin to move to the local rhythm and conform to the local beat" (p. 79). As Hall further stated, when one is in strange territory, such as when exploring a new culture, becoming or feeling lost can be a highly annoying event. This frustration may block expatriates' learning either about themselves

or their host country. Therefore, openness to change will increase learning and assist expatriates' transition from frustration (culture shock stage) to adaptation (adjustment stage).

Besides culturally-related learning, expatriates also gain new technical skills quickly in order to show their competency in aligning with their job demands during the assignment (Kohonen, 2004). With this new learning, expatriates start to feel more comfortable in the new culture. Therefore, the adjustment stage typically leads to personal and professional development.

***Mastery stage.*** The final stage is the mastery stage, in which people have gained the ability to live and interact effectively on a day-to-day basis in the host country. Although expatriates may find themselves more accepted by people in the host country after developing their cultural and professional skills, in order to be successful in completing the assignment, expatriates must continue their cultural and job-related learning (Bird et al., 1999).

**Learning from international experience.** Based on the U-Curve Adjustment model, expatriates acquire different learning skills to cope with changes. These skills could be cultural or job related. Two studies conducted by Antal (2000, 2001) found that expatriates believed that the learning they developed in the host country is not just from the job itself but also from their lived experience. Through their newly gained perspective and experience, they add value to the organization. Findings from Antal's studies support the notion that international work experience not only changed expatriates' way of working, it also changed their way of thinking. Their frame of reference changed over time because of their exposure to new ideas and points of view. Expatriates found new ways of learning through their handling of barriers during the assignment. Expatriates gain insight into how people in the host country work and behave. Expatriates who



are really engaged in the host country's culture understand why things are done in a different way.

Antal's (2000, 2001) studies also indicated that learning how to live in the host country is a new skill they need to master during their international assignment. For example, a deeper understanding of the language and norms is essential for their daily interactions with people in the host country, so that they can understand how people think and what they mean. Consistent with Mead's (1934) Symbolic Interactionism theory, to understand human behavior, one must learn how people define their symbols. Being pragmatic and seeking to understand the rationale of behavior is a key component of an expatriate's learning development during the international assignment (Antal, 2000, 2001).

Although overcoming challenges during an international assignment is not an easy task, many expatriates still encourage others to pursue this career because it will provide them with a new lens through which they will view different dimensions of human experience (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1988). Many researchers (e.g., Hall (1989), Mendenhall & Oddou (1988), Osland & Osland (2005), and Peltonen (1998)), have concluded that different cultures tend to focus on certain aspects of life. Based on the U-Curve Adjustment process, coping and learning are the key components throughout the adjustment process. Learning the host culture and how to do one's job will bring the expatriate to the final adjustment stage of the curve. When people live in cultures different from their own, they have the opportunity to value the experience and traditions previously unknown to them. As described in the U-Curve adjustment process, an international experience will likely require a person to go through psychological, social, cultural and job-related adjustments.

## **International Experience and Identity**

The previous two sections describe relevant information about different perspectives to understand the concept of identity and expatriates' international experience. This section attempts to provide information on the relationship between identity and international experience.

**Transitional experience.** An expatriate's international assignment can be viewed as a transitional experience. It creates personal development because the work requires the expatriate to move from a familiar location to an unfamiliar one as well as to take on a change of work role. Nicholson (1984) presented a theory of work role transitions to illustrate how people adjust to the transition. His theory includes four modes of adjustment to work role changes: (a) replication adjustment strategy refers to a person who makes a few adjustments to his or her identity or behavior in order to fit into the new role; (b) absorption adjustment strategy describes a person who would make changes to his or her attitude or behavior in order to fit into the role requirements; (c) determination strategy is a strategy where any attributes of the transition have no impact on the person; as a result, the person does not make any personal self-adjustments but rather adjusts the role itself; and (d) exploration strategy refers to a person who will make adjustments to himself and also to the role in order to cope with the changes incurred by the transition.

Nicholson (1984) asserted that role transitions amplify personal development because of the nature of work for expatriates. Kohonen (2004) also drew a conclusion based on Nicholson's (1984) suggestion that adjustment to role transition is a form of personal development that results in changes in one's personal values and identity-related attributes. Her study shows that mental maturity is a result of personal and professional development.

Personal development from experiencing role transition can alter one's values and identity-related attributes. Based on this, it is logical to assume that one of the consequences resulting from international work experience is identity transformation. It is worth presenting Nicholson's theory because his theory illustrates two key points. First, his theory presents a conclusion that personal development can be a consequence of work role transition. Secondly, his theory supports P. S. Adler's (1975) notion that transitional experience leads to identity changes.

**Expatriate's identity transformation.** Research on expatriate paradoxes has shed some light on expatriates' identity transformation process. One of the biggest dilemmas for many expatriates concerns how much of one's identity has to be relinquished (Bird et al., 1999) and how much of the host country's cultural values have to be adopted (Berry, 1983) in order to be accepted in the host country. In Osland (2000) and Osland and Osland's (2005) studies, the researchers concluded that expatriates began to experience an identity crisis when they started to question their identity, their values, and their assumptions about numerous aspects of everyday life that they previously took for granted. Because of this identity crisis, people may become more aware of their own identity.

In order to be successful, expatriates may feel that they need to give up or compromise their identity in order to be accepted by other cultures. For example, Lee and Larwood (1983) found that highly successful U.S. expatriates in Korea adopted some Korean values while still retaining some U.S. values. These expatriates sought to accommodate the host country's values while not completely relinquishing their U.S. values. Bird et al. (1999) claimed that in order to delineate an identity boundary, one must also possess an ethical knowledge of what those boundaries are, both from a business perspective and a social perspective. Taylor (1989)

suggested that during an identity crisis, expatriates will learn about their value system's perspective or develop a foundational understanding of themselves, which they may not have possessed before their assignment. To further Taylor's suggestion, Kim (2001) proposed that people who go through a cross-cultural adaptation process will experience a gradual personal identity transformation: a subtle and unconscious change that leads to an intercultural personhood. Ultimately, this process results in the development of perceptual and emotional maturity.

In the research study about identity transformation from international work experience conducted by Kohonen (2004), 4 Finnish expatriates, all in manager's role, reflected on their international experience, learning, and development during the assignment. Results indicated that participants in the study experienced changes in both professional and personal levels. One participant indicated that he started to question his religious values that he had inherited from his family's background and established a different perspective on his marriage as well as his personal lifestyles. He gradually adopted more of the cultural and social values from the host countries and became a more bicultural individual. Another participant from her study indicated that he discovered more about his managerial potential due to the unlimited job responsibilities and his interaction with people in the host country. Her study concluded that one's identity can be constructed and transformed through a career development process during a cross-cultural transition.

In Osland and Osland's (2005) study about expatriate paradoxes in relationship to cultural involvement, results show that expatriates, who integrate more with the people and culture in the host country while still embracing their home culture, can more effectively manage paradoxical situations during their assignment. Peter Adler (1974) introduced a new concept—

multicultural man, which he defined as "a person whose essential identity is inclusive of life patterns different from his own and who has psychologically and sociologically come to grips with complicity and realities" (p. 24). This type of person has a fundamental change in the structure and process of his or her identity. Their identity is not based on a belongingness, either owning or being owned by a culture, but rather on a style of self-consciousness and a sense of being capable of negotiating through new forms of reality. A multicultural person integrates into the interconnectedness of life in both thought and actions. Multi-cultural man is open to any culture and propels from identity to identity. The values, attitudes, beliefs and world view of this type of person undergo constant forming and reforming.

Sanchez and his colleagues (2000) suggested that expatriates face double-edged challenges to their mental and physical health. Sanchez et al.'s study shows that expatriate assignment can cause stress due to adjustment to new environment, as described in the U-Curve Adjustment process. They become frustrated early in the assignment (culture shock stage) because of concurrent cultural identifications. To go through this process successfully, alleviate stress, and unblock the learning process, a personal transformation to a multi-cultural identity is necessary. Their willingness to undergo profound personal transformation, including the formation of a multi-cultural identity associated with their international assignment, is essential to their health adjustment, both mental and physical.

Those who successfully completed their assignments become different people because they have experienced different events. They become more capable of seeing one culture through the eyes of others and they are more capable of living through and managing different paradoxical situations (social acuity paradoxes, marginality paradoxes, mediation paradoxes and

identity value paradoxes), as cited in Osland (2000) and Osland & Osland (2005). These abilities represent the pinnacle of a personal transformation (Sanchez et al., 2000).

Sanchez et al.'s (2000) study indicated that some expatriates feel that during the earlier stage of the assignment their identity related to their home culture is strengthened as they continue to learn how to conduct business in the new local culture, but identification with the host culture will dominate later. However, some expatriates may become frustrated if they choose to reject the host culture, and some adopt a perspective that is halfway between the two cultures.

Society identity theory may provide a vehicle for understanding how expatriates cope with feelings of rejection, especially when internal conflict occurs due to concurrent identification of multiple social entities is perceived as unacceptable (Sanchez et al., 2000). Those who choose the hybrid multicultural identity approach are more successful in adjusting because their frustration and stress levels due to the culture shock will diminish. The more successful expatriates are those who are open to this personal transformation and embrace both the host and home cultures (Bird et al., 1999; Sanchez, et al., 2000). This assertion aligns with Hall's (1992) notion that openness to the transformation process will increase learning and facilitate expatriates' transition from frustration to adaptation.

As mentioned earlier in the expatriate paradoxes section in this chapter, expatriates typically become more world-minded during their time abroad (Osland, 2000). Their encounters influence their perspective and understanding of their self-identity. Their management of anxiety and unfamiliar obstacles (Osland, 2000) necessarily expands their worldview. Their mental development may become more advanced as a result of trying to accomplish the demands of new assignments (Kohonen, 2004). Although expatriates may give up some of their home values to

embrace the values of the host country, at the same time, they also gain a different perspective on their own fundamental values throughout the transition. Sanchez et al. (2000) asserted that “learning to manage in and cope with a foreign environment involves a profound personal transformation” (p. 96); expatriation is indeed a transformation process (Osland & Osland, 2005).

### **Summary**

Much expatriation literature has focused on expatriates’ adjustment process. Culture plays an essential role in the formation of identity and there are some studies that discuss how cross-cultural adaptation affects identity change. However, empirical research on how and to what extent international experience can influence a person’s self-identity is still scarce. This study attempts to focus on participants’ own interpretation of their identity transformation from their lived experience. From their own narratives, participants can assess whether their awareness of identity is increased due to this international experience.

The research investigator adopted the narrative approach to explore participants’ perception of self. The research methodology is detailed in the next chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

This chapter presents the methodology used in this research study to understand expatriates' perceived identity transformation during their overseas assignments. The conceptual framework of this research study is to explore expatriates' perceived self-identity with a focus on changes in individuals based on their lived experience. The purpose is to understand the changes that occur to expatriates as a result of their international experience; how these experiences can shape their self-identity and whether international experience will increase their awareness of self-identity. Through expatriates' own narratives, the researcher analyzes and identifies a plot of their life episodes in order to construct an identity transformation story. This chapter includes the following sections: (a) research design, (b) source of data, (c) data collection strategies and procedures, (d) human subjects' considerations, (e) proposed data analysis, (f) study validation, and (g) plans for results reporting.

#### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research design using reflexive narrative inquiry methodology. The term reflexive in this context referred to ways of seeing things in multiple dimensions, and then reflecting on existing ways of seeing (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). The main thrust of this approach was to try to stimulate participants' critical reflection and awareness (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000) in order to understand a phenomenon. The central phenomenon of this study is self-identity. The purpose was to understand the changes that occur to expatriates as a result of their international experience; how these experiences shaped their self-identity. Through participants' own reflexive narrative of their lived experience during their international assignment, the researcher investigated how participants constructed a meaning pattern that combined the articulated and unarticulated experience.



Qualitative research has been widely used in the social science area, including education, social work, anthropology, management science, and to students and practitioners (Merriam, 2009). It is a multi-method focused approach “involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter...qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Because qualitative research forms around assumptions about interpretation and human action (Creswell, 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006), rather than providing a precise measurement to determine the quantity or extend of a phenomenon in the form of numbers, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meanings they attribute to their experiences and future (Merriam, 2009). The flexible characteristics of qualitative research design do not restrict investigation to one particular aspect of the context for inquiry; they are open to unexpected results and exposed to direct and spontaneous interactions between researchers and participants (Locke, Silversman, & Spirduso, 2004). This design provides meanings to words drawn from participants to improve the understanding of a concept (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006; Zikmund, 1984).

Creswell (2007, 2009) suggested that qualitative research is best understood by exploring a problem, concept, or phenomenon and that it is needed when there is a need to hear silenced voices from a group or population identified as variables. Creswell also suggested that qualitative research is used when researchers need a detailed and comprehensive understanding of an issue in which the detail can only be uncovered by talking directly to people, allowing and empowering them to share their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. Furthering Creswell’s suggestion, Merriam (2009) asserted that

“research focused on discovery, insights, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p. 1).

All qualitative research is interpretative and aims at understanding how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives, their experiences, and their worlds. Stories are how people make sense of their experiences, how people communicate with one another, and how people interpret the world (Merriam, 2009). When people tell their stories, it is not only the events and characters that are interesting, but also the way people construct their stories and their experiences, and this is how they claim their lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

One of the approaches among qualitative research designs is narrative inquiry in which stories are used to describe human action (Polkinghorne, 1995). In the context of narrative inquiry, narrative refers to a “discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). It draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes (Polkinghorne, 1995). Episodic narratives are events stitched together by theme rather than by time (Michaels, 1981). Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano (2002) suggested that stories and narratives are the “oldest and most natural form of sense making”, (p. 66). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further asserted that narratives go beyond storytelling because they involve how people make sense of their lived experiences.

The research design and method are appropriate for this research because the central phenomenon in this study is to explore expatriates’ sense of self, their self-identity, through their own narratives of different episodes of their lived experience throughout their international experience. As mentioned earlier, qualitative research is done to gain a better understanding of a concept (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006; Zikmund, 1984) by talking directly to people, allowing, and

empowering them to share their stories unencumbered by what researchers expect to find or what they have read in the literature (Creswell, 2007, 2009). Therefore when people describe their experience to others, they are creating their self and how they want to be known by others (Riessman, 1993). According to Goffman (1959), these self-narratives, meant to persuade themselves and others of how they want to be known, are self-representations. These narratives not only represent how they want to be known they also represent how people interpreted their worlds (Riessman, 2002). When people construct their past events and actions in personal narratives, they are creating their self-identity and that is how they want to be known by others (Riessman, 1993). They claim their identities and construct their lives through their narratives (Riessman, 2002). According to Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992):

How individuals recount their histories – what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between the teller and audiences – all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are means by which identities may be fashioned. (p. 1)

Narrative inquiries are strongly associated with moves to restore individual *agency* which is to focus on ways in which individuals may choose to shape their lives (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). People reveal themselves to others by the stories they tell (Lieblich et al., 1998). Chase (2005) also supported this notion and emphasized that research using narratives can help reveal cultural and structural features of individuals' everyday social worlds. Chase further argued that narratives may reveal any suppressive meta-analysis data that establishes rules of truth, legitimacy, and identity. Therefore, encouraging and allowing people to talk about their life

stories allows them to negotiate their identities and create meaning of their experiences (Riessman, 2008).

### **Source of Data**

This section includes target population criteria, sampling method, and desired sample size for the research.

**Participants' selection.** Target participants were expatriates who were currently on or had completed an assignment with an organization that sent employees overseas for an expatriate assignment. This population aids in answering the research question: how can international experience influence an expatriate's self-identity? In addition to being an expatriate, participants must also meet the following criteria: (a) an adult at least 21 years of age, and (b) willing to participate in multiple interviews with the researcher via telephone or face-to-face conferences to share their international experience, and (c) currently on assignment for at least 10 months or longer, or (c) participant has already completed an international assignment with a length of 10 months or longer within the last two years. The determining factor for the length of assignment criteria is based on the goal of targeting expatriates who had already passed their honeymoon stage on the U-Curve Adjustment model (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, et al., 2005; Black & Mendenhall, 1991) as described in Chapter 2.

People start to enter the cultural shock stage after they have passed the honeymoon stage of the U-Curve Adjustment model and they start to experience differences between themselves and people in the host country. In general, people will spend a few weeks to several months in the honeymoon stage, perhaps enjoying the adventure of newness in their host nation. Then in the cultural shock phase, expatriates will need to take a period of time ranging from weeks to months in order to cope with the permanence of the changes and differences in their new life.

Identity develops in two directions: interpersonally and intrapersonally—shaped through an individual’s inner processes or as influenced by society and its institutions; identity includes qualities that reflect both sameness and differences in an individual. Including expatriates who have finished the honeymoon stage and already overcome it, or who are at the end of the cultural shock stage or in the adjustment stage or beyond, may create a more reflective experience as reliable data for this study.

**Pre-interview questionnaire.** To ensure all participants met the minimum eligibility requirements to participate in the research as a part of the participant recruitment process, a pre-interview of possible participants’ background information was necessary. This provided relevant contextual and background information for the actual interview if possible participant was selected. Therefore, all participants were asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix B). This questionnaire contained a list of demographic questions for each participant such as age, gender, marital status, and a list of questions related to their international experience such as number of expatriate assignments in their career, length of the most recent assignment, and length of time back in their home country if the assignment has been completed. Participants had a choice to complete and returned the questionnaire to the researcher via an online survey tool called Survey Monkey® or email. Alternatively, the questionnaire may be completed over the phone with the researcher. Participants were advised that all information provided through the questionnaire was completely confidential and the use of data was for research purpose only. The principal investigator/researcher of this study has the sole access to the information.

**Sampling method.** Qualitative research is conducted not only to study individuals but also to collect extensive detail about each person. By exploring the detailed experience of an individual, the researcher can draw a better understanding of a concept or phenomenon. In this

research, the phenomenon was an individual's self-identity. Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) assert that this type of research does not generalize information; rather, it explains and interprets the particular and the specific. Qualitative researchers usually "work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth" (Miles & Huberman, 2005, p. 27). Creswell (2007) observes that many narrative researches use one or two individuals as participants in their studies. During the literature review process of this study, the researcher noticed that the number of participants involved in narrative research can range between two and eight. This is due to the fact that the interviewing process may take multiple meetings with each participant in order to establish a personal relationship encouraging participants to be comfortable sharing their experience. In addition, each interpretation and analysis of the narrative needed to be comprehensive and unique to each respective participant. Because qualitative research was about delving into the depths of an issue, the researcher planned on selecting no more than seven participants in this research.

Potential participants were identified using a professional network sampling strategy through referrals from the researcher's personal and professional connections, including the social/professional network site LinkedIn.com and Facebook. Appendix C – Professional Network Sampling Invitation message was sent to the researcher's personal contacts, colleagues, and the researcher's personal network contacts in these social/professional network sites. The goal was to recruit up to seven individuals to participate in this study. Collection of names of organizations was not part of the recruitment strategy. Communication with prospective participants relied mostly on electronic communications, including e-mails and person to person private email within the social/professional network. Person to person private email within the social/professional network sites could only be viewed by the message sender and the message

recipients, in this case the researcher and the prospective participant. Once possible participants were identified, the researcher sent a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix B) to each of these participants to complete in order to ensure they met the minimum participant selection criteria of the study. Based on review of the pre-interview questionnaire, the researcher selected seven participants who met the research participant selection criteria and send them an informed consent form with a full description of the research.

### **Data Collection Strategies and Procedures**

Data for this research was collected from participants' reflexive narratives of their lived experience during the international assignment, researcher's observations, and her field notes throughout the research process. Participants' narratives were collected via an individual interview between the researcher and each participant using audio recording procedures. Researcher's observation and field notes were maintained throughout the research process. The subsequent sections outline strategies and procedures that the researcher used to collect data for the analysis.

