



# Voices From Home

The Personal and Family  
Side of International  
Short-Term Assignments

A Research Report from  
The Interchange Institute



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# **VOICES FROM HOME:**

## **The Personal and Family Side of International Short-Term Assignments**

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#### **Executive Summary**

Unaccompanied short-term assignments and extended business travel are increasing in frequency, in the face of high expatriate costs, security issues, and family resistance to moving. While these assignments avoid a number of family complications, they potentially raise others. We examined the factors that were related to positive outcomes in a sample of people living at home while their spouses were on such assignments.

Participants were 88% female; were citizens of 21 countries; and had spouses working in 17 countries. Only about one third of the participants felt adequately supported financially during these assignments, and many reported new costs during the assignments. On the other hand, participants who did feel adequately supported financially reported that their traveling spouses were more positive about their employer and work, and that they themselves (and their children) were more positive about the assignment. Similarly, most participants reported having very little input into any aspect of the assignment, but those who did have some say in when visits home would occur, for example, or who felt less ambiguity about how long the assignments would last, were also significantly more positive about the assignments. Organizations are urged to discern and address any financial costs families face, and to search for ways families can be involved in decision making about the assignments.

When participants felt coerced into accepting the assignment, they tended to be more depressed. Interestingly, in a kind of “we’re in this together” finding, when both spouses either agreed that they had been pressured into accepting the assignment or agreed that they had not been pressured, participants felt more positive about their marriage. Better adjustment and higher satisfaction was also seen when the traveling spouse did more housework when home, when levels of worry about safety were lower, when their fundamental marital relationship and way of parenting seemed unchanged, and when the at-home spouse realized potential benefits to the assignment.

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**Statistical Note:** We have written this report with non-statisticians in mind. To make complicated bi- and multi-variate findings easier to visualize, we have presented bar graphs rather than tables of statistics. All the charts in this report refer to statistically significant differences. Questions about methodology and statistics should be addressed to The Interchange Institute.

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# Goals of Study

The goals of this study were to:

- ♦ Understand the impact of unaccompanied international assignments on the lives of the families of the traveling employees.
- ♦ Understand the family and personal factors that are related to more successful unaccompanied international assignments.
- ♦ Offer data-based recommendations about how to maximize the chances of a successful assignment in the context of a satisfied employee and family.

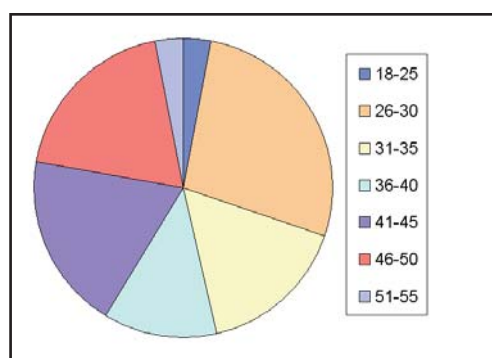
## Participants

Participants were the spouses of people who were on, or had recently been on one of these kinds of assignment:

- ♦ **Short-Term Assignment:** an international assignment, unaccompanied by any family member, lasting 60 days to 12 months (66% of the sample fit this category)
- ♦ **Extended Business Travel:** an international assignment, unaccompanied by any family member, involving travel between home and the destination country, for 10 or more work days per month, with returns home every 7-10 days, for a period lasting at least three months (34% fit this category)

Sixty-eight (68) at-home spouses completed the on-line survey, which was distributed on a variety of expatriate support sites. A parallel survey was available for the employees themselves. Results from the employee version of the survey are reported in a separate document (see [www.interchangeinstitute.org](http://www.interchangeinstitute.org) for the *Voices from the Road* document).

The majority of participants were female (88%) and married (88%); non-married participants were living as a domestic partner and, for simplicity, are referred to in this report as “spouses.”



	Female	Male
Married	79%	9%
Domestic Partner	9%	3%

Participants were fairly evenly distributed over the age range from 26 to 50.

