Single Expatriate Women: Gender and Identity in Cross-Cultural Transition
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on expatriates prior to the 1990s was overwhelmingly done on white U.S. males, excluding women professionals who were working abroad (Taylor and Napier 2001). For the past few decades, more and more women are moving into previously male-dominated professions and increasingly pursuing their ambitions across geographical and symbolic boundaries. Despite the increasing trend in the number of women expatriates, research in this area remains limited.

The intercultural experience is characterized by many novel situations. Therefore the effective expatriate must be capable of handling the psychological stress resulting from attempts to cope with the new aspects of the foreign culture. The literature on the culture shock phenomenon acknowledges this fact (Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman, 1978; Black and Mendenhall, 1990; Furnham and Bochner, 1989). The term “culture shock” was first coined by anthropologist Oberg (1960), who defined it as “the disorientation and accompanying anxiety experienced by sojourners in cross cultural transition.” Adjustment to a cross cultural situation generally has been viewed as the process and end state of being familiar and comfortable while interacting in the host culture (Black and Mendenhall 1990). While there are various aspects of adjustment, this paper focuses on the psychological aspects of adjustment for single female expatriates and how this sheds light on issues relating to gender and identity in a globalized context. Psychological Adjustment is defined as “the general psychological well being, self satisfaction, contentment, comfort with, and accommodation to a new environment after the initial perturbations which characterized culture shock has passed” (Ruben and Kealy 1979).
Singapore is host to a rough estimate of 800,000 foreign residents. Traditionally, an expatriate in Singapore is “a middle-aged Anglo Saxon male with a non-working wife in tow, on an obscene senior management package”. However, due to economic changes in the global arena, the modern expat is likely to be “single, younger, and more often than not- on a local package” (Long 2003). In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 single expatriate women in Singapore. In this study, we include both “traditional” expats who have been transferred by their firms, as well as highly qualified women professionals who have come to Singapore to seek opportunities on their own. All respondents came from Western or European ethnic origins such as Germany, Belgium, United States, France, and Canada. Respondents’ ages ranged from 24 to 41 years, and many held high ranking positions in established organizations. Our respondents shared with us their lifestyles and consumption experiences, the various challenges they face as women professionals working abroad, as well as their psychological adjustment to life in Singapore. The verbatim transcripts were read individually and as a whole in the hermeneutic tradition, where we sought a holistic and contextualized understanding of the key themes and concerns of our respondents.

In the interviews, respondents expressed how they feel about their psychological adjustment as single expatriate women in Singapore. We suggest that through their narratives, our respondents are constructing a frontier femininity premised on ideals such as independence, self-discovery and growth. This frontier femininity is juxtaposed against the frontier masculinity of single expatriate men, and interestingly, also against a different femininity of expatriate wives (or trailing spouses). This framing and the ensuing comparisons of experiences enable us to gain a better insight into the respondents’ self concepts and their identities as single expatriate women. In particular, we discuss the respondents’ tensions between traveling and dwelling narratives (Thompson and Tambyah 1999) and issues relating to body image and romantic relationships.