**Interview structure.** This research adopted a narrative inquiry one-on-one interview structure via teleconference or in person meeting format. The one-on-one interview was adopted for this research by a "flexible use of prepared protocols that serves to maximize both issue-driven and emergent data gathering" (Mabry, 2003, p. 171). It provides "considerable space for interviewees to bring up what they see as relevant and for the deeper explorations" (Alvesson, 2011, p.53). Six participants' interviews were conducted via teleconference; one participant's interviews were conducted in person with the researcher at the participant's office.

The researcher was mindful of participants' schedules yet allowed sufficient time to obtain detailed information about their experience. Therefore each participant was asked to

participate in at least three interviews at about weekly intervals. Each meeting was scheduled for an hour in length. The rationale for multiple interviews instead of a single session was that participants may need follow-up interviews to reflect on narratives described in the previous interview. In addition, participants may feel more comfortable expressing their life episodes to the researcher after their initial encounter.

Each scheduled interview with participant had a key focus area. The first interview was a formal introduction between the researcher and the participant. The researcher used this interview to obtain participant's background about his or her expatriate career. In the second interview, the researcher encouraged participants to reflect upon what type of personal changes that may have occurred during their assignment. The third interview was to bring closure to the interview process by giving the participant additional time to share their reflection and to discuss about their re-entry process into the home country, if necessary. Depending upon how much experience the participant would like to share with the researcher, additional interviews was scheduled upon participant's request and the researcher determined that it was deemed necessary for the participant's reflexive project.

The researcher used guiding questions throughout the interview. The purpose of these questions was to stimulate participants to reflect on their experiences and empower them to share the different episodes of their life with the researcher. Each of these questions was constructed around the phenomenon being studied. The researcher prepared for interesting and unexpected themes to emerge that may call for the sacrifice of some of the prepared questions; therefore, a small number of open-ended questions were planned as listed in Appendix D.

Questions 1 to 4 were intended to understand the motivation of participants to take on an international assignment and their background before becoming an expatriate. Questions 5 to 7



were to explore the participants' awareness of change in their self-identity. These three questions were particularly important because they required a much deeper reflection from participants on their experience before and after the assignment. Questions 8 to 10 assessed how clearly participants understand their self-identity and how they want to be perceived by others. Questions 11 to 13 explored participant's overall perspective of international experience and self-identity. The researcher attempted to guide participants with these questions in the sequence listed above. However, when relevant topics emerged from the participants' narration, then the order in which these questions were asked could be adjusted to facilitate the capture of additional information.

Between interviews, the researcher completed a technical assessment of the narrative responses to evaluate which questions worked well, how some prompts might be improved, or how participants may be made more comfortable with the researcher. The researcher did an overall evaluation of participants' responses to see if any themes had emerged or whether the interview questions needed to be modified in order for participants to open up more freely.

**Procedures.** Before beginning the first interview, participants were asked if they understood the description of the research, the meeting plan, and the informed consent form (Appendix E) provided to them before the meeting. They were then informed that each interview would be recorded then transcribed for analysis. They were also advised that there was an option to exit from this research anytime if they felt that they were no longer interested in continuing as a participant. Since the construction of identity can be perceived as a process of reflexive consciousness of self (Baumeister, 1986, 1998; Lindgren & Wahlin, 2001; Woodward, 2002), in order to allow relevant topics to emerge, uninterrupted narration was privileged during each interview.

In order to ensure that the researcher correctly understood what was said by the participant, during each interview, the researcher paraphrased some responses to the participant to obtain their agreement on the interpretation. The researcher also took observational notes during the interview to help document any emotion from the participant. When a theme was identified during the interview, the researcher could prompt additional dialogue with participants encouraging them to expand on the identified theme. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they have additional comments to add.

**Pilot study.** To prepare for the research, two distinct processes had occurred. First, to ensure validity of the interview process, a colleague with knowledge of interviewing procedures and self-identity concepts was asked to review the interview protocol, research questions and other information to be provided to possible participants. Following this review, a pilot interview was conducted to ensure that the guiding questions were clear, and that the time estimates for the length of the interviews were accurate. Modifications were made after the validation process and the pilot interview. Data from the pilot study was not used as research purposes.

### **Human Subjects Considerations**

Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviews all research conducted with human subjects in order to ensure that the welfare and dignity of research participants are protected conforming to all ethical guidelines in the Belmont Report (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html>). This research was conducted in compliance to any applicable U.S. federal, state, local laws and regulations (<http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb/>). The investigator submitted an exempt status research request with all required documents to the IRB for approval before recruiting any research participants.

This research was to explore personal views about identity through a reflective narrative interview process. The participants for this research were adult population that was not a protected group. Participants could stop participating in this research anytime, their participation was voluntary. Although the focus of the research was about personal perceptions, psychological risk was deemed to be minimal and no more than what was routinely encountered in everyday life. The interviews discussed the participant's normal work activities and experiences. Nothing controversial or overly personal from participants' perspective may be ascertained. Therefore, this research did not go beyond the minimum risk as outlined in the exempt status research requirements.

While the interview was for participants to voluntarily share their lived experiences with the researcher, the researcher used guiding questions to help participants with their reflection. The researcher also asked questions for clarification of participants' responses. However, in order to protect the participants' dignity and humanity, the researcher did not impose any judgment or make negative comments regarding the participants' responses during the interview.

Confidentiality may be another concern from the participants' perspective. It is important to assure them that all conversations will be privileged. The researcher had adopted the following measures for this research:

1. The researcher informed participants that all data collected from this study was for research purposes only.
2. Participants' identity was replaced by a code name selected by the participant. During each interview, the researcher only addressed the participant by his or her code name. This was to ensure that only the participant and the researcher would be able to identify the participant's identity.

3. The researcher finished a copy of the transcripts for participants' review following the interviews to ensure they were comfortable sharing what is recorded. This review gave participants the first right to modify any information that was misinterpreted during the interview, any data that participants felt too personal to disclose, or any information that participants no longer wished to share for any reasons. The researcher respected participants' to withdraw any information that they did not wish to share.
4. The researcher shared her contact information including email address and telephone number with participants. This provided another communication channel if participants had questions or wished to report a case of distress associated with participating in this study.

These precautionary measures were taken place to ensure that participants' privacy was protected under this research study.

**Informed consent.** All participants were provided an information package including a full description of the research along with the specific requirements, meeting protocols, and an Informed Consent form (Appendix E) prior to the scheduling of the first interview. No signature was required from the participants on the Informed Consent form because a mandatory signature requirement on the Informed Consent form could have interfered with participants' willingness to participate in this research.

At the beginning of an interview with participants, the researcher reiterated to each participant the purpose of the research, ultimate use of data collected from the study, participant's voluntary involvement, expected length of time required, handling of data, and their right to exit anytime during the course of the research. Researcher presented to participants the

expected benefits of participating in this research, including contributing to the knowledge of expatriation, which may help companies better prepare their employees for international assignments; and an opportunity to increase their awareness of their self-identity through their own reflection will be discussed. They were also informed of the potential risks of participating in the study, which might include their memory of any unpleasant life episodes during their assignment or any distress about their current workplace situation. Then the researcher sought for each participant's reconfirmation of their understanding and agreement before proceeding to the interview.

**Confidentiality.** All interviews with participants were audio recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher after the interviews. All audio recordings and transcripts were saved on a researcher's personal computer which was password-protected. The transcripts were further protected as a password protected document and only the researcher has access to the password to unlock the file. Out of respect to the participants' privacy, a code name was used to present participants' narratives as anonymous accounts. All recordings and transcripts were backed-up on a single-purpose digital storage device (flash drive) in a location separate from the researcher's computer.

### **Data Analysis**

This research employed Polkinghorne's strategies for data analysis. Polkinghorne (1995) further developed Bruner's (1986) distinction between paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought in order to differentiate narrative inquiry's analytic strategies into two groups: analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. Analysis of narratives captures data composed of narratives or stories, produced through a particular time period. The researcher inspects collected data (stories) to identify categories. The researcher notes the relationship among categories, then

locates common themes or notions among them (Polkinghorne, 1995). This type of analysis can uncover commonalities that exist across the stories from multiple participants in order to create general knowledge from a set of particular instances.

Narrative analysis, on the other hand, is composed of data of different episodes of live experiences including actions, events, and happenings from participants. The “researcher’s task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data as contributors to a goal or purpose...The analytic task is to discover a plot that displays linkage among the data elements as part of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15). The purpose of narrative analysis is to construct different live episodes of participant in a story as the outcome of the research. Researchers generally begin their questions with the *how*, *what* and *why* during the interview in order to search for pieces of information that contribute to the construction of a story that addresses the research questions. Since narrative analysis is an explanation of past events, the researcher will search for pieces of information from participants’ narratives, link past events together, synthesize data then construct a story that answers the research questions.

The goal of data analysis in this research was to create a comprehensive picture of the reported experiences from the seven participants through a thorough examination of their interview transcripts. Further, the researcher investigated expatriates’ assignment-specific issues. Since each participant’s experience and identity were unique, the researcher employed the narrative analysis strategy for this research.

The researcher began by listening to the interview recording. While listening, the researcher took notes for analysis purposes. Then, the researcher read interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents from transcripts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). While

listening to and reading the transcripts, the researcher also took notes and memos on observations from the data, then developed tentative ideas about categories and relationships in each narrative.

Maxwell (2005) emphasizes that memos are one of the most important techniques for developing ideas. They are not merely used for coding or presenting a conclusion in research but should be treated as a way to help the researcher understand the topic, setting, or study. Memos should reflect the researcher's reading, methods, personal reactions, and ideas, as well as fieldwork. Writing memos can be a way of working on problems when trying to make sense of the topic, setting, study or data. To aid this analysis process the researcher utilized a qualitative software tool - HyperRESEARCH™.

The researcher analyzed or coded data by categorizing narratives by participants. Categories were identified depending on how participants described and what they said about their experiences. The researcher categorized the narratives to draw on different reflective themes based on the following dimensions: (a) order of event, chronological or random; (b) importance of events; (c) and frequency of a particular term or phrase mentioned in the narrative. As Strauss (1987) stated, the goal of coding was to “fracture” (p. 29) the data, then rearranged them into categories in order to come up with broader themes. Therefore, the researcher repeated the process of reviewing, analyzing, and categorizing narratives until a plot emerges for the researcher to construct an identity transformation story for each participant.

## **Means to Ensure Study Validity**

Internal validity deals with questions on how the research findings match reality. However, reality is relative (Maxwell, 2005). One can never really capture reality. Because qualitative research is based on the assumption of a philosophical paradigm (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009), all data including numbers, equations, and words are “abstracts, symbolic representations of reality, but not reality itself” (Ratcliffe, 1983, p. 150). One can interpret these representations and construct a conclusion out of these data. Therefore, “validity is a goal rather than a product...It needs to be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstance of the research” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 105).

When interpreting narratives from participants, the crucial ingredients are the researcher’s “judgment, intuition, ability to see and point something out, as well as the consideration of a more or less explicit dialogue – with the research subject” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 248). Because reflexion is “an ongoing process of constructing a meaningful pattern that combines a person’s articulated and un-articulated experiences of life (Lindgren & Wahlin, 2001, p. 361), individuals in the process will get to know themselves better. The drawback of this approach is participants can present themselves in a positive, non-problematic way – the way they want to be known. Therefore, well designed research questions are crucial to seeing beyond these facades of self-deception. This research was not intended to judge a person’s personality. It was intended to help participants to better understand their lived experience; it was the process and interactions participants experienced that the researcher was focused on. Therefore, whether participants presented themselves in a positive or negative manner did not create a significant impact on the research conclusion.



Although the conclusion of the research was subject to this researcher's interpretation of the narratives, to ensure validity, the researcher adopted the following strategies to address the credibility and validity concerns:

**Clarifying researcher bias.** Clarifying an investigator's personal values and beliefs (Maxwell, 2005) is important to a study because readers can understand a researcher's position and any relevant biases and assumptions that may impact the inquiry and interpretation (Merriam, 1988). In this investigation, the researcher utilized Maxwell's (2005) recommended technique of a *researcher identity memo*, which was a personal memo the researcher used to reflect on goals and relevance for the research. Moustaka (1995) suggests that the first stage for any researcher to conduct a research is to deliberately set aside, or *bracket*, all preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand to the greatest extent possible. This allows the researcher to free his or her mind in the hopes of being a better receptacle of the experience of others, and to fully understand the experience from the participant's point of view. In this researcher identity memo, the researcher commented on past experiences, beliefs, biases, prejudices, assumptions and orientations that may likely shape the interpretation and approach of the study. The researcher's identity memo for this study is included in Appendix A.

**Member checking.** During the final interview, researcher debriefed the entire interview process with the participant to obtain their feedback on the interview format, their opinions on the research topic and how useful they found this research to their understanding of self. The researcher also shared her preliminary perspective of the participants' transformation based on observation from participants' narratives and their emotional responses during the interviews. She then asked participants for confirmation that the preliminary analysis was correct. Interview transcripts were sent to each participant for their review and confirmation. They were also asked

to provide information for clarity if necessary. The researcher invited participants to share additional experiences that they would like to add to their stories upon reviewing their transcripts. The goal was to solicit feedback on the researcher's emerging findings and interpretation of their respective identity transformation. Maxwell (2005) wrote, "This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed" (p. 111). It was also considered as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

**Participants' motives.** One of the potential threats to this study was what the participants were willing to disclose in their stories to the researcher. Even if they were willing, there was the question of how capable they were in expressing their experiences effectively. To minimize this threat, one of the pre-interview questions was to confirm speaking proficiency. Participants must be able to speak and understand English (orally and in writing) for the researcher to communicate with them during the interviews and for them to review the interview transcripts. Another way to reduce this threat was the multiple interview processes with each participant. One of the goals was to establish a relationship between participants and the researcher, so that participants felt comfortable in sharing their experiences openly with the researcher as the research progresses. To establish this relationship and to encourage participants to share their experience candidly, researcher started the first interview by introducing her own personal background to participants and the reasons that trigger her interests to begin the research. She also actively demonstrated interests to the participants about the information participants share. When the researcher noticed any insights or underlying information may exist from participants'

narratives, she posed subsequent open-ended questions to order to encourage participants to expand on the dialogues. Some of the question styles were, “So what did you do?”, “Why did you think...?”, “Can you share with me about your thought process at that time?” Participants were also reminded of their rights to decline answering any of the questions prompted by the researcher.

### **In Summary**

This research study aimed to expand knowledge about the implication of expatriates’ international experience on their self-identity. Participants in this study were recruited via a professional network sampling strategy through referrals from the researcher’s personal and professional connections. A reflexive inquiry approach was used to collect data from participants. Data analysis was performed using qualitative narrative analysis method. Upon the analysis and interpretation of each participant’s reflective narrative, the researcher reports her findings based on themes drawn on and a story constructed for each participant’s identity transformation along with an abstract of each narrative in Chapter 4. Discussion of the research and future suggested research recommendations are presented in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents findings of the study involving seven participants' reflexive narratives of their experiences when working for the foreign units of their companies. The purpose of this study was to understand the changes that occurred to expatriates as a result of their international experience, how these experiences shaped their self-identity, and whether international experience increased their awareness of self-identity. Through expatriates' own narratives, the researcher analyzed their life episodes, and then constructed an individual identity transformation story for each participant in order to answer the following research questions:

*Primary question:* How does international experience influence a person's self-identity?

*Sub-question:* Does working in another country increase one's awareness of self-identity?

### Participant Demographics

The data gathered for this research were collected from seven participants' reflexive narratives of their experiences during their international assignments, the researcher's observations, and her field notes throughout the research process. Table 1 below provides a summary of demographics about participants of the study.

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants*

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Count</b>
Age group	Between 31 to 40 years old	4
	Between 41 to 50 years old	2
	51-year-old or above	1
Gender	Male	5
	Female	2
Nationality	American	2
	Australian	2
	British	1
	Dutch	1
	Japanese	1
Marital Status	Single without a committed relationship	2
	Single with committed relationship	2
	Married with children	3
Expatriate status	Currently on assignment	6
	Assignment completed	1
Number of overseas assignments (10 months or longer) participant has been on, including assignments with both current and past organizations	Cindy	2
	Cody	2
	Douglas	1
	Elizabeth	3
	Fred	3
	Jack	2
	James	4

The length of each assignment varies from one year to six years. Location of assignments included Cambodia, China, Thailand, South Sudan, Caribbean, Hong Kong, France, Netherlands, and United States. These participants were interviewed between August 2013 and October 2013 either by telephone (six) or in person (one) using audio recording procedures. All interviews

were recorded and transcribed, then provided to participants for their review. Participants completed the review of their interview transcripts by February 2014. Researcher's observations and field notes were maintained throughout the research process.

### **Transformation Stories**

The following transformation stories were constructed based on participants' narratives from interviews with the researcher. Quotations were cited from interview transcripts. In order to maintain the ethnicity of the narratives, the researcher did not make changes to these quotations for clarity or grammatical corrections.

#### **Cindy's transformation.**

*Background and story.* Cindy is a thirty-six-year-old Dutch management consultant who spent a year on her first long-term foreign assignment in Thailand. Her assignment also included business travels to South Korea and India. After completion of her assignment in Thailand, she turned down an offer to stay in Thailand for another assignment and returned home. She has since opted to work with other companies.

The primary motive for Cindy to start her expatriate career was her strong interest to work abroad. She wanted to experience life working in another country and to learn a different culture. Another reason for her to consider an international assignment was because she began to feel bored with her position in the Netherlands. She was looking for a change. So she approached her employer at that time requesting an international opportunity. Her company offered her a couple of project-based opportunities in Asia (Singapore and Thailand). She selected Thailand because she had previously visited Thailand for short business trips. She had a basic understanding of the country and knew about the presence of an expatriate community.

The host country was primarily responsible in preparing Cindy for her experience abroad. Little was provided prior to her departure except the negotiation of a compensation package and the temporary housing arrangement in Thailand. The host country effectively helped her get settled, including finding a permanent place to live and assisted her in applying for a work visa. She managed to learn a little bit of Thai on her own before arriving Thailand, which was beneficial as she settled into her new community.

Cindy's experiences of the differences of culture, ways of working, climate, communication styles, religion and social concept led to a change in her own behavior. The first challenge that she encountered was the communicative style, which was part of the cultural differences she noticed immediately when her assignment started. The Dutch have a very direct communication style. Thai people have a different approach when interacting with others primarily due to their religion. Buddhism, which has a focus on harmony, is the primary religion of the Thai people. It is rare to see a Thai person behave or communicate too directly or too aggressively in both personal and business settings. Cindy provided some examples:

The Dutch people are like ... naturally, they're very direct people. They just sort of say it like it is without softening how it would sound or how it would come across. This is very Dutch and in Thailand, that's not very accepted so you really need to change your style of communication. That's one point to be less direct. The other thing is for myself, becoming more calm and I think in a way becoming a bit slower with everything that you do and thinking things more thorough and having a lot of patience with people, which was quite a big change in my time in Thailand, getting accustomed to the culture and the culture differences at work, which were sometimes awkward. You're sometimes put into an awkward position in which you don't know how to behave because the situations are new. For instance in a meeting, as a ... well, a couple of examples, one example is that when you are visiting a client and you give a presentation, you're not supposed to stand up so one of the guys that I gave the presentation with did stand up so culturally, in Thailand that's not really accepted because you should never ... your head should never be higher than the most senior person in the room so if you stand up and he sits down, it's not a good thing. And then we didn't know how to change that at that specific moment. Another example is when people address you in the office and all of a sudden, you're very ... you're seen as a very senior person.

For me, that was a bit awkward because in the Netherlands that was never the case that I was really treated as an expert in my field of consulting skills. In Thailand, it was a completely different story. People would ... they would ... even people would keep their head lower than mine, which was awkward for me. People would address you in a certain way. People would treat you with a lot of respect and a lot of ... almost like a distance. Yeah, that was different for me.