In addition:

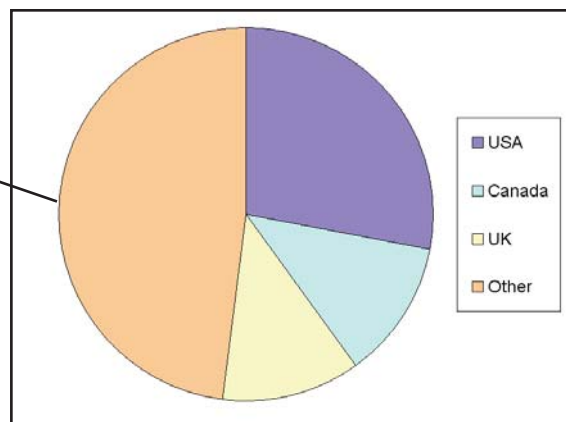
- ♦ 60% of the participants had spouses on corporate assignments; the others were on foreign service, military, missions, educational and other kinds of assignments;
- ♦ 71% were living in their home country while their spouses traveled abroad; the rest were living outside their home countries while their spouses traveled to yet another country;
- ♦ 44% of these [at-home] participants were employed full time; 20% were employed part time; 13% were full- or part-time students; the rest were not working outside the home;
- ♦ 22% had changed their work status since their spouse's assignment had begun.

## Country of Citizenship

“Other” included:

28% of the participants were USA citizens. Twelve percent were Canadian and another 12% were from the UK. Seventeen other nationalities are represented in the sample.

Australia  
Belgium  
Brazil  
China  
Finland  
France  
Germany  
India  
Ireland  
Mexico  
Poland  
Slovak Republic  
South Africa  
Spain  
Sweden  
Switzerland  
Tunisia

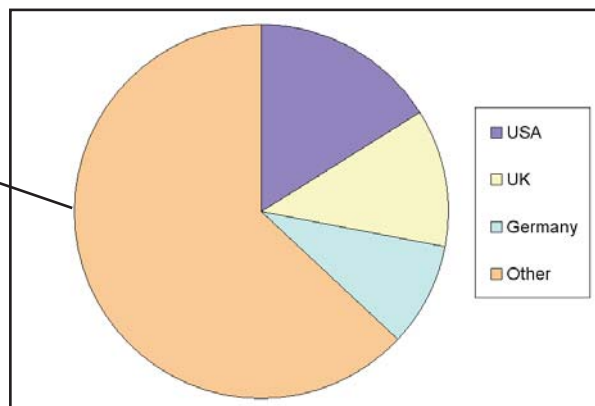


## Country of Spouse's International Assignment

“Other” included:

About 16% of the traveling spouses' assignments were in the USA. Another 12% were in the UK and 9% in Germany. In total, the participants' spouses were working in one of 27 countries, on five continents.

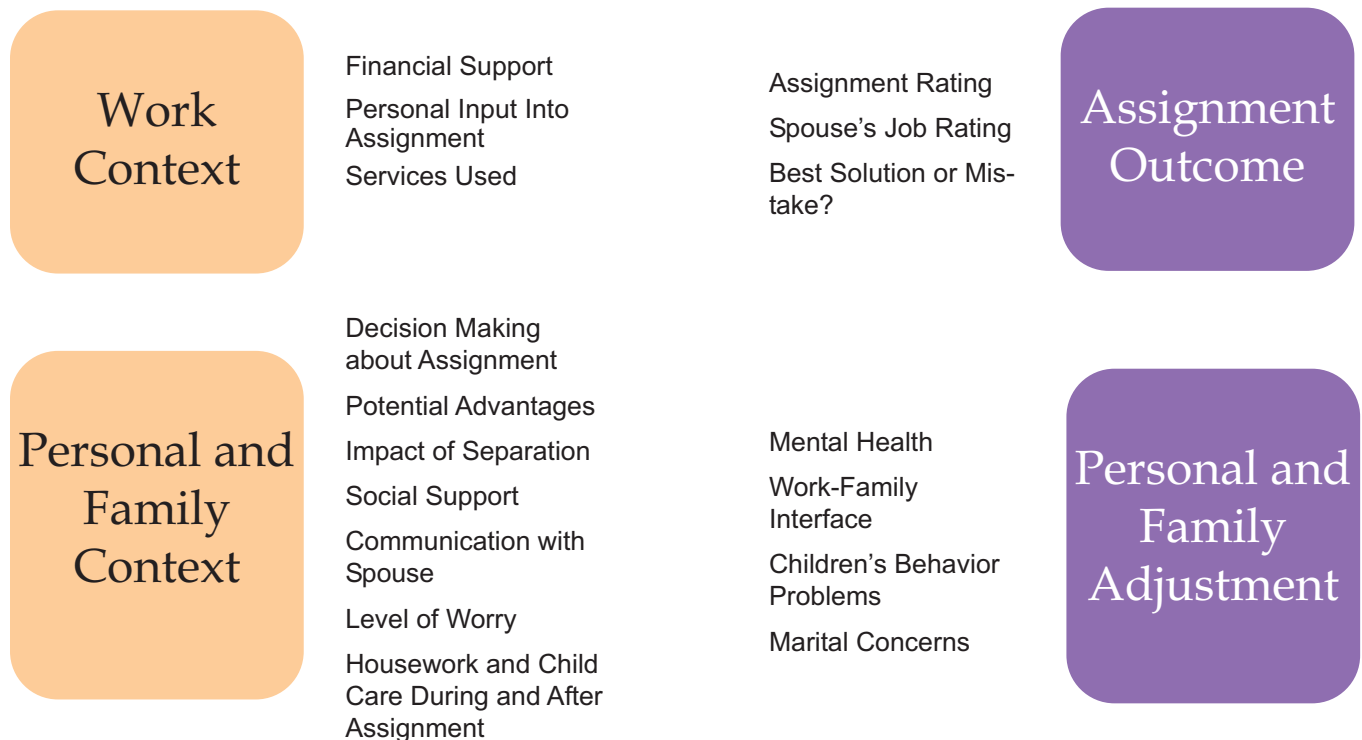
Argentina  
Australia  
Belgium  
Brazil  
Bulgaria  
China  
France  
Gabon  
Iraq  
Israel  
Kuwait  
Malaysia  
Mexico  
Nigeria  
North Africa  
Norway  
Philippines  
Russia  
Saudi Arabia  
Singapore  
Switzerland  
Syria  
The Netherlands



# Analysis Model

A simple Context-Outcome model was used to analyze the results of the survey — that is, we asked “What Contextual factors in the participants’ family and personal lives were related to better Assignment and personal Outcome?” The relationship between each Contextual dimension and each Outcome dimension is reported, in order to understand the complex factors that surround and potentially influence short term assignments and extended business travel. Quotes from participants, given in response to open-ended questions, are found in the “In Their Own Voice” boxes throughout the report.

## Context ↔ Outcome





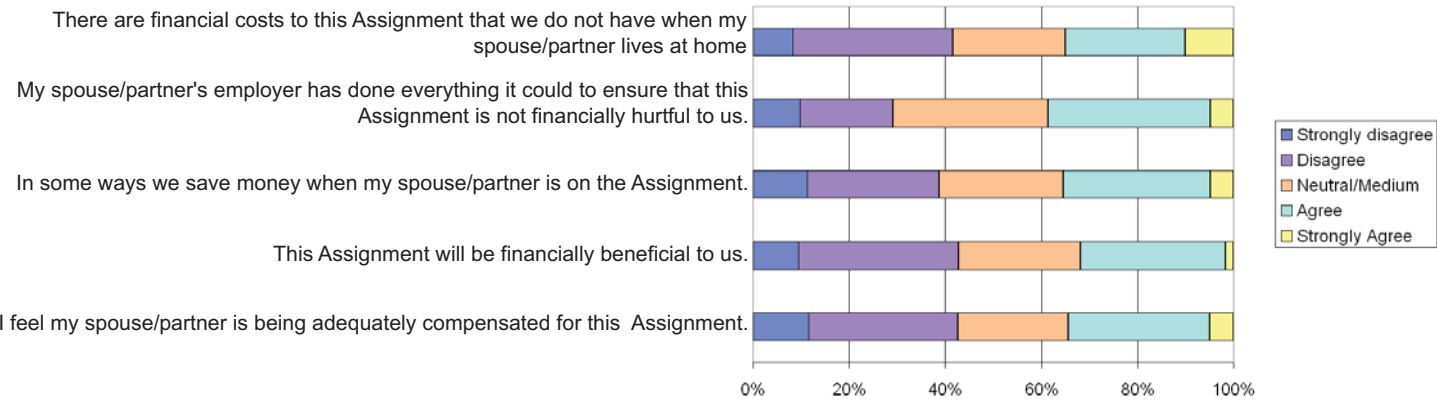
# Description of the Assignment

First, we present some descriptive statistics about how participants viewed their assignments. Later we will report how these measures are related to each other.