In order to properly address people in a polite form as it related to social class and the correct societal level, Thai people asked strangers personal questions such as marriage status, age, and so on which Europeans like Cindy consider too personal to ask a stranger. As Cindy elaborated,

If you have money, you are obviously higher in rank. If you have international experience, you're obviously higher in rank so people just place you in a certain position based on the information that you give them, whether you are married or whether you have lived abroad or whether you are Caucasian so they just give you a certain ranking and then you are treated according to that ranking that they give you. In public life, money is a very big driver.

This was completely opposite to the way Cindy was accustomed to. Due to this difference, Cindy changed her direct communicative style to a softer, calmer and less direct approach.

Cindy noticed a big difference in her concept of time and productivity compared with Thai people. In the Netherlands, people focused on time management and productivity during the 8-hour work day. Employees went home on time and enjoyed their personal time after work. Thai people, in the eyes of Cindy, were more relaxed with their time. People would arrive late to the office and stayed very late but were relatively less productive compared to people in the Netherlands. In order not to create a big gap between her work style and local people in Thailand, Cindy slowed down her pace to blend in more with the local culture.

Beginning an expatriate journey could be a lonely experience, because unlike in her home country where Cindy had a support network of family and friends, in Thailand she needed to quickly develop interpersonal skills to make friends. During the course of developing these



skills, Cindy noticed that she was an extrovert, which she had not recognized when she was home in the Netherlands. Her social circle was the expatriate community. She attempted but did not fully immerse herself into the local community throughout her assignment. Cindy felt that Thai people were not interested in learning foreign cultures.

The fact is actually I have a Swiss friend who was in Thailand for a very, very long time and she speaks Thai fluently but it's not ... feel more accepted. Because the Thai people, some of them or most of them, they see you as a foreigner and they gossip about you all the time and it's hard if you understand what they say so this was her problem always... because you're a foreigner and at the same time they don't understand your culture... Sometimes they ask a question or they giggle. They always giggle but I don't think they have a lot of interest in our culture as we would have in their culture... They just think you are wealthy and for a lot of people, that's most important.

Upon completion of Cindy's initial assignment, she was offered to stay in Thailand for another assignment with a management role; however, she declined the offer. There were two main reasons for her decision: First, she did not feel that life in Thailand was real because she was living in luxurious life style. Second, she felt that she would never completely fit in to the local community:

I also didn't feel that I wanted to stay leading the expat life for another year in the manner that I lived in Thailand. It's very much a luxury life. I cooked once during that entire year so I think it was worthwhile to change my environment again and have less of a luxury life probably... the reason for that I think is very much based on the fact that everything is very work-related when you are an expat. If work stops, your stay stops which makes you of course in a way dependent on work, on a work situation. In a way, you're always dependent on work because you need money but when you are abroad, that's even more so. Work is a very key part of your life and the other reason for wanting to go back to a more, I don't know, I would say ... well, I wouldn't say westernized but a more lifestyle where you wouldn't be so much living as an expat is that you ... in Thailand, you would never be part of the actual local community because you don't speak the language, you don't know all the customs and all the ... it's a very complicated country, not only with the religion, with the Buddhist religion but also with the way how they relate to each other in daily life, all the rules and regulations and the things you see but also a lot of things that you don't see so it was very difficult to become one of the locals and I noticed that because I only had one Thai friend, which was a lady in the office but for the rest, I didn't have any Thai friends. I had another friend who I played squash with but he was half-Thai, half-Chinese and he was very western himself so that was a big reason for me to not want to stay in Thailand because you will always be a foreigner...

You will never fit in to the society unless you are a Thai person. That is the same for every foreigner whether they speak their language or not, whether the foreigner married a Thai woman or not. I know one... I know a guy who lives in Thailand who is married to a Thailand lady. He has a business which is a cycling tour for foreigners. He speaks Thai; he has a child with a Thai lady. They are fantastic. And I know them very well. Even he wouldn't be part of the Thai society in the same way a Thai person will be. It's impossible.

After Cindy returned to the Netherlands for a few months, she went to Australia for a different international assignment. Her experience in Australia was rather different from the experience in Thailand. The transition was easier in Australia due to not having a language barrier, and having a similar western culture and working style:

Because the culture was very different. Australia is filled with immigrants. This is their history. Half of the population is immigrants. They need skilled migrants. It's a very different story. You speak the language, you have the same culture, and you have the same background. Most people come from Europe. It's a melting pot of all these different nationalities. It's very different from Thailand.

Throughout the interviews, Cindy repeatedly mentioned that her expatriate life did not feel *real* because she was living a luxurious lifestyle during the assignment. Because of the lifestyle and the cultural differences, she did not feel a part of the local community. When she was in Australia, she shared a similar culture with Australians, but she still did not feel that her life was real. Her family and friends were far away from her. To her, expatriate life was not permanent. She felt that at some point expatriates will leave their host country, and separate from their new friends they made. As she explained:

You will never feel 100% at home in your home country, and you will never feel 100% at home abroad. That is a constant tension, and whether I would live in Australia or whether I would live in the Netherlands, I would always miss the other side... You always take the good things of the other environment with you, and you wish you could implement them in your Dutch life, but that of course, is not possible.

This was also the main reason she decided to stop her expatriate career and settle in the Netherlands after the Australian assignments. Another reason for her to stop her international

career was because she felt that an expatriate's life was very work dependent. As she noted above:

The reason for that I think is very much based on the fact that everything is very work-related when you are an expat. If work stops, your stay stops which makes you of course in a way dependent on work, on a work situation. In a way, you're always dependent on work because you need money but when you are abroad, that's even more so. Work is a very key part of your life.

When she returned to the Netherlands, the re-entry process was not easy. She lived a luxurious life for many years prior to her return home to the Netherlands. Although she had her friends and family closer to her, she also noticed that her support group did not always understand how she felt because they did not share the same international experiences. Her worldview had changed and expanded causing a gap between herself and her peers. There were times she was frustrated during the re-entry transition, but the international experience made her more determined to be successful regardless of the emotional stress and hurdles. When she had an unhappy moment, she would remind herself to hold on to the decisions that she had taken and to focus on all the beautiful things such as being closer to her family. She understands that time will help her with the adjustment. Cindy is becoming stronger and more flexible, and feels able to overcome any challenges to come in life.

I had emotions of insecurity but yeah, also that being away when you notice that you can actually really build on yourself and this is one of the things that I think throughout Thailand but also throughout Australia has really sort of shaped me in who I am today that I'm not afraid to have these big challenges in life because I've had so many already. There are not a lot of challenges that would scare me.

Cindy believed that her international experience was a very rewarding experience which raised her awareness of her self-identity. She met many people, and all of these people were her *mirror*. Her concept of mirror was explained as below:

If you meet a new person, you give that new person something and that new person gives you something back. A lot of new persons, it's like a mirror. If you meet a lot of new

people, it's a mirror. I don't know if it makes any sense but, this is how I always see meeting new people. All these people are a mirror for yourself, because you give something and you get something back. If you are negative, you will get negativity back. If you are positive, you will... It's like a mirror.

I think you get to know yourself really well, because when you are abroad by yourself, you just need to fix it yourself. You need to share happy moments with yourself, but you need to share shitty moments with yourself. You get to know yourself in more extreme situations.

*Sense of identity.* Cindy's challenge of trying to fit in to a new group gave her a fresh view and better understanding of herself. From a professional level, she viewed herself as an inexperienced consultant, not an expert before the expatriate assignment. Her expatriate experience changed her perspective about her skills and expertise level. Because she was put on the project for her expertise, she had to constantly prove to herself and that she had valuable input to contribute. Her knowledge and skills were attributes that assisted in receiving acceptance from her co-workers in Thailand. She became more confident about herself and about her skills at work. Outside of work, she felt that her self-image has improved because she had proven to herself that she could move abroad and be successful in looking after herself and entertaining herself. She made new friends and felt more confident in the unknown due to her ability to overcome obstacles.

The international experience helped her as a change management professional because she can now understand why people behave well in certain situations or why they don't behave well in different situation. Cindy understands how a strong culture influences an individual's behavior. As she said, "The more experience you have, working with a broader range of people, of course, it can only enhance your skills and your competencies in working in different situations, because the more you see, the wider scale you've seen, the better you can respond to situations that are coming your way".

To conclude, Cindy's self-identity transformation was a discovery process through her professional and personal improvements during her international assignment. Her international experience helped her realize the internal process changes she had experienced due to the differences in language, communicative style, country, business culture, and social class. Her narration has a strong focus from the cultural perspective which influenced her identity transformation and awareness. To overcome the challenges triggered by these differences, Cindy developed new skills. Through the development process she was able to recognize the hidden identity that she did not realize previously – confident, capable, and a strong will to succeed. She developed better competency in her interpersonal and communications skills. She has become more accepting of other cultures as well as more flexible and responsive to change. Her self-image has improved. She is a much stronger person and believing in herself. She knows how to manage her own success, control her destiny and be responsible for her own choices. Cindy recognized that her root culture and family were her reality; hence she decided to give up her unreal life style and returned to the life in which she was raised. Through her reflection from the interviews, Cindy recognized that living in another country increased her awareness in self-identity. Her awareness of self-identity continues to increase her personal and professional expertise to the next level.

### **Cody's transformation**

*Background and story.* Cody is a forty-four-year-old finance professional who moved to China as an expatriate about seven years ago. He started working as a market analyst for a manufacturing company in the United States. His company was setting up a joint venture in China in order to expand the business. Due to his desire to be actively involved in the economic growth of expanding into China, he requested to be assigned to this new joint venture and moved

to China. The initial assignment was for a three-year rotation. Upon the completion of the first rotation, he continued to stay on for another rotation cycle. Upon completion of his second rotation, he left the company to join another company in China. His narrative below focuses on his two rotation terms with the previous employer. At the time of the interviews, Cody was still living in China as an expatriate employee for another company.

Cody has a few special circumstances that make his expatriate journey to work in China a very unique one. First is his family background. Cody is of Chinese descent, living in the United States since the age of fourteen. He speaks Chinese Cantonese but not Chinese Mandarin, which is the main dialect used in China. He grew up and received his formal education in the United States. Although he is of Chinese descent, he did not have much knowledge of Chinese culture or history. His career, family and close friends were all in the United States until he accepted the international assignment at the age of thirty-four.

Despite the fact that Cody was educated and raised American, his company assumed that he did not require any cultural preparation for his move to China due to his Chinese ancestry background. It was assumed that this would not be a difficult transition. Cody explained that it was very difficult at the beginning. Although he is Chinese and was familiar with the China market, he still experienced challenges due to differences in language, culture and business work style in China. People in China viewed expatriates as experts sent from overseas. The expectation was that expatriates knew everything and had answers for all their questions. Therefore, business knowledge was extremely important. Since he was working on market analysis, it was assumed that he was very familiar with Chinese market trends. Aside from the knowledge expectation from the local team, there was tremendous pressure coming from the home office to generate the expected financial goals within an aggressive timeline. Cody needed

to quickly develop the necessary skill sets to meet the company goals, especially soft skills including interpersonal skills, a communications approach based on the audience and paying more attention to the needs of the local employees in China.

When we inherited a state-owned enterprise, naturally there were lots of workers. These are unacceptable surprise, [more] than you really need, which tend to be the nature of a state-owned enterprise. It's not just China, probably around the world, you know, whether it is Germany, whether it is Japan, at the certain point. State-owned enterprise just tends to have more people than needed. The first thing we needed to do was to evaluate the local team that we brought along with the company. And then evaluate the talent level we got, and then to make some tough choices. You know, like laying off people, turning them away which are not so easy to do in a country that we are not so familiar with, to be honest. And then to tell me to go home, "you are no longer needed", it is quite a challenge. Especially you have to do a large scale cut back, and layout that you have to do. You ultimately have to convince first with the labor unit as well as the management team why we have to do this. What is the purpose behind all these layoff? And tell them what it is light at the end of the tunnel? What is the vision? Why we are doing this? The long-term. What it is in it for them? Explain to them and keep explaining. You will be surprised how many times have to tell the same story, over and over and over again, until they finally sink in and said "Ok, I got it". At that point, it probably takes a good couple of months convincing the management and labor union about what we need to do before we actually do anything. But once you get their buy in, it is a lot easier.

He understood that he needed to be more tolerant, open minded and accepting in order to win the hearts of the team. He convinced his local team that he was one of them and he wanted to collaborate with them to drive the company to success. He described his experience as:

When I first came to China, the assignment was in the finance area and the job was primarily to set up one of the new joint ventures in China. It was very interesting, very challenging actually. One of the best times of my life in terms of career. Extremely challenging, one of the toughest assignments I ever had. It was good. We set up the new company. We turned around a Chinese owned enterprise into a profitable westernized company operation. It was quite interesting. You came to learn about surprise, the Chinese culture how you do things here. And how to talk to the local team, how to get them to negotiate and settle on something. How to get things done in China is very challenging over the process. Looking back it was one of the best experiences, one of the best times in my life here. Good experience.

At the beginning of his assignment, he spent more time with other expatriates. As time passed, he started to spend more time with local employees and less time with expatriates

socially. He mentioned that his Chinese descent could be an advantage to him over other expatriates in terms of immersing into the local culture. Although English is not his native language, it was his main language for communication since he was a teenager in the United States. As mentioned earlier, Cody could not speak Chinese Mandarin which was considered a new language to him. In order to fit in and blend in to the local community, he needed to learn this new language. Since he is the same race as the local employees, he felt that they were more accepting of him even though he could not speak the language. This acceptance helped him advance his Chinese language level much quicker. He was getting more interested in learning Chinese history and his ancestors' culture:

I think I am evolving but that is kind of the direction. I think there are two folds. One is because my Chinese is not so good, so I do want to hang out with the locals and try to improve my Chinese. Two is once you learn more about the Chinese culture and history, the taste, how the locals are like, nothing else but curious. It is very fascinating to me. I have read the Chinese history book since I've been in China. I read more Chinese books than all my years in US. I was able to read Chinese textbooks now. I can speak the language a little bit more. I can mingle with locals now; can understand what they are saying. I still don't understand everything they say but I think I can get most of it. So actually quite fascinating to me. Quite fascinating to learn another, not another, but to learn more about the Chinese culture. It was quite fascinating actually. Along the process I had distant myself from the expats. With that said though, on the daily basis, I speak English actually quite a bit at my current job and prior job because there are quite a few expats in the company. So I am quite comfortable talking to expats as well as the locals.

The second special circumstance for Cody was his decision making process. Moving to China was a quick decision for him because he had been longing for the opportunity to be part of the company's growth, so it met his career goal. But it was a difficult decision for his family to leave what they had established in the United States and move to an unfamiliar place and build a new life. The agreement between Cody and his wife that this assignment was very important and critical to his career development was difficult to reach. His wife reluctantly agreed to move to China with him. Cody's wife was not excited about the new environment and, coincidentally, there



was a personal issue to take care of back in the United States. Therefore, his wife and child only stayed in China for 3 months, and then returned to the United States. Since then his family has not returned to China.

When asked about his feelings regarding the separation from his family, he described it as a mixed feeling. It was strange knowing his family was not returning and that he would be alone in China for the remainder of his assignment. Due to the demanding and challenging nature of his work, it was also a relief to him that he could focus on his work without worrying about allocating time and energy to his family. As he explained, "...get used to it and focus on the purpose of being an expat in China is primarily because of career. I have been keeping myself quite busy, so it is not really such a big deal". Cody's ambition had caused some compromises with his family. He described it as "lots of issue. There are complaints. A lot of tension". He recognized that his family value was getting weaker. He was losing his sense of where his home was because he had been away from home for a long time. He knew he was very career-focused and probably very self-focused at the expense of his family. However he did not regret his decision of choosing an international career path because he believed he was doing the right thing. He was clear that this was what he wanted for his life. This was the priority of his life. Anything else became a secondary priority.

Throughout the conversation, he re-emphasized how much he enjoyed the challenges he experienced in his expatriate journey. He would not have realized his goals in life had he stayed in the United States. The challenges he experienced motivated him to expand his responsibilities and to progress quickly through his career. These challenges also helped him to expand his worldview and the development of other skills, like leadership. He is planning to continue his expatriate career without an ending date and without any restriction to the countries as long as

they continue to be a path that challenges him. He is very clear about what he wants and what his path will be in the future. As he described, “I don't think I will ever be able to turn back. I just go as far as I can. If there is a price to pay, there's a price to pay. But my goal is quite clear and I want to get there”.

Although Cody's company had a plan for him to stay in China for a third rotation term, he declined the assignment but accepted another opportunity with greater responsibility from another company in the same industry. It was his choice to leave the company for his career advancement: “It is really once again for career advancement. I was offered another position, a bit more senior position in another company. So in the interest of career development, I decided to leave. It was not an easy decision but I left anyway”. To him career advancement was his goal; greater responsibility creates new and greater challenges which meet his career objectives.

Cody's ambition and self-focus were the main context of his narration. He was not discouraged by challenges he encountered. On the contrary, he was motivated by these challenges. He kept reminding himself of the reason he moved to China. This reason was the driving force for him to go forward. He enjoyed and felt rewarded by what he had accomplished even at the expense of his family.

*Sense of identity.* Cody acknowledged that his self-identity has changed. Before his international assignment, he had a greater work/life balance. He thought he was comfortable with his status quo. However, the longer he has served on an international assignment, the stronger he felt about this career desire. He was more assured about his belief that working abroad would expand his career growth. The international assignments provided him with what he wanted for his life. It made him realize what he wanted to achieve in his career. As he said, “It just amplified exactly what I always wanted, kind of low lime light before and now it has become a bright light

Hollywood. That is exactly what I want to do. I would get my life even more focused on what I want to do”. Although he knew his identity as a career-focused individual, the international experience made his identity more pronounced. It affirmed his belief, strengthened his understanding of self, and increased his awareness of what the priorities are in his life.

He did not think his identity was compromised nor did he think he needed to give up his identity. Instead he was becoming more open minded and less egoistic. He listens more to the locals before making any decision and maintains a positive attitude. To meet his goals, Cody worked on understanding the Chinese culture quickly so that he could fit in to the local community. He learned that he needed to be very flexible, and recognized that there are always different ways to reach goals. He is now open to others’ opinions, listens more to the locals before making any decision, learns from others and maintains a positive attitude. The more successful he is with his career, the more confident and reassured he is about his identity. He was influenced by the locals and became more interested in Chinese history and his root culture. The achievement of his success and the change in the local team’s behavior gave him confidence in his ability and the decision to continue his international journey. On the other hand, his identity with family values was weakened as he focused more on his career ambitions.

### **Douglas’ transformation.**

***Background and story.*** Douglas is a thirty-four-year-old single male web design professional working for a global company in the United States. In November 2011, he was transferred to work in their Hong Kong office for a six months assignment to implement a global website project across the Asian Pacific region. He was already part of the project but was located in the United States before moving to Hong Kong. The reason for the transfer to the Hong Kong office location was to have a close proximity to and direct interaction with business

users in the Asian Pacific region. He was offered a management position by the company to manage the overall website program and the web marketing team in the region following the implementation of the launch of the global website project. He accepted the position and there was no ending date of his expatriate contract at the time of the interviews.

Douglas always wanted to experience life living overseas. When his company offered him the opportunity, it was an easy decision due to his long term interest in overseas life. However he was skeptical about the location in Asia. He had never been to Hong Kong. He could not speak or understand the local language. He also had a perception that Asia in general has a very different culture. It is very far away from friends and family. From a practicality point of view, he was concerned with what he would do with the house he owned, his car, and his salary payment and tax arrangement while overseas. His former supervisor at that time had provided great assistance for his decision to move. She was able to negotiate an expatriate contract to his satisfaction, so that he would not need to worry about any tax issues or about coming back to the United States for his annual holiday. He was also able to find a renter for his house. Once all of these arrangements were made, he was more comfortable with his decision.

In terms of preparation, he believed he was ready because he simply would be doing the same job at a different location. There was not any cultural preparation prior to his move. This was due to him spending a tremendous amount of time trying to finish up project tasks prior to his relocation. The company also did not offer any cultural preparation support other than providing him with the housing accommodations in Hong Kong.

Douglas elaborated at length about how his previous international travels to Australia, New Zealand and Europe had helped him with anxiety when traveling to other countries. This included going through customs inspection and understanding the logistics from any

international airport to a destination in a foreign country. He also described his emotion when he saw the skyline in Hong Kong upon descending into Hong Kong International Airport. He described the following when he saw the skyscrapers from the plane:

I remember first thing seeing the skyline of being like "it's a very impressive city". Very different from what we see in the States. I knew about one fact about Hong Kong was quite interesting was that having skyscrapers in the world, they determined by buildings of over 300 meters tall. Hong Kong has well over 2000. The next city has the most was New York, only has about 700 or something. I knew it's only going to be quite a different city. It's going to be quite daunting even like New York is.

Douglas described his first week as "very strange". He noticed a few interesting observations related to the physical environment and his comfort level in a foreign country. First he was surprised by the amount of English used everywhere in Hong Kong. At that point a strong sense of excitement started to grow for his upcoming adventures in this new home for the next six months.

The next day when he went to a home goods store to purchase an ironing board, he experienced his first cultural shock about people's aggressive behavior. This experience did not frighten him in any way but it was a very different encounter than where he came from. And he learned very quickly to handle the situation and manage his emotions at the moment. As he described:

The whole concept of queues and lines is a bit different in Asia. You're staying there and waiting to pay for your iron. All in a sudden, you see this old Chinese lady coming out and shuffle cash in front of me and paying for her things. Wow! How was this working? I don't understand. Now I get it, you need to be aggressive, so I stuck my arm out with my cash and get my iron home; then start ironing.

The third observation was related to his comfort level in a foreign country. When he was looking for a restaurant to have his first lunch in Hong Kong, he browsed around one of the busiest streets where there were many restaurants with a variety of food choices available. He finally decided to eat at the MacDonald's which he felt was the most comfortable place to eat

among numerous choices on his first day out in the city. Probably at that moment, he was still missing home and was not adventurous to try something new.

He enjoyed the differences he noticed on the walk he took to work as these were all new and interesting to him in his first week:

Knowing little about Hong Kong, in order to go someplace, you have to look up and there was sign board above you. That is where you need to be. It was an interesting walk that first morning. I believed I took the train home that first night, kind of like an experience how that was like. Kind of did that.

He also explained to the researcher about his first and biggest challenge professionally and personally – the difference in time zone. With the time difference, it was difficult for him to stay in close contact with his family and friends, or communicate with colleagues in the United States. That was an interesting observation because this was noticed and more critical to him when he first landed Hong Kong. As his social life expanded and he got more comfortable in managing multiple time zones in his daily schedule, this was no longer the biggest challenge.

In terms of his social life, he expected to have a more intermingled relationship between expatriates and locals. Instead he became more socialized with the expatriate community: “...that was quite shocking. I didn't quite expect that. I was expecting more of inter mingling between the two cultures”. He explained to the researcher that he and other expatriates had attempted to interact socially with the local employees; however, the local employees appeared to isolate themselves from the expatriate employees. Expatriate employees were receiving special attention like they were more superior at the office.

Douglas and his expatriate peers felt that there may be two reasons: One reason was that in his office, many if not all management level employees are expatriates; local employees were mainly support staff. Therefore expatriates held a senior ranking position in the company. Because expatriates were temporary employees residing in Hong Kong, they were not permanent

employees in the office from the local employees' point of view; therefore local employees treated the expatriates as their guests.

The second reason was most expatriates were single. Local employees have families or live with their families in Hong Kong. They have a different life style and different social activities. Locals spend more time with their families after work or on holiday. Most expatriates live in a mid-level social location within close proximity to one another, so naturally they will spend time among themselves during their time off. The most common activities for expatriates are to visit bars, night clubs or dining out.

One of the biggest changes he noticed in himself was becoming more sociable. Douglas always knew he was an outgoing and sociable individual. After he settled in Hong Kong, he has become even more sociable. Before he came to Hong Kong, he was concerned about how he would be able to find his social niche in a new city. Not too long after he settled in Hong Kong, he felt that Hong Kong was an easy place for foreigners to live. The close proximity in which everyone lived in Hong Kong promoted interaction among people. He was able to meet a group of new friends and built relationships. These friends became his lifetime friends.

Reflecting back on his life in the United States, his life was very routine – he worked and cooked at home, and talked to or met his good friend, who lived only two miles away, at most once a week. Life in Hong Kong was completely the opposite, as he described:

Our group of friends, we interact a lot. We talk to each other every day. We see each other quite a bit. My closest friend here I see probably 5, 6, maybe all week. I mean, we do see each other quite a bit so ... You know, again I think a lot of it may just ... I think Hong Kong certainly helps kind of ... kind of promote that kind of interaction, you know, where Hong Kong isn't necessarily a city where everybody's cooking every night. You know, that was something that I did when I lived back in DC. I would go grocery shopping. I would cook. I would make my own meals and bring lunch to work and that certainly isn't the case here.

You know it's just so affordable to go out to eat and just sort of like kind of that social interaction so there's a lot of ... If you worked long hard hours, just go home and cook something so ... You know, we tend to get together in the evenings, you know, for either ... going to the gym together or having a drink together and a lot of times that includes having dinner together. I think ... And we've talked about it in a group of friends before thinking, you know, like ... because there's some of us that think that that sort of interaction is normal, some of us find it odd because that wasn't the way we interacted with friends back home so you know ... there it ... That has been a topic of discussion sometimes where like you know, "Is this Hong Kong? Is this how everybody acts in Hong Kong, or are we just weird?"

Douglas has developed a sense of freedom and individuality in Hong Kong. To him, the spatial arrangement in Hong Kong enhanced the social interaction and relationships among people, especially among those who were outgoing. It also fit in to his memories of his university dormitory and lifestyle, which he cherished. This freedom and individuality made him more comfortable in sharing his identity and in being comfortable with whom he was.

I think people become friends here very, very quickly. I think any Westerner that picks up and moves as far away from home as we need to move to come to Hong Kong are probably very social, extrovert people by nature and so sort of interacting and meeting people is quite easy. I can say, I think, the experience at Hong Kong is a little bit, again, more like university, where it's the kind of thing, you know, you first get here and it's like when you're a freshman in college and you just love it, you're meeting all these new people, you know, it's very, very social, you're having a great time, you know, like the experiences, you feel this new sense of sort of like freedom and individuality.

Professionally, Douglas also noticed some changes in himself. One of the most noticeable changes was his confidence. His current role as director is to manage the web marketing team and strategize the project to meet company goals. He felt that the increased responsibilities have pushed him to work differently. Before he took on this new role, his supervisor led the project, so tasks were handed down. He did not have the opportunity to manage the work from start to finish. He was an executor of a project. He implemented someone else's vision efficiently. Now he needed to be more strategic, which allowed him to feel empowered and confident to carry out his responsibilities. Besides confidence, Douglas also developed leadership and public speaking



skills which he did not have much opportunity to utilize before. These leadership and public speaking skills are needed as he is now regularly interacting with the business community and promoting his web marketing tools.

Working as an expatriate gave him a fresh view of Asia and a holistic view of how his organization operates. His organization has a big portion of business in the United States. Therefore, many global projects within his organization are originated from the United States. The company would generally choose a smaller market in the United States as a test market for the initiative. Once the test worked, the organization would roll this project to the entire company across the world. The issue was that there were many unique challenges and requirements in Asia that people would not be aware of until they live in Asia and experience them. From Douglas perspective, he was living in Asia but seeing things through the eyes of the United States. He could see the challenges when his organization was implementing the project using the United States model and protocol. This was a good lesson learned for him and his American expatriates in Asia. This gave him a holistic view of the company and how the company worked in general. With his interaction with different regions, his expatriate experience gave him a much greater world view on how things should work and how a certain project was going to be implemented.

*Sense of identity.* Douglas' narration was mainly focused on his social life. He narrated in great detail on changes in his social life which raised his level of happiness compared to his life in the United States. He repeatedly mentioned how much he enjoyed Hong Kong, even compared to other Asian countries. He is very comfortable and happy living in Hong Kong. He is open to a different location when another expatriate opportunity arises, but he would probably consider European countries.

Douglas believed that his international experience allowed him to understand himself better through relationships and dialogue with his new friends. He was more comfortable sharing his inside world with friends, which he was not able to do before he took on this international experience. When asked about his perspective of whether international experience had increased his awareness in self-identity, he was not too sure because he believed in order to be aware, he needed to spend time with himself. In Hong Kong, he is always with people, so he feels that the awareness may not be about self-identity but rather increased awareness of group-identity.

He felt that his social friends help him improve emotions even when he has had a stressful day at work.

I love Hong Kong. I love my experiences the last two years. I do think that it's changed me for ... Certainly it's changed me for the better, at least giving me a more worldly view. I don't think I ever want to be the kind of person that never leaves their hometown, never gets on an airplane. If that's what you want to do, good on you, but for me my personal growth has certainly come from my experiences elsewhere. I've grown as a person. I think it's certainly increased my independence.

So you know, if I'm having a good work day I'm ... typically I'm pretty damn good mood and if I'm having a bad day at work, you know, I'm usually in a crappy mood. So I think that certainly has an effect on it and having good work when there is something that really helps them when things are not going so well as far as projects or such that can certainly kind of put a grey cloud over the rest of your day. But luckily, like I said, there are lots of social interactions, so you know, friends help a lot.

### **Elisabeth's transformation.**

***Background and story.*** Elisabeth is a thirty-three-year-old single female from Australia. Elisabeth started her international assignment when she was in college. She took a year off from college to teach law, tax, and gender studies in Cambodia. Upon her completion of the assignment, she returned to Australia and worked there for a couple of years. She then took on a volunteer international assignment funded by the Australia government to return to Cambodia for 18 months. At the end of the assignment, she accepted a 5-year assignment to work as a

Technical Writer in Thailand for a non-profit organization from the United States. At the time of this interview, Elisabeth was still working on the same assignment and it was due to complete by mid-2015.

Elisabeth explained her motive to start international work was both career and adventure driven. She grew up in a very supportive environment surrounded by family and friends. She wanted to get out and do something else to find out who she was, what she wanted in life. This yearning led to her first assignment in Cambodia. When she returned to Australia after her first assignment in Cambodia, she was quite clear about her values and she knew she wanted to do development work as her career overseas. When the opportunity arose to return to Cambodia, she took it on. Since then she has been an expatriate.

There were quite a few changes that Elisabeth observed about herself since starting her international journey. First was communications, both verbal and style. Her peers in Australia noticed that her accent had changed to having a less Australian accent. According to Elisabeth, people mistakenly took it as Elisabeth wanting to pick up another glamorous accent and give up her own. The real reason was that she felt there was a need to change her accent in order to be understood during her assignment. Another change in her communication style was the delivery method. She started to think more visually and use more visual-aide tools to communicate with her audience. When she was in Australia, she tended to write essay-style for communications. When she worked overseas, it became very challenging for people to understand her message due to the fact that she did not speak the native language, and conceptualizing was more difficult in words at times. She started to become more creative. She would use graphics, flow charts, pictures or any other tools to help her communicate more effectively with her audience. The more she used these communication tools the more her thinking process also became more

visual. From her point of view, these were necessary changes in order to do her job well for her assignment.

Another change that she noticed was her increased anxiety about health and safety. She realized that in Cambodia and Thailand, medical needs were not always as prompt and as available as in Australia. People could lose their lives quickly if immediate medical assistance was not available. She witnessed this happen to her friends multiple times. Therefore, she would make sure to keep all emergency contacts for her friends and acquaintances.

I get more anxious if people aren't where they should be at certain points in time. It's pretty easy to assume the worst. That got really bad after my boyfriend's accident, but it's not solely him, either. Not really an awful lot about myself and my own personal safety, but like people who I relate to. I'm a lot more, "Where are you? What's happened? Are you somewhere on the side of the road?" Stuff like that. ...It's just, I'm quicker to reach the conclusion that somebody's hurt or something terrible has happened, because they're more likely to happen here, or away from home. I'm big into having people's phone numbers, and people's parents' phone numbers, just in case, because you're also separated from all of those support systems; so there's that.

Elisabeth was feeling more western influenced than she felt in Australia. Her feelings for her home culture were stronger now than before. She would react to things from a more western perspective. In Asia, people tend to come close to one another, inquire about everyone's business and discuss it. She was getting more protective of her own space, her own time, and her privacy, which were not common in Asia. She felt that she was and would always be an outsider at the host country. She was comfortable being an outsider.

Cambodia and Thailand have a very different style and speed of working. Punctuality was not well practiced in these countries. As she said, if the meeting was scheduled for four o'clock and rain prevented people from arriving until five o'clock, it would not be uncommon for the meeting to simply happen the next day. It was also quite normal for anyone to just sit and wait in the office for a few hours for others to process paper work that they requested. There was

nothing that she could do to expedite the process because this was how their work flow worked in the country. Her level of patience and calmness increased tremendously due to the differences in the value of time and efficiency.

Every country has a different standard code of ethics. Being an expatriate in Cambodia and Thailand for a few years and often traveling to other countries in South-eastern Asia, she noticed that not everything was done to the same ethical standard as she has or was taught. Nowadays, she felt that sometimes her ethical standards are compromised, causing her internal conflict. She no longer holds tight to her personal code of ethics all the time. As she said, "I am not less black and white, but spend more time in the gray area. I am more flexible."

I do a lot of work with government, and a lot of that work is around wanting and needing them to do stuff, and also needing the relationship to be sound and steady, so we pay too much, basically. We pay over the odds, and I don't enjoy that; I probably never will enjoy that. I do feel, in general, at least, that that's an ethical conflict for me. I don't like it. I don't know if I'd go so far as to call it bribes; no, I would. I'd go so far as to call it bribes. I don't like it, but I guess that's the black and white stuff. It's less than that. The acceptance of it, obviously, these people are doing stuff for us that are really doing stuff for themselves. They're not getting remunerated in any sort of fair way. We're placing extra demands on them, so if the day rate goes up from 20 dollars to 25 dollars, I'm more willing to let it go, even though sometimes it's ridiculous, and ethically, I don't feel that it's sound.

Some of the ways that we present achievements openly, I don't feel good about them. I see how, in the system in which we work, it's important to show things as achievements, but I feel uncomfortable at times when things do fail, that you can't just say, "That didn't work?" "I think that was a terrible plan, and it didn't work." Or, "It didn't work, because that guy over there is an absolute idiot, and he was going to kill it at any point in time." Around that language, I find it difficult. It's not lying, but it's misrepresentation, at times. That still makes me feel quite uncomfortable, and it's part of my job that I'm particularly bad at, as well. I joke with my supervisor; I write something and he sanitizes it. I don't think that's going to change. That's always going to annoy me. I feel at times, there's ethical conflict, both financial stuff and work stuff.

*Sense of identity.* As time passed by, Elisabeth felt more confidence in making her own choices, choosing her own path, and finding her own destiny. The choices have expanded exponentially, and there was a freedom to that. She felt freer in making choices that aren't

defined, obviously, by what would've been the logical progression in career path or life path in Australia. She was also feeling more assured of her ability, more capable, and more relaxed about her ability to cope with what happened around her. If she needed to get things done, she could no longer just ask for help. She would need to do it on her own.

Elisabeth's first international assignment helped her find out who she was and what she would like her life focus be. When her international journey continued, her self-identity continued to unfold and reaffirmed her belief. Some of her changes were indeed part of her identity unfolding, such as learning new skills to meet her goal as being successful in her career development. She did not give up her own values but there were some compromises in her ethical standards involved due to the nature of her work. The international assignments made Elisabeth more aware of her identity and her needs. They gave her an opportunity to recognize her own culture, which has grown stronger as she experienced differences in her interactions with people from different cultures.

### **Fred's transformation.**

*Background and story.* Fred is a thirty-six-year-old male Australian currently working in the Caribbean as a Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist. He worked in Australia for ten years, but his career did not excite him or give him a sense of accomplishment. He did not want to get stuck in a routine job and follow the traditional path of working, getting married, raising kids, and so on. He looked around for something international, especially in sectors with humanitarian and development focus. Because he wanted to experience a different culture, not in a touristy way but to immerse himself into the culture; so that he can try to get a better understanding of himself and his own culture in the process. Working in Cambodia was a stepping stone to get into the international journey.

His view came from a philosophical perspective. He wanted to change the world for the better in his own mind. He wanted to build a career that could contribute to the betterment of the world while also obtaining career satisfaction. His exposure to other countries made Fred more critical of things going on in Australia. For example, he felt like he was an ambassador for his country in his first assignment, but now he felt like it's his duty to explain the reality of things to people.

My first assignment, I had that sense that I needed to be an ambassador, but since then I don't feel that at all. I feel, in fact, that perhaps I'm doing just as a duty to people by explaining the reality of things, and especially working in less developed countries, where people perceive the West and the ways that go on there in a certain way, and it isn't necessarily true or realistic. So, I don't want to disenfranchise them, but at the same time I want them to be aware that it's not all roses in Australia or America, or wherever they're idealizing.

I don't know if that makes me an anti-ambassador, but I feel like that people need to get a broader view, and I certainly am not afraid to talk about that or put that forward.

The challenges Fred experienced made him learn quickly some of the essential skills such as language, local customs, flexibility and an open mind. Fred lived in a rural town. He did not have the luxury like expatriates who lived in the city where more English-speaking people and an expatriate community existed. It forced him to learn how to speak the language much faster and how to understand the culture.

Culture barriers led to emotional barriers. For him, he was ready and willing to get accustomed to the local culture, go along with how things were done in the country and maintain a positive attitude; this helped reduce his frustration. The ability to adjust and to fit it is an important attribute to the success of being on international assignment. Fred thinks he will always keep an open mind, an open heart, be able to let go, be resilient and be able to adapt to change. Some expatriates fight and resist the local culture, and this eventually causes burn-out.

There were times he felt depressed or angry or upset. The way he handled his feelings was to talk to someone, especially someone he was close to in the assignment because they can understand the situation and are better to have a conversation with.

One will never get to be 100% comfortable. It takes time to get adjusted. In his reflection years after years, one would not start to understand a place for the first year. Everything up to that year, instead of truly learning about other culture, it is more about one's baggage and their own perception of the world. People seldom put their preconceived notion on things. To understand other culture, one needs to try to understand and benefit from living in another culture.

One of the disadvantages that Fred noticed about having an international assignment was relationships with people. He felt that he met many new friends, but due to the nature of the international assignment, it was hard to keep a close and long term relationship with people. The following was how he described it:

You meet people and you love them, and you are close to them for a certain amount of time, but then at some point they move on or you move on... Facebook and email, and all that stuff have made it considerably easier to keep in contact with people. I feel sad about letting some of those friendships go. Not necessarily let them go, but those relationships are not what they could have been perhaps if we'd been in the same place for the same time, that kind of thing.

The immersion into the local culture made Fred explore more about humanity and multicultural issues, which were reasons he started his expatriate career.

I wonder when doing research and evaluations stuff, you're always searching for some sort of truth or some sort of answer or something. To me, there's a huge question out there about who we are as a people and why we are here, what we are doing, what's the best way of doing stuff. Whether that being politics, religion or just as individuals. I do think that we need to take time to learn and to be better. Traveling and working in different cultures, I think that inevitably you can just start questioning things. Inevitably, you are going to start changing your world view and trying to sort of, understand humanity more, understand people more.