## Work Context

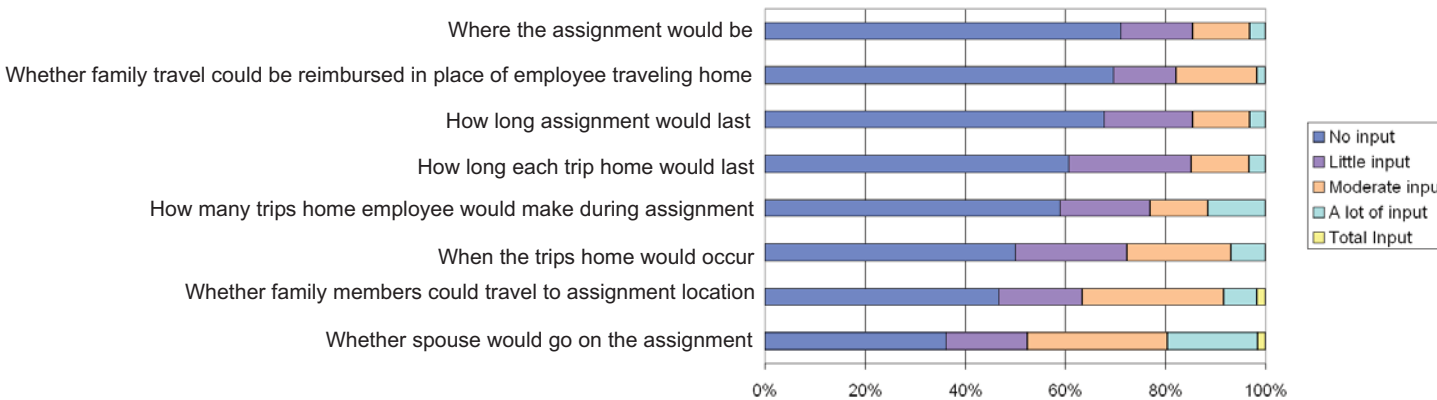
### Financial Support

Participants were asked about the financial support they received during the assignment. While there was a range of perceived support, for the most part, these assignments were not viewed as particularly financially beneficial. Thirty-five percent said they had new financial costs as a result of the assignment; only 35% said they saved money as a result of the assignment; only 9% said their spouse’s employer had done everything it could to protect them financially; and only 35% % felt they were being adequately compensated.



### Amount of Input Into Assignment

Participants were also asked how much input they had over the following aspects of the assignment, either directly or through discussions with their spouse. They had least input over where the assignment would be, whether their travel to visit at the assignment location would be reimbursed, and how long the assignment would last. They had most input into whether their spouses would take the assignment at all — almost 20% said they had “total” or “a lot” of input into whether their spouses would take the assignment, although 36% said they had no input into that decision at all. (See section below on the importance of having input.





# In Their Own Voice

***Please describe any financial costs you have encountered during this Assignment that you do not have when your spouse/partner lives at home.***

Communication, household help and child care were the most frequent categories of extra expense. Costs to at-home spouse's career, everyday transportation, travel costs, and food were also mentioned frequently. Some sample comments:

## Communication

- Extra phone calls
- Long distance/international phone bills which are higher in Europe via cell phone

## Household Help

- I have to hire out for repair work he or I could do if the other were watching the children. I have to hire more household staff to help with entertaining since he is not here for the preparation/clean-up.
- Handyman jobs around the house which my husband would do if he was here. Help in the garden and with car.
- extra personal fee service providers (tax preparer, household helpers, drivers, etc) because he has no time to help with these tasks

## Child Care

- extra babysitter fees to cover for his absence, especially at night
- Must have a babysitter to do the smallest errands. Cannot rely on husband coming home at night so I can even go to the grocery by myself. Youngest child must accompany me everywhere while oldest is in school. We have no family in the area, so there is no 'free' care.

## At-Home Spouse Career Costs

- I have decided I will not work again until we are all overseas, as otherwise our children would never have time with either one of us.
- Lack of financial opportunity for me with work because we can't have BOTH parents traveling = loss of opportunity/promotion potential.

## Transportation and Travel

- Public transportation
- We now need a second car.
- Air travel to and from assignment
- Due to high stress travel, no time for proper travel voucher review = paying out of pocket for many fees (taxis, etc) because of poor organization and follow-up [means you incur lots of expenses because there is no way to keep all the documentation straight before, during and after so much frequent travel = no net money gained by travel, instead money lost by family to compensate for incidental expenses]

## Food

- Increased food costs - per diem is not adequate due to differences in food costs in assignment country.
- He spends over 400/month just on food for himself. We had to pay up front for motels and food (very expensive since he had to eat out).