I feel like I'm much more connected to the world and world affairs, I would say. I am becoming more abreast of things of the history of this country that I wasn't before. I feel I know much more about the world and feel much more connected to it. I've got many friends from many different backgrounds. I do sort of have this sense of being this international person. I don't feel like I am just Australian anymore. I feel like the



perspective and that experience has made me a more rounded person in some ways. I feel like the boundaries between countries, they are very ... They are just politics, and when it comes down to it, none of it is really real.

Fred was a bit distant from the expatriate community. As he mentioned he has become more critical. He sensed that many expatriates and he did not share the same perspective on humanity and in worldview:

I feel like sometime in expat communities, there's an expectation there that, you just become friends because you are white, basically. That's the only thing you have in common. I've always been a bit more discerning and maybe rude and stuck-up, I don't know. I am not going to become friends with people I don't like. Time's too short for that. I don't want to waste time hanging out with people who are not on some sort of journey themselves, and who don't see more in the world, I guess. I think it's an interesting thing. Maybe, I don't know. The whole interaction within the expat community has something interesting, and how that might shape identity as well.

*Sense of identity.* Although Fred felt that he had a good sense of self-identity before leaving Australia at 29, compared to his current view, his sense of identity has grown tremendously. He felt like living outside of his own culture and interacting with people from different places helped him understand who he was; where he was from; his own culture and exposed him to new ideas. He was confident before he became an expatriate. With the international experience, his confidence and cultural sensitivity have increased a lot. He was more assured about who he was as a person. He was able to assert himself in relationships with people and professionally. He did not think a person can change who one was, but that international experience could shape one's identity in different ways.

International assignment has increased Fred's awareness in self-identity. He was much more aware of the differences and similarities between others and him, not just across nations but also among people in his country. When he transitioned from working in Cambodia, then to South Sudan and currently in the Caribbean, he felt that he was more aware of his identity because the Cambodian culture was very much different from Australian culture. Then when he

moved to the Caribbean, he discovered many similar cultural traits between the Caribbean and Australia that could be due to both being former British colonies. His family values had changed a little due to his observations in other countries where family values took a high priority. He admitted that he would like to have a closer relationship with his family. He did not have an estranged relationship with his family, but he felt that any conversations that he had with his family were always quite superficial. Even when he tried to have a deep conversation with his family, it was not successful.

Fred's narrative was focused mainly from the cultural and humanity perspective. The impact of international assignment on Fred was to strengthen his belief in humanity. Through a positive attitude, an open mind, constant learning and self-reflection, he noticed the transition in his identity. The one he understood still exists, but the concept become stronger and more assured. Part of Fred's realization of his identity affirmation from international experience was his constant self-reflection and acknowledgment of his emotions. The more reflective he was, the more he could talk issues out with someone close to him. Fred encountered differences among cultures. He believed a person can have multiple identities depending on how circumstances impact a person.

### **Jack's transformation.**

***Background and story*** Jack is a forty-seven-year-old Japanese expatriate for a trading company. Although he travelled to different countries for international assignments throughout his employment, his first long-term international career started in 2004 when he moved to Sao Paulo, Brazil for 5 years. Upon the rotation of his assignment in Brazil, he returned to Japan to work at the home office for three-and-a-half years. He was then re-assigned to the United States

for another assignment in July 2012. At the time of this interview, he was working in the office located in California, United States.

Jack joined his company after he graduated from the university. After working there for fourteen years, he was called for his rotation to work in Brazil. As a rotation team member, he was expected to be sent overseas for a three to five-year assignment to carry out the company's project. As a commodity trader for the company, he was not surprised when he was called to serve a rotation assignment in Brazil. To him, it was not a choice but his responsibility to accept the assignment.

When he was told of his assignment in Brazil, the company did not offer any cultural preparation for him. However Jack understood that in order for him to be able to conduct business, he must learn Portuguese. Therefore, one of his requests to the company before taking on the assignment was to provide him with language training. His company allowed him to take a three-month Portuguese training course in Brazil before he officially started his assignment. This has been helpful to him as it provided him a basic understanding of Portuguese and language skills to conduct simple conversation in daily activities. However, even after the training course he did not feel that his Portuguese language skill was proficient enough for business communication. He felt that he would need four to six months in order to reach the business conversation level:

I can communicate in Portuguese. But it is not so easy to use Portuguese for the business only after three months study. Three months is too short. Four to six months is required to study a new language for the business purpose. Everybody said that. It is ok for three months to understand the language and it is possible to communicate but very difficult to use the language in business. There is no problem to live in Brazil and go to a grocery store to buy something, to take a taxi, to make a day to day communication with somebody. But it is not so easy to use it in business.

Although the language barrier was one of the challenges Jack experienced in Brazil, he discovered that it was easier for him to communicate with locals in English. Jack's mother tongue was Japanese. The language in Brazil was Portuguese. When both sides tried to understand what the other side said, sometimes it was easier to get the meaning in English because both sides pay attention to each other and they would use proper English language the best that they could. If he were to communicate with American or British, he would have had a difficult time understanding because people often include slang in their conversation. Slang was new vocabulary to Jack, which made it harder for him or other non-English speakers to understand.

During his stay in Brazil, Jack discovered that Brazilians and Japanese share some similar culture in general. In his opinion, people in Brazil were very relationship oriented. He described the similarity:

I found the Japanese culture or Japanese way of thinking is similar to Brazilian way of thinking. I think that Brazilian people are friendly and sentimental. Friendship is very important for them. Once they meet somebody, they recognize he is a friend, only once. Friendship is very very important for them. Not "contract is contract". Even in business we can make something "I owe you" or "owe you one" something like that. In case in United States or some of the European countries, their mind is "contract is contract".

Because of this similarity, it made it easier for Jack to learn how to do business and communicate with his clients, his colleagues, and the people of Brazil.

The security and traffic in San Paulo were a great concern to Jack. With that concern, Jack became more aware of his surroundings. He was never comfortable with the safety issue in San Paulo. Although there were concerns, Jack kept repeating that he enjoyed Brazil. He used the terms "I like Brazil", "[Brazilians are] in general cheerful. I agree Portuguese is a good fit for me. I understood the Brazilian culture well. I like Brazilian music". He believed that staying in

Brazil during his assignment has expanded his view into the Brazilian culture. He has become more open to others' opinions.

I made new business in Brazil. So it contributed my development. And it was the first time for me to touch the country's culture in overseas, so it let me open eyes on the culture in overseas. From the business point of view, I don't think big change but of course I had a good experience in Brazil. Not so big change but what I experienced in Brazil contributed to my development. Characteristically, I don't think I had a big change but other than the business I could touch the culture and as Brazil has a lot of races like United States, I could find the good aspect of the Brazilian culture. Touching other country's culture made my eye open widely... I can hear other people's opinion better than before...

Because I had to hear the opinion of the Brazilian staffs and also had to hear the opinion of the customers, clients. Brazil is Brazil. We have to follow the Brazilian culture. But of course in business world, there is something like global standard but still Brazil also has their local standard. We have to understand the local culture, background, and also the style of business. To understand that, we have to hear the opinion of others. So I think I can hear other people's opinion better than before.

To Jack, work was demanding in Brazil. However working in Brazil was still much less stressful compared to working in Japan. He described the stressful work situation in Japan as follows:

From the business point of view, Brazil is better than Tokyo. Tokyo is the worst country to work, hardship is worst. Especially for my company, hardship in Tokyo is worse because of a lot of overtime work. Very stressful. But Brazil is good. I made a lot of overtime work in Brazil as well but still better than Tokyo because I wish to accomplish, achieve my goal. In case of Tokyo I have to make overtime work in spite of my will. The company sometimes forced to work, because the company asks to make a lot of reports every day, very complicated, very stressful. In Brazil, we have to make certain reports but much better than Tokyo. Culturally, also my life was better in Brazil than Tokyo except the security issue. Language is different from Japanese, so only me is okay. In case of with family, I am not sure. At that time, I was alone, so no problem. Yeah, so I wanted to stay longer when I was ordered to be back to Tokyo. I felt I wanted to stay another one year but I couldn't. So in the future if I have a chance, I want to be back to Brazil. But I am not sure I will be able to go there.

When Jack returned to Japan, he was promoted to be the General Manager. His responsibilities were expanded. He did not find any big challenges for his re-entry back to Japan. He explained that the international assignment did not change his character; however, he was

even more certain about what he wanted to accomplish, which was to drive the vision he has for the company. He became more culturally sensitive, more eager to listen to other's opinions, and more aware of what is going on around him. The main difference was that his life became more stressful due to the increase in his responsibilities. Besides continuing to manage the project he started in Brazil, he also had a team to manage. Unlike his previous role in Brazil, he was implementing the project. Upon his return to Japan, he was managing the entire program. To him, this outcome was partly due to his achievements from the assignment in Brazil.

Jack got married while he was in Japan and before being assigned to another post. This time it was in California, United States. He is now the Executive Vice President, and his new role in this assignment was to monitor the business operations in the United States then communicate with the Japan headquarter. Jack was beginning to notice some internal conflict during this assignment. He started to question which perspective of his identity he wanted.

In Jack's new job, he had an important role but this did not create as much work as he used to do in Japan and in Brazil. After having almost non-stop working schedules for almost nine years, he started to feel uncomfortable with the reduced amount of his work load.

Another factor for his doubt was the distance between his geographical location and Japan. When they were having executive meetings, he was the only one away from the meeting room in Japan. He felt that he was a little bit disconnected from the leadership team for any business decision-making process. He also experienced a bigger cultural gap between his American colleagues and him due to the language and life style differences. As he explained,

Americans have their own culture. Brazilians have their own culture. Each culture is very different. So of course Japanese culture is also a big different from others. As I mentioned last time, Japanese way of thinking, way of making communications with others is not the same as Americans and Europeans, but ways of thinking of Brazilian, I think it is similar to that of Japanese from a certain aspect. In case of Americans, their way of thinking is not the same as that of Brazilian. Not similar. I think US and

Brazilians are not similar characteristically. In Japanese, we say “wet”, which means like friendly...as I mentioned last time, for Japanese and Brazilian, we can say “I owe you one” or something like that... That is the normal type of relationship, ways of thinking in Brazil. But I think there are some people here in US but it's very rare case, they are very businesslike....

Most of Jack’s social circle is Japanese through his wife’s friends in Los Angeles. He tended to be closer to his Asian colleagues at work, but the number of Asians in his company was very small. He felt connected with these Asian colleagues. Regarding his internal conflict over what he really wants, he explained in a metaphorical way:

One Jack is seeking higher responsible job. But the other Jack is feeling comfortable to stay here for another one or 2 years to refresh my mind, my brain and also my body. I think it is important to make a balance between the two. In the near future, I think it will be within less than 2 years; I will be so busy again. So one Jack is seeking higher responsible job which is more stressful, like the most stressful job I experienced during the Brazil days and in Tokyo... My job is not so stressful. My job is not so higher responsible. My job does not change so much. There is a possibility to change a little bit if this company changes the company’s direction or something like that. My job might be more stressful but more than 90% it will not occur. If I really seek higher responsible job, I have to go back to Tokyo. But another Jack says I want to stay here, because I cannot stay here forever, just for another 2 years or so. You should stay here. Another Jack says...I was glad to be here. The experience here is good for me, not so many people can come here. In spite of around 3 year rotation here, no many people can stay here. I can watch how they manage the company, just beside the management team. So it is a good experience for me to understand the management and what an American company does. It is a good opportunity for me. So I don't want to go back to Japan soon. But in the future, in the near future. But another Jack likes to go back to Japan, so it is a conflict.

*Sense of identity.* Jack was quite certain about his identity when he was in Brazil and also when he was in Japan. He was a vision-focused individual with high expectations for his achievement and contribution to the organization. The cultural aspect of the assignment helped him develop additional skills to enhance his business objectives. However at this moment, he was feeling a bit ambivalent. At the end of the interviews, Jack was still unable to determine which lifestyle he preferred. He believed that his self-identity was based on his reflection. Unfortunately during his time with his demanding job, he did not have the time to think and

reflect on such matters. However with his current role, he has the time but he was not able to identify the true Jack. He was certain about himself in terms of ability to accomplish his business objectives. He could not identify himself as someone who wanted to continue as a high achiever or as someone who could stay in the current status quo and enjoy spending time with family. Therefore, the international assignment in Jack's case has created more questions for him about his identity, and he would need to continue to seek the answer for himself.

### **James' transformation.**

*Background and story.* James is a fifty-five-year-old United Kingdom expatriate working in France twice, in the Netherlands, and in Germany. He worked in different countries for four different assignments. He started his expatriate journey twenty plus years ago. At the time of the interviews, he was on assignment in France.

James was born and raised in Nigeria. When his first long-term international opportunity arose, he was an engineer working with a construction company in the United Kingdom. He proposed to the managing director at the time that he was interested in other opportunities. Coincidentally, the company had a joint venture project in the east of France, and he was brought in as one of the engineers on the project. It was anticipated to be a one-year contract, but it was extended two years to complete the project.

His first international assignment was not a very pleasant one due to the lack of support either at the entry or the exit phases from the home office in U.K. at the time. Challenges included the lack of proper arrangements for housing accommodations, and lack of support for administrative issues such as banking, child care, medical services, and so on. Looking back, James could understand it was over twenty years ago, when not too many employee transfers took place. His company just was not ready and equipped to manage the transition.



The company also under-estimated the complexity of a joint venture between multiple countries with different cultures. An example of the challenge was the language differences. Because there were three different languages and cultures involved in this project, the objectives could get lost during the translation.

That was the first international assignment for James. No one explained to him about these risks; therefore he had to learn the lessons himself through observation, patience and asking the right questions.

After the first assignment, James left the company and was hired by another company to work in the Netherlands. His assignment required him to travel to various countries in Europe. This company provided much better arrangements for his preparation, from housing to language training. The transition worked extremely well from his perspective. The third assignment was in Germany, working for a retail company with headquarters in the U.K. His responsibilities included markets in the U.K., France and Germany, so travel was quite significant for him. His current assignment is a U.K. company but he was assigned to work in Paris, France. Except for his first international assignment, the other three assignments' preparations by the home offices were well organized.

Throughout James' expatriate career, he developed skills and discovered areas that required attention. Some of these skills included learning how to ask the right questions at the right time, and learning from each other. His international experience increased in his cultural awareness and sensitivity. In order to manage the team effectively from a distance, he became extremely adept at the different cultures. His high awareness of the different cultural and communication styles enabled him to identify differences among his team, and not jump to conclusions based on the face value of the conversation.

James recognized that another important skill that he gained from his international experience was his active listening skill. He was not only hearing what people said but he was paying attention to what message or content is fed through the conversation. This was a crucial skill when he was dealing with multi-language environments:

I would say is the Netherlands because when you're working and living in a different language and therefore different culture obviously, you do have to listen more because you don't understand all the words. I don't just mean listening to what is being said and what the sentences is that are being put to you. I was in a job obviously which required me to travel a lot and to be very involved in different nationalities and businesses, so I had to learn very quickly what was being said to me because when you get off a plane until the time you get back on a plane which could be a matter of a few hours, it could be longer obviously but wasn't always the case, you have to be able to dissect what was being said very, very quickly. There really wasn't time.

I was covering eight countries on a very regular basis, so as I said yesterday, being on the road four days a week. That was no joke. That was literally out Monday morning early and back late Thursday night. You've got to make sure that your time is productive, and in order for it to be productive, you have to hear what the others are saying. I'm not sure I could say there was much patience in that particular one, but I would say that, yes, the listening and the awareness of what was happening around increased.

To be effective in active listening, patience is another attribute that James was able to build on through his international assignment. If he did not have patience, he would try to do things too fast and hence may make mistakes. He learned to find the right pace to be able to keep up the rhythm.

During his international journey, James recognized that maintaining a strong and close relationship with family was important to his success. He learned to understand and appreciate the value of the family. To his point of view, the reason he could continue his international journey was because he has a very supportive wife. To illustrate his point, he provided an example:

When I traveled a lot in the Netherlands, the CFO at one stage decided to tell the MD [Managing Director], I mean, we were at the same level. We were both directors that my phone bills were excessive and could not continue. So I was questioned by the MD, and I told them it's really very simple. I said, "My family is the most important thing to me and

I will talk to them as many times today as I need to do in order for them to feel and know that I am not far away,” and I’ve always maintained that. He got off the case afterwards. That’s fine. He was okay, but he wasn’t specifically happy about it.

I would always make a point, and still do, of connecting with the family. I think with modern technology now, you can do it so much easier; but in those days, that’s what you needed. That is something that was and is very important in any expatriate travel, of course, but certainly expatriates as well, because they can have significant impacts on your family life.

James believed that it might be difficult for him to keep up the root culture. He noticed it through the eyes of his children. When he moved from one country to another for an assignment, his children would very quickly get into the new culture. For the benefit of his family, he always blended in with the local people. He did not socialize much with expatriate community. To him this was the best way to fit in and be accepted in a foreign country.

*Sense of identity.* James was quite clear about his own identity even from a young age. He has always been driven to achieve more and to know more, and see those successes in him and other people. To him, he did not lose any of his self-identity. He maintained the integrity around who he was, what he did, and the way he thought. The driving force of how he viewed things and his ultimate objectives never changed. On one hand, James continued to take on new assignments after one was completed, he continued to be successful at what he was doing, and he became more multicultural. On the other hand, due to his various international assignments in different countries, he has also lost his sense of home:

I’ve traveled so much and lived in many different countries that I couldn’t honestly tell you whether I am British, French, Swiss, Nigerian, whatever. Many different facets to me so it really depends on where I am and who I’m with, so I just consider myself an international. That’s I believe often called me just jokingly, but I’ve stuck to it. I think it’s quite amusing. They called me the international man of mystery, which is not in any way unkind. They just find it fascinating. I think that’s the word.

James was not certain that international experience would necessarily increase one’s identity awareness. His main reason was, in order to be aware, one needed to spend the time to

reflect and observe the surrounding environment. During international assignments, the time span was generally short. With the demanding job requirements, not many expatriates would have enough time to appreciate the country and its culture to become aware of their self-identity. James also mentioned that his current assignment in France would likely be his last assignment because his children were already grown up. His career was already at a level he was comfortable with. He was ready to be settled at where he was.

To conclude, James' international experience has strengthened his family values, and required him to adopt new skills on cultural sensitivity, leadership and communication. His reflection on his life experience had transitioned his understanding of identity to the next level.

### **Chapter Summary**

As a summary of the stories from the seven participants, international experience created significant changes to them from different aspects - perspectives on life, view of themselves, family and personal values, and professional and personal development. Although all participants confirmed that the international experience had increased their self-confidence, their understanding of themselves, and their career development in terms of skills, there were also sacrifices that they recognized from these international journeys.

**Perspective on life.** Each participant has uncovered insights about their perspective of life after being in the international assignment for a period of time. Elisabeth became more anxious about people's safety and security. She worried more with people she was related to. She also noticed that she cherished more of her own space and privacy. Cody's perspective of life was all about career. He shifted his full focus on his career and everything else took on a lower priority. He wanted to maximize what he could achieve while he was still capable of doing it in the time allowed. Jack was career focused during his assignment in Brazil. However, with his

work role and marital status changed, he started to assess his perspective on life. He was ambivalent between having an intensely stressful but highly satisfying career and a work/life balanced life-style but a less satisfying job. Douglas was enjoying his newly found social life in Hong Kong. He worked hard due to the job demand, but he was able to maintain a work/life balanced life-style with the support of his social group.

**View of themselves.** All participants reported feeling differently about themselves during their reflection narratives. The most noticeable change was their level of confidence and competency. Cindy noticed that her self-image had improved because she always needed to showcase her abilities and prove to others the value of what she brought to the project. Fred and James commented that they became more culturally sensitive. All of them agreed that the international assignments had increased their self-confidence. They felt that they could do anything that they desired to. They could live anywhere that they chose to. Choices were in their control. They also viewed themselves as world-minded as a result of the international experience. They were no longer single-mindedly focusing on happenings in their home country.

**Family and personal values.** Participants' reflection narratives indicated that their international experience had influenced their family and personal values. Although Cindy enjoyed the luxurious life-style and the socialization with the expatriate community during her international assignment, she felt that these were only temporary life experiences. Close to her family and friends is the permanent life – her reality. Elisabeth's focus on humanity and development work made her realize the reality that not every country or region shared the same ethical standards. In order to fulfill her job requirements and meet her goal to help a wider population in need, her personal values had been compromised. She no longer insisted on holding tight to her personal code of ethics. When Fred noticed how people in the host countries

embraced the family relationship, it influenced him to wanting a close relationship with his family in Australia. James showed great appreciation to his wife. He admitted that his success was largely from the support of his wife.

**Professional and personal development.** Regardless of the motives expatriates took on their assignments, all expatriates admitted that they developed some new skill sets which enhanced their professional and personal development. The most common ones were active listening, patience, questioning, communicative approach, public speaking, and leadership. The main reason for this development was due their need to resolve issues at work or to fit in to the local community. In addition, their international knowledge and exposure enhanced their career development.

Cindy, as a change management consultant believed that her international experience made her more marketable in the job market because companies like to bring in people with international experience and world-minded view

James needed to manage a team with a diverse cultural background, multiple native languages, and at different geographical locations. In order to understand the true meaning of what others tried to communicate, he needed to depend on information obtained from physical movement, facial expression, intonation of the speech, and the person's cultural background. This situation led him to develop skills in active listening, questioning, and patience. The combination of the above helped him grasp the correct meaning from conversation with people from different backgrounds due to the language pattern and communicative style. These skills helped James succeed as a leader for each assignment he took on.

Douglas took on a management role in his assignment which required him to give presentations to different levels of audience. This job requirement helped him develop his public speaking and leadership skills to cope with his daily activities at work.

Therefore, international experience can create opportunities for expatriates' career development.

**Sacrifice.** Expatriates gained valuable experience and satisfaction from their international assignments, but sometimes these gains required some sacrifice. In Cody's case, his motive to take on the international assignment was to further his career. On one hand he reached his career objective, earned satisfaction from his achievement, and affirmed his belief; on the other hand, these gains were at the expense of his family. He compromised his family values as well as the definition of home which he possessed before his international journey. As Cody stated, "It's a weighted opportunity cost". For him, the cost was the long-term separation from his family and the loss of his definition of home.

**Sense of identity.** Expatriates motives and their determination to fulfill those motives can impact their feelings about the decision to take the international assignment and their enjoyment in the host country. Those who kept reminding themselves of the reasons they took on the assignment were more adaptable to the host country. Elisabeth and Fred were motivated by their strong desire to help humanity and do development works. Through their international experience, they became more assured of their interests to be working in these areas. Fred became more distant from his root culture, and more critical of the western world as he became closer to the host culture. Elisabeth has not been highly immersed in the local culture except from the work perspective, where she has interaction with some local people. Her identity

transformation was mainly due to the personal independence gained from overcoming the challenges that she encountered, and reflection on what she had experienced in her life.

Cindy's initial motives for taking on the international journey were to experience how working overseas would be like. Although she gained additional insights about other cultures, and she valued her learning through the process, her identity did not change much except that she discovered some hidden personal attributes that she had not realized previously.

Cody, James and Jack were career driven for their international experience. Their changes were primarily driven by the requirements of their jobs, but the management and consequences of their experiences were rather different. Both Cody and James were highly immersed into the local culture and were able to understand and grasp cultural differences and similarities. This helped with their career as well as their transition into the host countries. For Cody, the international assignment helped him clarify who he was and what he wanted in life, but at the expense of his family. As a result, his understanding of himself became clear but his identity in the sense of family values weakened.

James was successful in balancing his career and family, and maintains true to himself with respect to his perceived self-identity. From James' point of view, his identity has never changed. He held true to himself in each decision and in each experience. His perspective about things continued to expand and evolve as his international journey continued. He was able to leverage what he had (a supportive wife, flexible children, and marketable skillsets), learn from what he encountered, made the best out of each of his international experiences, and made each one a successful experience. As much as both Cody and James were successful in their career paths, their sense of home also got dimmer.



For Jack, he had met his vision and gained satisfaction from his contribution to the success of the project regardless of the extremely high demand and stress. His identity remains unchanged, however. When his role changed at work and his family responsibilities changed, he started to sense internal conflict between work and family demands, which he is still ambivalent about.

Douglas' transformation was influenced by his social circle and the new management role he experienced during his international assignment. Rather than changing his identity, he discovered a new group identity among his new social group. He was more comfortable discussing and sharing his self-identity with this new group of friends that he met at the host country. With the enjoyment from his social group, he became more comfortable in the host country and with his international journey, despite some initial challenges he experienced being far away from home and the differences in life style between local and expatriate communities.

Conclusions, implications and recommendations along with some personal reflections are presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions**

The final chapter of this dissertation reviews the findings of the study regarding the impact of international experience on expatriates' perceived self-identity. The significance of the findings and implications of managing these impacts are discussed. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research which will increase understanding (1) for individuals who participate in an international assignment, and (2) for organizations to support this career trend, from both individual and professional perspectives.

### **Summary of the Study**

The question of identity – sense of self – has become an interesting subject for discussion in both academic and business spheres. As more organizations are expanding their business across countries, international work assignments are becoming increasingly popular and important for business growth. Employees with special expertise are often offered opportunities to work abroad in order to support their company's initiatives. More employees are interested in working overseas to gain some international experience for their career development, or are just curious to learn about a different culture for their personal growth. When people accept international assignments, they undergo many changes in life. Some examples are geographical location, life-style, work responsibilities, and personal and professional networks. As they go through these external environmental changes during their international assignment, people go through changes in their internal environment, including the self-identity realization process. The conceptual framework of this research study was to explore expatriates' perceived self-identity with a focus on changes in individuals based on their lived experience. The purpose was to understand the changes that occur to expatriates as a result of their international experience, how

these experiences shaped their self-identity, and whether international experience increased their awareness of self-identity.

### **Issues and Significance**

The overarching research question of this study was: How does international experience influence a person's self-identity? In addition, this study addressed a sub-research question: Does working in another country increase one's awareness of self-identity?

The results of this study contribute to three arenas: (1) Filling the gap in the expatriate literature about the relation between expatriates' international assignment and their self-identity transformation; (2) Raising awareness within organizations to recognize changes in their expatriates' self-identity in order to better support and retain their employees, and to increase communications among workgroups coming from different backgrounds; (3) Providing insight into how international experience can enhance an individual's self-understanding.

Therefore, this study not only increases the body of knowledge from the research perspective, it also benefits organizations as a whole, including expatriates who are on assignment, repatriates who have completed their assignments and returned home, and people who are thinking of becoming expatriates. In addition, it provides meaningful information to people who are interested in knowing how international assignments may impact a person's self-identity.

### **Conceptual Foundation**

**The concept of identity.** The concept of identity is complex and has been defined in many ways. It can be viewed as an understanding of self (Gergen, 1991), self-concept, or "a socially constructed definition of an individual" (Weigert et al., 1986, p. 34) that is subjected to constant reconstruction (Gergen, 1991). Identity represents how one perceives oneself, the value

system a person espouses, and how a person represents himself or herself in a social group.

Identity is important (McCarthy & Moje, 2002) because identities shape people's practices, and one's behavior and attitude towards one another can be a reflection of one's self-identity.

The understanding of identity has evolved over time with different views from anthropology, the Enlightenment, philosophy, psychology, and sociology and the post-modern perspectives. From an anthropological perspective (Kellner, 1992) in traditional societies, one's identity is a function of defined social roles and is non-controversial. It is a fixed, solid, stable (Baumeister, 1986; Kellner, 1992; Woodward, 2002), and directly observable self. In this traditional view, a person has a sense of continuity between the past and the future based on their identification with their social group (Erikson, 1968). The Enlightenment perspective emphasizes that a person is born with an inner core that remains essentially unchanged (Hall, 1992, 1996). This inner core is the person's identity. From the Enlightened view, one can assume that everyone is born with a core identity that is permanent, stable, and unchanged throughout a person's life term. Philosophers Rene Descartes' (1596-1650) and John Locke (original 1689/1959) presented their views that identity is based on the individual and remains with a person over one's life time. Then German philosopher Immanuel Kant (Baumeister, 1986; Woodward, 2002) offered a crucial point that the understanding of self can only be noticed in the process of doing something else because a self cannot perceive itself directly. The self can only be perceived in relation to the world. Therefore the unity of self is situational and woven across time.

As the debate continues, a more contemporary approach to understand identity can be found from the psychological, sociological and post-modern perspectives. The psychological view defines identity as an interpretation and definition of the self (Baumeister, 1986), an

understanding of self (Bird et al., 1999; McCarthey et al., 2002). The sociological concept affirms that identity is formed through a process of conscious reflexivity (Woodward, 2002) within a framework of social relations – construction over time through an interaction with others (Bruner, 1990; Kellner, 1992; Woodward, 2002) and influenced by social environment, culture, work, level of education, politics, and family upbringing. Currently, post-modern theorists view identity as hybrid and fluid (Ghosh & Wang, 2003; Hall, 1992; Juhasz, 1983). It's about sameness and differences (Mishler, 1999; Sarup, 1998; Woodward, 2002); and can be constructed and reproduced around different relationships and reflection (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Weigert, et al., 1986; Woodward, 2002).

**International experience and identity development.** Inkson and his colleagues (1997) identified two broad models of international experience: expatriate assignment and overseas experience. The major differences between these two types of international experiences are: (a) source of initiation, (b) source of funding, (c) goals for the international job, and (d) career type. Expatriate assignments are initiated by a company which operates internationally, for internal transfer to a subsidiary in other countries (Inkson et al., 1997). The goal of the assignment is to carry out an organizational project. Overseas assignments, on the other hand, are mainly intended to achieve the personal goal of living overseas and are funded by the individuals; an example is the Peace Corp. For the purpose of this study, the international experience is restricted to the expatriate assignment context.

Much research has addressed the expatriate adjustment process, from cultural adaptation to role transition during their international assignments. The most commonly quoted U-Curve Adjustment hypothesis includes four stages of cross-cultural transition: the honeymoon stage, the culture shock stage, the adjustment stage, and the mastery stage (Black & Mendenhall, 1991).

The U-curve can be illustrated as people usually start at a high point during the honeymoon stage of their international experience (the upper left of the U), then they experience a decline in emotion and suffer depression during the culture shock stage (the lowest point in the U-curve). After going through a critical recovery and adjustment stage, they end up more or less balanced, near where they began.

Nicholson's (1984) work role transitions theory illustrated how people adjust to the transition through four different strategies – replication adjustment strategy, absorption adjustment strategy, determination strategy, and exploration strategy. His theory asserted that role transitions amplify personal development because of the nature of work for expatriates. Kohonen (2004) drew a conclusion based on Nicholson's (1984) suggestion that adjustment to role transition is a form of personal development that results in changes in one's personal values and identity-related attributes. Nicholson's theory and Kohonen's research support Adler's (1975) notion that transitional experience leads to identity changes.

According to Osland & Osland (2005), expatriates often experience one or more of the four categories of paradox: (a) social acuity paradoxes, (b) marginality paradoxes, (c) mediation paradoxes, or (d) identity value paradoxes. Social acuity paradoxes refer to an expatriate's interaction with people or being in a situation that requires cultural understanding. Marginality paradoxes (Osland & Osland, 2005) refer to expatriates' relationships with the host culture as a whole. Mediation paradoxes (Osland & Osland, 2005) refer to expatriates' feeling caught between contradictory demands of the headquarters and people in the host country. Identity value paradoxes (Osland & Osland, 2005) refer to expatriates who feel that they need to give up some of their personal values and their identity in order to be accepted or successful in the host country. Taylor (1989) suggested that during an identity crisis, expatriates will learn about their

value system's perspective or develop a foundational understanding of themselves, which they may not have possessed before their assignment. To further Taylor's suggestion, Kim (2001) proposed that people who go through a cross-cultural adaptation process will experience a gradual personal identity transformation: a subtle and unconscious change that leads to an intercultural personhood. Ultimately, this process results in the development of perceptual and emotional maturity. Osland (2000) and Osland and Osland's (2005) studies concluded that expatriates began to experience an identity crisis when they started to question their identity, their values, and their assumptions about numerous aspects of everyday life that they previously took for granted. Because of this identity crisis, people may become more aware of their own identity.

### **Study Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative research method using a reflexive narrative approach. 'Reflexive' in this context refers to ways of seeing things in multiple dimensions and reflecting on existing ways of seeing (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). The reflexive process involves multiple levels of reflection (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Through the reflexive process, people explore their place in the world, try to make sense of it, construct their social and organizational experiences (Cunliffe & Easterby-Smith, 2004), and discover a personal awareness of oneself (James, 1961[1892]). Qualitative narrative analysis aims at understanding a concept or phenomenon (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006; Zikmund, 1984), how meaning is constructed, and how people make sense of their lives, their experiences and their world (Merriam, 2009). The researcher collects descriptions of experiences as expressed in stories told by individuals, examines and discerns meaning from individual narratives, and then analyzes how they are put together (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2002). This method is appropriate for

this research because the purpose of this study is to explore how expatriates' international experience influences their self-identity. Through the reflexive process, expatriates construct their personal narratives by examining their retrospective accounts of their international assignments. These narratives include how expatriates' construct their sense of self by weaving past events and actions (Riessman, 2002), their cultural and structural interpretation of everyday social worlds (Chase, 2005), and how they create meaning from their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Hence, their personal narratives represent how their identities are fashioned (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

This study's participants were recruited using a professional network sampling strategy through referrals from the researcher's personal and professional connections, including the social network site LinkedIn.com. The minimum requirements to participate in this research included: (a) be an adult at least 21 years of age, (b) be willing to participate in multiple interviews with the researcher via telephone or face-to-face conferences to share their international experience, and (c) be currently on assignment for at least 10 months or longer, or have already completed an international assignment with a length of 10 months or longer within the last two years. To ensure all participants of this study met the minimum participant selection criteria, each participant was required to complete and return a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix B) to the researcher via an online survey tool called Survey Monkey®, email, paper copy or by phone with the researcher. This questionnaire contained a list of demographic questions for each participant, such as age, gender, marital status, and a list of questions related to their international experience, such as number of expatriate assignments in their career, length of the most recent assignment, and length of time back in their home country if the assignment has been completed.



Seven participants, including five males and two females, were selected for this study.

The demographics of participants were included in Table 2 below:

Table 2

*Participants' Demographics*

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Count</b>
Age group	Between 31 to 40 years old	4
	Between 41 to 50 years old	2
	51-year-old or above	1
Gender	Male	5
	Female	2
Nationality	American	2
	Australian	2
	British	1
	Dutch	1
	Japanese	1
Marital Status	Single without a committed relationship	2
	Single with committed relationship	2
	Married with children	3
Expatriate status	Currently on assignment	6
	Assignment completed	1
Number of overseas assignments (10 months or longer) participant has been on, including assignments with both current and past organizations	Cindy	2
	Cody	2
	Douglas	1
	Elizabeth	3
	Fred	3
	Jack	2
	James	4

Six participants conducted between two and three one-hour individual interviews with the researcher over a recorded telephone conference; one participant conducted four one-hour taped

recorded interviews with the researcher in person at the participant's office. During each interview, the researcher used some guiding questions (Appendix D) to stimulate participants to reflect on their experiences and empower them to share the different episodes of their life with the researcher. Since the construction of identity can be perceived as a process of reflexive consciousness of self (Baumeister, 1986, 1998; Lindgren & Wahlin, 2001; Woodward, 2002), in order to allow relevant topics to emerge, uninterrupted narration was privileged during each interview. In order to ensure that the researcher correctly understood what was said by the participant during each interview, the researcher paraphrased some of the responses back to the participant to obtain their agreement on the interpretation. The researcher also took observational notes during the interview to help document any emotion from the participant. If a theme was identified during the interview, the researcher prompted additional dialogue with participants, encouraging them to expand on the identified theme. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they had additional comments to add. To ensure the validity of the research, each interview was transcribed and sent to the participant for their review so that they were able to confirm and check for the transcriptions' accuracy before the analysis.

The researcher began the analysis by listening to the interview recording. While listening, the researcher took notes for analysis purposes. Then, the researcher read interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents from transcripts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). While listening to and reading the transcripts, the researcher took notes and memos on observations from the data, and developed tentative ideas about categories and relationships in each narrative. The researcher then developed a story for each participant about their identity development during their international experience in order to answer the research questions of this study.

## **Key Findings**

To summarize the stories from the seven participants, international experience created significant changes in these participants with regard to their perspective on life, their view of themselves, and their family and personal values, as well as professional development. All participants confirmed that the international experience increased their self-confidence, gave them a better understanding of themselves, and promoted career development.

Cindy's initial motives for taking on the international journey were to experience how working overseas would be like. She enjoyed a luxurious life-style while being an expatriate; however, this type of life-style was not satisfying for her. The separation from family, the difference in life-style, and her loss of sense of home strengthened her orientation towards her home and family. Although she gained additional insights about other cultures, and she valued her learning through this process, her identity did not change except that she discovered she had hidden attributes that she had not realized previously. She recognized that she was stronger, better in rationalization, more responsive to change, more determined to control her destiny in life, and that her world view had expanded. Her family and cultural values became stronger, which triggered her decision to end her expatriate career and settle in her home country in the Netherlands.

Cody, James and Jack were career driven for their international experience. Their personal changes were primarily driven by the requirements of their jobs and their determination to be successful in meeting the objectives of their assignments. However, the handling and consequence of their experiences were rather different.

Both Cody and James were highly immersed into the local culture and were able to understand and grasp differences and similarities to help with their career transition in the host

countries. For Cody, on one hand, he reached a higher level of his career and felt satisfied with what he achieved at work, enjoyed and developed new skills from each challenge he experienced, and affirmed his belief in his life plan; on the other hand, he sacrificed his family values as well as the sense of home he had before his international life. The international assignment helped Cody clarify who he was and what he wanted in life but at the expense of his family. Cody's identity was compromised a bit due to this sacrifice for his family life. James was successful in balancing his career and family, and in remaining true to himself with respect to his perceived self-identity.

For James, his identity has never changed. He stayed true to himself in each decision and in each experience. His perspective about things continues to expand and evolve as his international journey continues. He was able to leverage what he (a supportive wife, flexible children, and marketable skillsets) learned and developed from each challenge he experienced, then make the best out of each international assignment and apply what he learned to the next one to make each one a successful experience. Some of his development included skills in listening, questioning, and leadership. He became deeply with the host culture, while sharing his root culture with people in the host country, in order to fit in. He became more multi-cultural and was able to enjoy each experience at both the personal and professional levels.

As much as both Cody and James were successful in their career path and enjoyed the culture in their host countries, their sense of home also got weaker because they were continuously living abroad for a long time and highly immersed in a different culture. Cody has been living in China for more than seven years. James has been living in different countries for more than 20 years. Both did not return to their home country after each assignment. This resulted in their feeling of being emotionally and physically distant from home.

For Jack, he had met his vision and gained satisfaction from his contribution to the success of the project regardless of the extremely high demand and the stressful job. He recognized the similarities and differences between people in the host countries and him. In order for him to achieve his goal, he understood that he must leverage the similarities and appreciate the differences. He was able to develop new skills which benefited him at work in the host countries, and also when he returned to his home country in between international assignments. His personal characteristics remained unchanged; however, when his family responsibilities increased and his role changed while taking on his current assignment, he sensed an internal conflict between work and family which he is still ambivalent about.