***If you have been compensated in some way, please describe how.***

Most participants said they received no compensation for any costs other than the traveling employee's per diem reimbursement. A few reported a per diem or travel reimbursement which they were able to stretch to cover family expenses, a general bonus, and in one case, child care support. Here is a complete list of such compensatory supports:

## Travel reimbursement stretched to cover family expenses

- The compensation is in the form of overtime and per diem. He earns a set amount of 'per diem' to cover food costs. He chooses not to use all of the per diem while on assignment in order that we can save that money for other expenses.
- Depending on the location he is given per diem which he can usually save half of, we receive some reimbursement for entertaining.
- My compensation has been that we share 5 flights between the two of us to see each other.

## Extra pay to employee

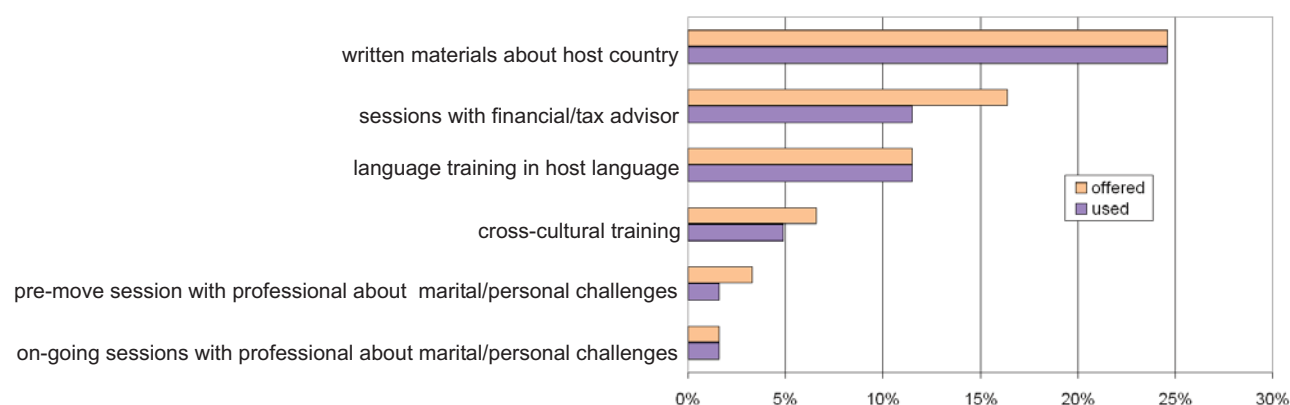
- He is given hazardous duty pay each month, as well as Live fire, and separation pay.
- My husband has an extra weekly stipend for living expenses when he traveling on business.
- He also earns overtime, but cannot until he has already worked a 10 hour day. He also receives danger pay depending on the location.

## Child Care

- A limited number of hours in a back-up babysitting service are available but only during my working hours. For example since Jan 2007 my day care provider for our youngest child has been absent 3 full working weeks; this service means that I was still able to work.

### Services Offered to and Used by Traveling Spouse

Relatively few support services were offered to or used by the traveling spouse — the most frequent service was written materials about the host country, but even these were offered to fewer than 25% of spouses.



### Services Offered to and Used by Participant

Similarly, relatively few services were offered to or used by the at-home spouses. The most common service offered and used was a telephone budget to facilitate communication between spouses, but only 16% received even that. No participants received on-going sessions with professionals about marital or personal challenges.



## In Their Own Voice

***What advice do you have for others in your situation seeking cost-effective ways of communicating during an Assignment?***

#### Low-cost telephone companies

- Research low-cost telephone companies, it makes quite a difference when you can talk for twice the time, at the same cost.
- Complete package from one company, including DSL and long distance communications. My spouse has an international cell phone, including a monthly allowance so he can regularly call home. It has been provided to him by his employer.