Douglas' change was strongly influenced by his social circle and the new management role he experienced during his international assignment. Personally, he noticed that he became more socialized and comfortable with sharing his inner world with his new social group in Hong Kong. Professionally, he developed his leadership skills and public speaking skills from his new role. He felt that he became more confident in being a leader. Rather than changing his identity, he discovered his group identity through his social group. With the enjoyment from his social group, he became more comfortable at the host country and on his international journey despite some initial challenges he experienced such as home-sickness, and differences in life-style and culture between local and expatriate communities.

Fred and Elisabeth were motivated to take on international assignments by their strong desire to help humanity and do developments work. They actively sought international opportunities before becoming expatriates. Through their international experience, they became more assured of their interest in working in the humanity and development areas.

The rural area where Fred's assignment was forced him to learn the local language much quicker than expatriates who stayed in a city where a large expatriate community existed. His newly developed language skill enabled him to communicate with local people; hence, he understood the host culture. His description about Cambodia and Thailand being scented countries; how he longed to smell this scent when he was coming back from Australia on holiday implied his adaptation and attachment to the host country. As he became closer and more immersed in the host culture, he noticed that he had become farther and farther away from his root culture and more critical of the western world where he came from. The international experience helped Fred increase his confidence and cultural sensitivity. He was more assured about who he was as a person and was able to assert himself in both personal relationships with people and professionally. As he noticed how other countries embraced their family values and friendship, he also wanted to strengthen his relationship with his family in Australia. The regret that he had about international assignment was that he realized his valued local community relationships would be hard to maintain as his assignment was short term. The relationships would eventually end and he would need to establish new relationships in his new assignment.

Elisabeth was not highly immersed in the local culture except from the work perspective, where she had interaction with local people. However, her identity shift was mainly due to her increase in personal independence resulting from overcoming challenges that she encountered, and her reflection on her experience and the compromise of her ethical standards. She became very confident in her ability and competency to handle different situations. She enjoyed the new visual communicative skills that she developed, and her family values had strengthened. She is closer and wanted to connect more with her family in Australia. At the same time, the more Elisabeth understood about the host country culture, the more differences she could identify

between her home culture and the host country culture. She felt even stronger about her western culture now than before she became an expatriate. Her international experience increased her anxiety about health and safety, especially with people she was connected with.

Both Fred and Elisabeth felt more connected to the world from their international assignments as they were exposed to more events and had discussions with diverse people from countries around the world. They no longer only talked to Australians and focused only on local events in Australia. This change made them feel very “international”.

In summary, the research data showed that language and emotional barriers were the common obstacles for expatriates in their international assignments. The quicker expatriates feel that they fit into the host country, the easier it will be for them to get through any challenges. Throughout the course of overcoming their work and personal challenges in the host country, expatriates developed new skill sets such as communication, listening, patience, public speaking, and leadership. Expatriates who are determined to fulfill their motives to take on an international assignment are more satisfied with their international experience and their career achievement. Expatriates who maintain positive personal attitudes, and appreciate the differences between the host country and themselves have a quicker and more enjoyable transition fitting into the local culture and local community.

The next section describes conclusions with implications from this study. Recommendations for practice and future research will also be introduced for organizations and for expatriates.

## **Conclusions**

The conceptual framework of this research study was to explore expatriates’ perceived self-identity with a focus on changes in individuals based on their lived experience. The purpose

was to understand the changes that occurred to expatriates as a result of their international experience, how these experiences shaped their self-identity, and whether international experience increased their awareness of self-identity. This study's findings showed that changes to these participants were derived from different aspects during their international journey. Changes could not have occurred should there be no social interactions, cultural encountering, and self-reflection involved during their journey. Through the findings from participants' narratives analysis, the following four conclusions were established:

**Conclusion 1: International assignment does not cause abandonment of a person's self-identity, but it helps people discover the identity that they may not have recognized previously.** Based on the findings from this research, people may not necessarily be clear about their self-identity until they recognize changes in themselves. Through reflection, people learn more about themselves. They go from being not aware of their identity attributes to discovering their individuality.

*Implication for conclusion 1.* The findings of this research indicated that all participants agreed that being involved with this project gave them an opportunity to reflect on their international experience which they did not find the time to do during their assignments. As one participant commented in the last interview about responding to the guiding questions from the researcher, "The questions in themselves are intriguing and like I say they make you think, and I'm thinking or you've made me think these last three calls about things I haven't stopped and thought about, and after I've thought it through, I go, 'Yeah, that makes sense, or that was interesting'".

Through reflection, all participants were able to identify the changes in themselves in different ways. These changes gave them a clearer perspective of their individuality. Participants



stated that they did not believe their identities had changed. However, some claimed that they discovered attributes that they did not previously realize they had, and some affirmed their identities through this reflexive process. Each participant's experience was unique. Changes in them could have resulted from different aspects of their life experience, depending on meanings attached to their experience. For example, Cindy was able to recognize the hidden identity that she did not realize previously – confident, capable, strong will to succeed. She also discovered how much her family meant to her – they were her reality. Douglas noticed that the longer he lived in Hong Kong, the more comfortable he was with his identity. The spatial arrangement in Hong Kong reminded him of his college dormitory lifestyle, which he always cherished. This realization made him understand that socializing with a close-knit support group is a key component to his personal satisfaction and happiness. His sense of freedom and individuality in Hong Kong made him more relaxed in sharing his inner world with his social group; hence, he also discovered his group identity.

In Ghosh and Wang's (2003) research, they discovered that the motives for taking on an international assignment and the degree of acceptance by the people in the foreign country will increase one's identity transformation. In Cody's case, his motive was to advance his career. In order to meet his goals, he explored all means to get accepted by the local team. Through his experience in China, he realized that career and challenges were the key identity attributes which he had not noticed in himself before he moved to China.

The concept of self from the sociological perspective is that self can only be perceived in relation to the world (Baumeister, 1986, 1998). People cannot understand their self until they are in a situation, or reflect upon their behavior. Identity bridges the gap between inside and outside, between the personal and the public worlds (Hall, 1992). The results from this study support this

identity theory. It is important to note that these expatriates did not abandon their original identity from their international experiences. They merely discovered other identity attributes that they had not previously realized.

Another implication for this conclusion is associated with the organization's opportunity cost as a result of an expatriate's increased understanding of their self from the assignment. Cody's identity discovery was his strong desire for career advancement and new challenges from the assignment. Although his previous employer offered him a third term of rotation to stay on the same job, he chose to join another company because the new company offered him a position with more challenges and leadership responsibilities. James changed to different employers at the completion of each international assignment mainly because the new employer could provide a better career opportunity and a better compensation package. Both of them were able to leverage their newly developed skills and experience to negotiate a better career move to a different company.

According to the study *Understanding and Avoiding the Barriers to International Mobility*, a research initiative between PricewaterhouseCoopers and Cranfield University School of Management (Geodesy, 2005), over 25% of expatriates leave their company within 12 months of their return to the home office. Geodesy's study indicated that key factors attributed to the expatriates' departure were their feelings of reduced autonomy, a lack of recognition for achievements on assignment, and an overall lack of clarity about how an international assignment had helped with their career development. Twenty-five percent turnover is a relatively high rate given the significant financial investment allocated to these employees during their assignments. These financial investments include recruitment, training, housing, compensation, travel and other perks. More critical to the organization is the loss of talented

personnel with the newly gained international knowledge during the assignment. It will take a few years to retrain another expatriate in order to acquire the same international knowledge. Additionally, if these repatriates leave the company with the new knowledge to work for a competitor, it will create a competitive disadvantage to the home company.

***Recommendations.*** Since adjusting to a new environment can make any international assignment a stressful journey, it would be beneficial for the well-being of the expatriates if organizations provided a coach to help expatriates go through the transition period. The coach would guide the expatriates to reflect on their experience, from preparation of the international assignment to their current experience in the foreign country, and also when they return to the home country upon completion of the assignment. This will create an opportunity for the expatriates to relax and listen to their internal process changes in their daily encounters. This reflection will also help expatriates to prioritize their work list, identify their learning needs, and discover any identity attributes that they can leverage in order to meet their objectives for the assignment while minimizing any frustration due to their transition. These coaches should continue coaching these expatriates upon their return to the home office to ensure no gap would occur in their support during transition from the international role to their domestic role in the home office.

To retain the best talent and optimize the return on investment in these expatriates, at the time of offering employees international assignment positions organizations can consider additional multiple measures. Often, HR managers or business sponsors do not communicate well with expatriates about career path development and how an international assignment can enhance the employee's career when the assignment is completed (Wittig-Berman & Beutel, 2009). Therefore, organizations may want to ensure a discussion will take place before the

employee takes on the assignment. Organizations can provide employees with a career perspective upon their completion of the assignment so that employees will know what the potential career move will be at the end of the assignment. Although it is difficult to foresee the kind of positions that will be available for the employee in a few years, it is crucial to have a mutual understanding of what the employee expects upon completion of their assignment and what the organization can do if no turbulence or downsizing occurs at that time. The goal is to ensure that employee and organization have the same understanding on the assignment objective and ensure the employee's expectations are realistic upon their return (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2008; Tyler, 2006). Once the expectation is realistic and understood, it is easier for the company to accommodate and meet these expectations; hence, reducing the possibility of expatriates leaving the company due to unmet expectations.

Before expatriates complete their assignment, organizations are advised to assess the changes in their employees to identify career desire, new skills and experience gained. This will help confirm the original career perspective or offer an alternative opportunity to these expatriates to best meet their growth.

**Conclusion 2: International experiences help people transition their already known identity to a different level unconsciously through experience, new learning, events, and relationships with others.** All participants recognized that some of their identity attributes were becoming stronger and some were becoming weaker due to their international experiences. These changes were caused by the new skillsets they developed, new relationships they built, and personal and work events they went through during their assignments.

*Implication for conclusion 2.* International experience creates an opportunity for people to increase one's understanding of self. The unconscious identity transition can be revealed

through mental maturity, role transition, and the recognition of the sameness and differences with others. Kim (2001) proposed that people who go through a cross-cultural adaptation process will experience a gradual personal identity transformation: a subtle and unconscious change that leads to an intercultural personhood. All participants in the study experienced this change in themselves. Some may argue that the identity transformation process does not require international travel, and that it can be realized in a domestic environment within a multicultural setting. The key difference between domestic versus international experience was the support network and the interpretation of the experience. In a domestic environment, people can interact with people from diverse backgrounds. When challenges occur, they can reach out to their support network rather easily in their familiar home country. When expatriates are in a foreign country, they do not have the same support network until they establish one. This leads to different meanings derived from their experience due to the foreign environment, the amount of culture difference experienced, and the heavy work load with a shift in responsibilities. The different interpretations of their experience will shape a person's identity differently. This phenomenon was confirmed by all participants in this study. All of them felt that the experiences they gained were rewarding, and that they would not have been able to have the same experiences had they stayed in their home country with a domestic-based career.

Nicholson's (1984) work role transitions theory asserted that role transitions amplify personal development because of the nature of the work for expatriates. Personal development leads to change, or realization of a person's value system and other identity-related attributes. People make changes to their attitude or behavior in order to fit into their new role requirements. In this study, all participants claimed that they learned new ways of working with people in the host countries in order to fit in and meet their job's objective. For example, Cody had to quickly

learn the local language in order to communicate with the local team and fit in. During this process, he learned about the importance of patience and being open-minded. When he realized that he was accepted by the local team and his career goal was accomplished, he also affirmed his belief that his career was his priority in life, that his family values were weakened, and that his consideration of any new assignment would be based on the challenges the assignment would provide.

As Mishler (1999), Sarup (1998) and Woodward (2002) suggest, identity is about relation (Mishler, 1999) and differences (Sarup, 1998; Woodward, 2002). Individuals make claims about who they are by aligning or contrasting themselves with others. To illustrate the sameness and difference, Elisabeth noticed that the longer she lived in Asia, the more affirmed she was with western identity. She explained that her Australian culture was very individualized compared to the collectivistic nature of the eastern culture. She also noticed that the level of ethical standard she applied to work had been lowered. Fred had a very humanistic and philosophical mind set about his life and his career. The more he was immersed into different cultures, especially the Caribbean culture, the more world-minded he became. From his perspective, he was multi-cultural before he became an expatriate because his family background was of mixed ancestry. When he became more connected to world events, he saw a mix of cultures across the world due to travels for various reasons. For him, the concept of nationalism was dated. The boundaries among nations became dimmer and dimmer.

Fred's comments indicate that the concept of nationalism is becoming less entrenched due to increased interaction among different nations as travel becomes more convenient and society becomes more globally oriented. People are interacting more frequently and making connections across countries when conducting business or traveling abroad. As a result, a

concept of global citizenship is rising. As expressed by all participants in the study, there was an expatriate community in each country they were assigned to. These expatriates were trying to fit in to the local community and hence developing new skills such as language and learning a new culture. Every nation is now composed of people with different nationalities and different cultural backgrounds. As James mentioned in his narrative, his team was composed of members in different geographical locations, different cultural backgrounds and different native languages. He needed to understand their cultural background, and practice active listening, patience, and questioning skills in order to effectively manage his team and his work. Therefore, the concept of global citizenship is becoming a new reality for expatriates.

One of the contingencies for being able to transition expatriates' already known identity to a different level is that expatriates must remove their emotional barriers. They need to be able to accept the differences in order for the transition to unconsciously occur; otherwise, they will always be in the same frustration stage and resistant to receiving the gift provided by their own experience and acknowledgement.

***Recommendations.*** One recommendation is for companies to conduct a fit-gap analysis of employees before their acceptance of the international assignment. This assessment will evaluate their mental readiness, strength, and their level of self-understanding. Based on the assessment results, together with a presentation on actual facts from known challenges expatriates will experience due to the role and their location change, expatriates will be able to make an informed decision whether they are the right fit for the job. If not but they still want to take on the challenge, then what kind of preparation do the organization and the employees themselves need before they move to the foreign country to carry out the organizational project.

Another recommendation is to have a local support group or a local guide that has a good understanding of the expatriates' basic needs, such as language and cultural guidance in the host country, who are willing to lend their helping hands, and who are able to communicate effectively with expatriates in order to support them in the earlier stage of relocation. The objective of this support group is to have the expatriates associated to the local team so that they will feel welcome, and be in a safe environment to learn about the cultural differences. Ambiguity and misunderstanding usually cause confusion and resistance. Once expatriates understand the differences, the cultural background, it will be easier for them to open up and accept the reality of their international assignment.

**Conclusion 3: Social interaction and dialogue are crucial to expatriates' international experience.** The research findings indicate that participants' social life influenced how they felt about their international experience.

*Implication for conclusion 3.* How expatriates feel about their international experience is greatly impacted by the level of social interactions and dialogue with others, regardless of whether the others are local people in the host country or are the expatriate community. According to Mead's (1934) Symbolic Interactionism theory, to understand human behavior, one must learn how people define their symbols. Being pragmatic and seeking to understand the rationale of behavior are key components of an expatriate's learning development during the international assignment (Antal, 2000, 2001). Among the seven participants in this study, due to various reasons, three of them had high levels of social interaction with people in the host countries, and four of them had frequent socialization with the expatriate community in the host countries. Their social interactions created different levels of enjoyment and experiences during the international assignments.



James, Cody, and Fred made a great effort to immerse themselves in the local culture, from learning of a new language to understanding the history of the host country. They leveraged their socialization opportunity to expedite their learning so that they could have a deeper understanding of the language and norms for their daily interactions with people in the host country, and hence fit in to the local culture quicker and easier. Jack enjoyed his international experience in Brazil because of the cultural similarity he discovered between Brazilians and Japanese. This discovery helped him with the learning and handling of business situations, thus enhancing his experience in Brazil. Cindy, Elisabeth, and Jack felt that they would always be foreigners in the host countries because of the differences in culture, language, and even physical appearance.

Although all participants enjoyed their international experiences in a different manner, James, Cody, and Fred were able to fit in quicker and better in the host culture. They were able to exchange their home culture with people in the host countries. They embraced their own culture as well as the new culture they were getting into. Cindy and Elisabeth felt that they would always be a foreigner and could not fit in completely in the foreign country.

Douglas, on the other hand, although socially active in the expatriate community and not as much in the local community, was able to gain an even higher level of happiness in Hong Kong than when he was in the United States. In his narration, he indicated that the constant dialogue that he had with his social group increased his confidence and comfort level on how he felt about his individuality. Douglas' observation affirmed Mead (1934) and Cooley's (1964) idea that interactions between self and society through communications produce identities.

How participants described their experiences may be influenced by their individual characteristics, such as up-bringing, cultural background, attitude and personal values. The

background of an individual could contribute to the level of enjoyment throughout the assignment, and whether this individual is the right fit for being an expatriate. As affirmed by all participants in the research, expatriation is a rewarding experience. They would recommend this career to anyone who is interested.

However, they would also warn people that being an expatriate is not a career for everyone. Douglas and Cindy both suggested that expatriation may not be the right career path if an individual is an introvert, because they may not be able to manage all challenges by themselves by staying in their own space without expanding their social network. Fred believed that one needed to possess a certain level of self-confidence and understanding or the international experience would become an overwhelming task. A positive attitude towards others is an ingredient that all participants recommended. If an individual is not capable of having a positive attitude, the expatriate will not gain the same wealth of experience.

**Recommendations.** From a personal level, expatriates are recommended to take the initiative to explore the new environment and find their own social group, regardless of whether the group is a local group or the expatriate community. Organizations should lend their support to the expatriates as best they can, but their social life is in their own hands. Once expatriates find their own social group, their social network will expand.

Another recommendation is the work/life balance concept. Although many expatriates have a highly demanding job, it is the expatriates' own responsibility to ensure that they can allocate some time for themselves to relax, energize, and have dialogue with others. The social group can be a catalyst for this work/life balance initiative. Douglas' and James' cases were good examples of this recommendation. Not only did they notice how their personal development helped them to better understand themselves, they were able to create a very enjoyable

experience from their international assignments and established some valuable relationships through this experience.

**Conclusion 4: Expatriates' losing their definition of home is a by-product of long-term international assignments and deep immersion in the local culture.** Participants who were in multiple and continuous international assignments expressed that they no longer had their sense of home.

*Implication for conclusion 4.* International experience undoubtedly creates an opportunity for expatriates to become “international” as attested by participants in this study. For those like Cody, James and Fred who were on assignment for a long time, especially when they were on multiple assignments and highly immersed in the foreign culture, they became multicultural. Their sense of home was diminished after being in these international assignments for quite some time.

Berger and Berger (1973) asserted that a multicultural person has a “homeless mind” which allows great flexibility for a person. Multicultural people do not settle for permanent or agree on unchanged conditions. The findings from this study show that these multicultural men relaxed their minds and took action at the soonest time possible in order to fit in to the new environment. Due to the constant travel to multiple locations and adjusting to different cultures, these multicultural people adjusted and changed their life style to fit the host countries. In addition, none of these participants had returned home after each assignment. They continued to take on a new assignment after one was completed. All of these factors contributed to the feeling of being emotionally and physically distant from home; hence, confused about their own definition of home. This phenomenon can resemble the gypsies who travel constantly without settling in a single location, and consider themselves to be citizens of no nation. Therefore, the

findings of this study can conclude that losing the definition of home is one of the by-products of people in long-term international assignments and deep immersion in the local culture.

Some may argue that expatriates' losing their definition of home is a negative outcome from the international experience, while others can counter-argue that it all depends on one's perspective of home. For Cody, his family is still in the United States but he is in China, so it is understandable about his confusion of home. For James, he and his family live in a different country for each assignment. If he defines home as a location where he and his family live for a period of time, then his home will be where his assignment is. He is already a multicultural man; so as long as he feels comfortable at any geographical location, then this location will be his home. Although James and Cody both claimed that they were not clear about where their homes are, they were not complaining about their feeling or situation. It was their observation about the consequence of being a long-time expatriate in multiple locations.

***Recommendations.*** For those who are interested in pursuing an international career or those who want to continue their expatriation without an end date, the recommendations are for them to assess their value system, their sense of home, and how important it is for them to know where their homes are. These people need to develop their flexibility and open-mindedness in order not to be bothered by this concept of losing the definition of home.

If people have a strong desire to have a clear definition of home but still want to pursue an international career, one recommendation is to maintain a close connection with family and friends from where they deem their home is. With advanced technology and social media, expatriates can make the best use of these tools to stay connected with people at their "home". In addition, these expatriates should plan regular trips to visit home, so that they will not feel

emotionally distant from their family and friends at home; hence, helping to retain their definition of home.

### **Internal Validity and Study Limitations**

Participants' realization of their self-identity changes through their narratives proved that the reflexive narrative was an appropriate methodology for this research. Their comments and conclusions also reflected great interest in this topic and usefulness to their self-understanding. While the narrative approach can provide rich and deep insights, one of the limitations for this study is participants' ability to express their experience effectively. To minimize the limitation of language proficiency, the researcher included one question in the pre-interview questionnaire to confirm participants' speaking proficiency. In order to be considered to participate in this research, participants must confirm that they are able to speak and understand English (orally and in writing), so that the researcher can communicate with them during the interviews, and for them to review and confirm the interview transcripts for accuracy. During the interviews, when the researcher asked some follow-up questions and paraphrased statements that participants made, she then asked for their confirmation to ensure that the researcher had a reasonable understanding of participants' narratives. Some of the statements the researcher made for confirmation included, "Would you please elaborate on what you just mentioned?" or "Would you please provide some specific examples?" or "Based on what I just heard, is it an accurate statement that...?". To ensure all conversations were transcribed accurately, the researcher sent participants their individual interview transcripts for their review and final confirmation before the analysis took place.

The second limitation about this study was participants' willingness to disclose their stories to the researcher. To encourage participants to share their experience candidly, the

researcher used a multiple-interview process with each participant, so that a relationship can be established between participants and the researcher throughout the course of the interviews. The researcher started the first interview by introducing her own personal background to participants and the reasons that triggered her interest to begin the research. She also actively demonstrated interest to the participants about the information the participants shared, and asked subsequent open-ended questions when she noticed more insights or additional information may exist. Some of the question styles were, “So what did you do?”, “Why do you think...?”, “Can you share with me about your thought process at that time?” However, no issue was found about this limitation. All participants were cooperative and genuinely showed their interest in this study, and shared their experiences openly with the researcher. All of them commented that the interview process was very helpful. They were appreciative of the opportunity to reflect on their own experience and affirm their beliefs.

The third limitation is the researcher’s potential bias. Since the research analysis is highly interpretive by the researcher, any bias she has may alter how she captures meaning from participants’ narratives. To ensure validity, the researcher utilized Maxwell’s (2005) recommended technique of a researcher identity memo, which is a personal memo the researcher uses to reflect on goals and relevance for the research. This approach helps to free the researcher’s mind in order to better capture the experience of others, and to fully understand the experience from the participant's point of view.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study offers knowledge to the expatriate and the identity literatures. To further investigate the relationship between expatriation and identity, there is an opportunity to explore how expatriates’ children’s identity development progresses and how it is different from

expatriates' identity development. This is especially important for long-time expatriates who relocate to different countries for assignment. The findings can help to discover what the impacts are for these children due to their parents' career movement.

The current study's demographics were mainly between people with western culture moving to countries with eastern culture or people from countries with eastern culture moving to the western countries. Since culture is a key factor for expatriates' identity development, another study that can be considered is what kind of impact to the expatriates' identity development happens if the destination country has a similar culture as the expatriate home country. This finding can confirm cultural difference is country specific, regional specific, or something else.

### **Closing Comments**

The discussion of identity has been an interesting topic for a long time because of the evolution of the identity concept over time. Expatriation is a currently popular discussion due to the increase in people movement across the world. This study brings these two topics together and offers additional knowledge to both identity and expatriation literatures. From the researcher's perspective, conclusions from this study contribute evidence for ideas to the existing body of knowledge in the expatriation and identity literatures by pointing out that changes occurred to expatriates on both personal and professional levels, which can help expatriates gain a better understanding of themselves. This self-understanding includes discovering identity attributes they may not have recognized previously, and the transitioning of their already known identity attributes to a different level. It is important to note that this discovery of expatriates' identity development does not mean that expatriates abandon their original identity. It is a complement to their existing identity. This study also provides support on how social interactions and dialogue can influence one's international experience. According to the results of this study,

expatriates claimed that their level of happiness has increased due to their newly found social network and having constant dialogue with their social group. Lastly, the study data showed that losing the definition of home is a by-product of long-term international assignments and deep immersion in the local culture.

Because of the unique situations expatriates experienced during their assignment, when they participated in the interview and reflected on their past experience, they acknowledged that international experience can indeed raise their self-identity awareness, especially when they can allocate the time for their reflexive process. It is the researcher's hope that information in this study can help organizations to better support their expatriate employees. Employees in the home office need to understand the change in expatriates in order to improve communication between expatriates and people in the home office. It is also crucial for current expatriates to understand the internal process changes that occurred to them and how it impacts their understanding of self and behavior. Those who are interested in pursuing an international career need to be mindful about the challenges they may experience, both workwise and personally.

Before this study began, one of the researcher's concerns was the recruitment of participants and their availability to attend 3 one-hour interview sessions due to their busy schedules and different time zones. As the study progressed, the researcher did not experience any anticipated concerns with getting people to participate and disclose their experience. The researcher noticed that participants were appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the study and share their stories. They were generous in giving their time to the researcher and willing to accommodate the researcher's schedule and time zone in order to perform these interviews. During the interviews, participants expressed their genuine interest in this topic. They shared their experiences candidly with the researcher and voluntarily offered valuable insights.



This is an encouraging indicator to researchers who are interested in future research about the impact of international experience on self-identity. The researcher of this study expressed her gratitude to all her research participants for their dedication of time to this research, candor and willingness to share their stories to make this study successful.

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## APPENDIX A

### Researcher Identity Memo

I cannot recall the first time I was interested in expatriation. I do remember the time I started to pay more attention to international experience. It was in my second year as a doctoral student, I wrote a term paper about retention of expatriates. That was one of the most interesting papers I wrote. I did not think much about where all this came from at the time except that expatriation has been a growing career trend that many young professionals are interested in for the past few decades, so it would be a good topic to write on in the context of organization change.

While talking to my friend Sharon how our doctoral program Organization Change has transformed us in our thinking, I was thinking about myself coming to United States as a teenager, how much I have grown up and how different my views are, and how different my life would be if I had never come to the United States. I decided that my dissertation would be about international experience. However, I still did not know the focus of the international experience I would be investigating for the research.

One day in a class discussion, one of my classmates told me that he felt like he was in a marginal group. Then I started to question how he can be in a marginal group when he was born in the United States. He then told that it was his race that was causing this difference. This made me think and I realized that I am also in a marginal group. I have an American identification but my root is Chinese ancestry. Americans think I am Chinese. Chinese in Hong Kong think I am Americanized. Am I American or am I Chinese? I espouse family values and collectivism like many Asians do; but I also enjoy individualism. I have always felt different from other people - I am not Caucasian or Black or Hispanic; I am olive color skin Chinese. I can speak fluent

English but people often make fun of my accent. Interesting that when Europeans speak with an accent, many people think they sound cute or they have such a classy accent. When Asians speak with an accent, people think we sound irritating and make fun of us. There were times when I felt it was difficult to “fit in” with others. I thought this was all compounded by my own shyness, perhaps my self-esteem and personality.

My own identity question wandered in my mind while I was reviewing literature for my dissertation topic, which is related to international experience. The more I read about people in an international experience and the way they struggle to fit in in order to be successful resonates with my own experience of living in the United States. I feel that every day I am trying hard to fit in in order to sustain myself professionally and personally. I learn different skills and adopt the culture so that I can fit in. I do not need to be like others, but I need to help others to understand me, recognize and accept me as an individual, as who I am. This is what expatriates go through during their assignments too. If I have a question about my identity, I suspect these expatriates may have a similar question but may not have time to reflect on this question because they spend most of their time trying to fit in and to cope with their job demands. I have the same issue. Every day is a busy day for all working professionals. I need to complete all responsibilities at work, at home and at school. Sitting down to figure out my identity would have been the last item on my to-do list or would never even exist on my to-do list. I never thought about it till the conversation occurred with my classmate about his identity. My dissertation idea just surfaced! Perhaps this was one of the reasons the term paper I wrote about expatriates was the most exciting topic that I worked on.

While reviewing literature about narrative inquiry, I learned that it was not uncommon for a researcher to engage in serious reflection during the research process. Although questioning

my own identity helped triggering the development of this study, this research is not about my self-identity. It is about investigating expatriates' international experience with relation to their self-identity. As suggested by Moustaka (1995), qualitative researchers need to bracket their preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand to the greatest extent possible in order to fully understand participants' point of views. I decided to write this Researcher Identity Memo and to keep a field journal to jot down my responses throughout the research study. My Identity Memo and field journal not only will help me in bracketing any of my own thoughts, biases and assumptions that may interfere with the results of the study, they will also help me in making sense of my actions and reflections. Recording my thoughts, my feelings and observations will increase the awareness of my own biases. Knowing and paying attention to my own biases can help me analyze more objectively, better hear what others are saying, thinking, experiencing and feeling, so that I can draw on conclusions for the study with an open-mind (Chan, 2013, personal communication).

## APPENDIX B

## Pre-interview Questionnaire

As part of the participant recruitment process, I am sending you a list of general questions to answer in an effort to ensure each participant meets the research participant selection criteria. This will also enable us to better focus the discussion during the research interviews. These questions are demographic in nature and are related to your expatriation experience. Please complete the questionnaire by filling in the blanks (where applicable) or by selecting the most appropriate choice. You can access and complete this questionnaire via one of the following methods that is the most convenient for you:

1. Via Survey Monkey by clicking this link (*insert URL for the Survey Monkey*);
2. Fill out the attached questionnaire and email it to me at [REDACTED];
3. If you prefer to complete this questionnaire over telephone with me, please let me know and we can schedule a time.

Please be advised that the information you provide is completely confidential. They will only be seen by me as the Principal Investigator/Researcher of this study. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me using the contact information below. Please be advised that the information you provide is completely confidential. They will only be seen by me as the Principal Investigator/Researcher of this study. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me via my contact information below.

Thank you very much for your participation!

Sincerely,

Mandy Chan  
Principal Investigator/Researcher

## Questions:

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Gender:  
 Male  
 Female
4. Country of Birth \_\_\_\_\_
5. Nationality \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you able to speak and understand English (listening and reading) fluently?  
 Yes  
 No
7. How many overseas assignments (10 months or longer) have you been on, including assignments with both current and past organizations? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Were all these assignments with companies operating internationally?  
 Yes  
 No
9. Are you currently on an international assignment abroad?  
 Yes  
 No
10. If the answer to question #9 above is no, please specify the length of time since you returned to your home office/country. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Were you fluent in the language predominantly used in the country of your most recent assignment?  
 Yes  
 No
12. How would you describe your level of immersion within the local culture?  
 Highly immersed



Somewhat immersed

Minimal immersed

Please explain:

13. Marital status:

Single without a committed relationship

Single with a committed relationship

Married without children

Married with children

Single parent

Other (please describe):

14. Did your family (spouse/partner/children) accompany you on your assignment?

Yes

No

N/A

15. Are you willing to attend multiple (minimum of 3) 1 hour interview sessions with the researcher during the research process?

Yes

No

16. How comfortable are you using voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services (example: SKYPE) or Web Conferencing tools (example: GoToMeeting, Adobe Connect or Cisco WebEx)?

\_\_\_\_\_ Very comfortable

\_\_\_\_\_ Somewhat comfortable

\_\_\_\_\_ Not comfortable

## APPENDIX C

## Professional Network Sampling Posting Message

LinkedIn.com, URL: <http://www.linkedin.com/>

Are you interested in being a participant in my research project *Impacts of Expatriates' International Experience on Self-Identity*? I am seeking participants for this study who are current expatriates on assignment from their employer for at least 10 months or longer, or former expatriates that have completed their assignment of 10 months or longer in length, and are willing to participate for at least 3 one-hour interviews at about weekly intervals with the researcher .

All individuals interested in participating in this research will be asked to fill out a participant selection screening questionnaire to ensure each participant meets the research participant criteria. This questionnaire will take an average of 15 minutes to complete. Questions included in this questionnaire are demographic in nature and are related to your expatriation experience. Upon the researcher completes the assessment of the potential participants screening process, individuals who returned the screening questionnaire will be notified of the screening results and the next steps. Please note that all information collected from this screening questionnaire will be kept strictly confidential between the researcher and the potential participant.

If you or someone you know is interested in contributing to this research study, please send me a message via LinkedIn or email me at [REDACTED] for additional information.

Thank you.

Facebook, URL: <https://www.facebook.com/>

Are you interested in being a participant in my research project *Impacts of Expatriates' International Experience on Self-Identity*? I am seeking participants for this study who are current expatriates on assignment from their employer for at least 10 months or longer, or former expatriates that have completed their assignment of 10 months or longer in length, and are willing to participate for at least 3 one-hour interviews at about weekly intervals with the researcher.

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If you or someone you know is interested in contributing to this research study, please send me a message via Facebook or email me at [REDACTED] for additional information.

Thank you.

## APPENDIX D

## Open Ended Guiding Questions

1. How did you become an expatriate?
2. Why did you accept the assignment? What factors did you consider before deciding to accept the assignment?
3. How did your organization prepare you for the assignment? How long was this preparation period? Can you provide some specifics?
4. How did you (your family, if applicable) prepare yourself for the assignment?
5. What changes did you observe in yourself as a person as a consequence of your assignment?
6. Would you please elaborate on the change(s) you experienced and provide an example?
7. In what ways are the changes you have experienced a consequence of your international assignment?
8. How clear are you about your self-identity (i.e. your sense of self, who you are)?
9. Do you believe you have more than one perception of yourself, and why?
10. Do your self-perceptions ever conflict with one another, and how?
11. What is your view on the impact of the international assignment on your perceived self-identity in general?
12. Do you think that working in another country increases your awareness of self-identity? Please explain.
13. Would you recommend an expatriate career to others?

## APPENDIX E

## Informed Consent Form

Dear Mr/Ms. (*prospective participant's last name*):

My name is Mandy Chan, and I am a student in Organization Change at Pepperdine University, School of Education and Psychology. I am currently in the process of recruiting individuals for my study entitled, "*Impacts of Expatriates' International Experience on Self-Identity*" which is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a doctoral dissertation. The professor supervising my work is Dr. Kay Davis. The study is designed to investigate how international experience may influence expatriates' self-identity. "Self-identity" refers to a person's sense of self. "Expatriates" refers to employees who are currently on an assignment sponsored by their employer to work abroad, or employees who have completed an international assignment sponsored by their employer and have returned to the home office or left their company. I am inviting individuals who have at least 10 months expatriation experience to participate in my study. Please understand that your participation in my study is strictly voluntary. The following is a description of what your study participation entails, the terms for participating in the study, and a discussion of your rights as a study participant. Please read this information carefully before deciding whether or not you wish to participate.

If you should decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate a minimum of 3 one-hour one-on-one interviews at about weekly intervals. The interview will be conducted via teleconference, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP; SKYPE, for example), or in person. During these interviews, you will be asked to reflect on and share your international experience with the researcher. The researcher may use some guiding questions to facilitate the interview. It is your sole decision of what information you would like to share with the researcher. All interviews will be recorded by the researcher for the sake of accuracy. All recorded interviews will be transcribed by the researcher or a professional transcription service (if used) for later analysis. You will be asked to review the transcripts from interviews to insure our interpretation of your narrative is accurate. You will have the first right to modify any information that is misinterpreted during the interview, any data that you feel is too personal to disclose, or any information that you no longer wish to share for any reason. Your participation in this research should take approximately 4.5 *hours* over a period of 3 to 4 weeks. To insure confidentiality, you will be assigned a code name as your identification throughout the study. The researcher (who is also the Principal Investigator) will be the only one who knows your identity. Interview recordings will be erased following the successful completion of the study, and, until that time, will be kept in the researcher's computer with a password protection. The researcher will be the only one who knows the password to unlock the file.

Although minimal, there are potential risks that you should consider before deciding to participate in this study. These risks include your memory of any unpleasant life episodes during

your international assignment or any distress about your workplace or personal situation if they exist. In the event you do experience distress associated with participation in this study, you can contact me immediately to discuss your concerns, and you can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.

The potential benefits to you for participating in the study are: (a) your contribution of new knowledge to the expatriate literature about the relationship between international experience and self-identity, (b) an opportunity to increase your self-identity transformation awareness by reflecting on your international experience and to gain a greater clarity of your sense of self, (c) provide empirical reference for individuals who are considering international careers to better appreciate the impact of international experience on a person's self-identity, and (d) raise awareness within organizations regarding self-identity changes in expatriates. This will allow for improvements in the design of their organization's expatriate program. It will also promote retention support programs for returned employees to keep them from leaving the organization after completion of their international assignment. Improved and increased communication among workgroups coming from different backgrounds, such as between expatriates and local employees, and between repatriates and home office employees is another expected outcome.

If you should decide to participate and find you are not interested in continuing the study in its entirety, you have the right to discontinue at any point without being questioned about your decision. You also do not have to answer all of the questions during the interview. Any question that you prefer not to answer--just advise the researcher that you choose not to respond to the question.

If you choose not to participate in this study, please decline this invitation by contacting me using the contact information shown at the bottom of this form; otherwise, I will contact you next week to schedule our interviews.

If the findings of the study are presented to professional audiences or published, or made public in anyway, no information that identifies you personally will be released. All electronic data will be kept in a secure manner for five years. One set of any hardcopy data will be kept for three years and stored in a locked and secure location then the data will be destroyed.

If you have any questions regarding the information that I have provided above, please do not hesitate to contact me at the address and phone number provided below. If you have further questions or do not feel I have adequately addressed your concerns, please contact Dr. Kay Davis via telephone at [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Doug Leigh, Chairperson of the Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (IRB), Pepperdine University, telephone at [REDACTED] or email at [REDACTED].

By accepting the scheduling of interviews, you are acknowledging that you have read and understand what your study participation entails, and are consenting to participate in the study.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information, and I hope you decide to accept this invitation to participate in this research study. You are welcome to a brief summary of the study findings in about 1 year. If you decide you are interested in receiving the summary, please notify me via my contact information shown below.

Sincerely,

Mandy Chan

Researcher/Principal Investigator



## APPENDIX F

## Pepperdine GPS IRB Exemption Notice

# PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

## Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

July 15, 2013

Mandy Chan  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Protocol #: E0513D03

Project Title: Impacts of Expatriates' International Experiences on Self-Identity

Dear Ms. Chan,

Thank you for submitting your application, *Impacts of Expatriates' International Experiences on Self-Identity*, for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB appreciates the work you and your faculty advisor, Kay Davis, have done on the proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations (45 CFR 46 - <http://www.nihtraining.com/ohsrsite/guidelines/45cfr46.html>) that govern the protections of human subjects. Specifically, section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) states:

(b) Unless otherwise required by Department or Agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the following categories are exempt from this policy:

Category (2) of 45 CFR 46.101, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: a) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a Request for Modification Form to the GPS IRB. Because your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to

be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to "policy material" at <http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/>).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval. Should you have additional questions, please contact me. On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,



Doug Leigh, Ph.D.  
Chair, Graduate and Professional Schools IRB

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives  
Ms. Alexandra Roosa, Director Research and Sponsored Programs  
Dr. Kay Davis, Graduate School of Education and Psychology