#### On-line resources

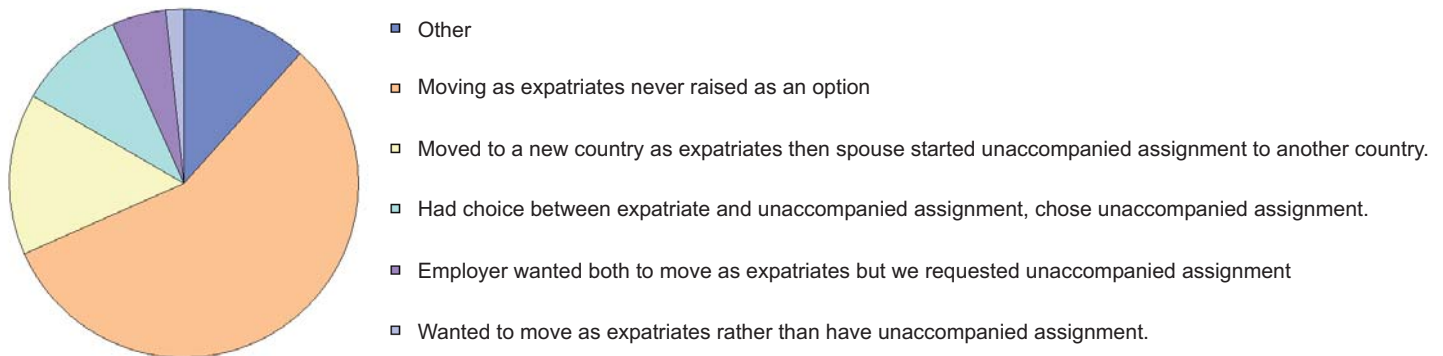
- Subscribe to publication where you can network with other people in same situation, i.e. global connections in the Netherlands, expat expert websites, etc.
- E-mailing is the best and most efficient way of communicating, and its the cheapest.

## Family Context

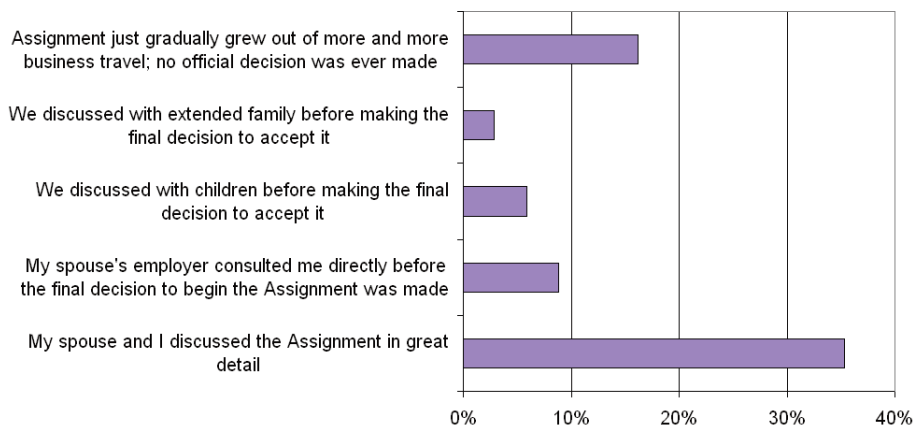
### Decision-Making About Assignment

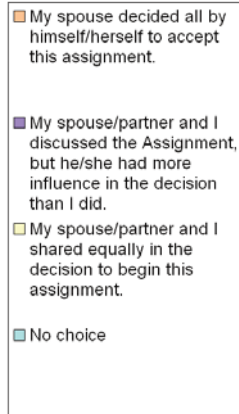
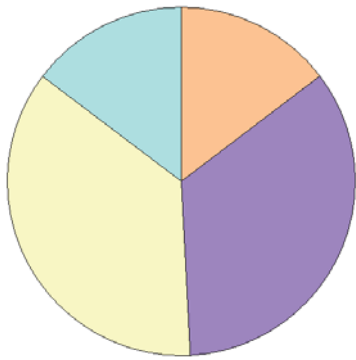
We asked several questions about the extent of participants' involvement in the decision to take the assignment. First, we asked whether the couple was given the choice to move to the international site as expatriates.

In the majority (57%) of cases, this was never raised as an option. Fifteen percent moved with their families as expatriates and then the unaccompanied assignment began; 10% were given the choice between an expatriate and unaccompanied assignment and they chose the unaccompanied one; in 5% of the cases, the spouse's employer preferred an expatriate assignment but the couple requested an unaccompanied one instead; in just 2% did the couple prefer an expatriate assignment.



We also asked about how the decision was reached by the couple. Only about 35% of the participants said they discussed the assignment in detail with their spouses. Many fewer discussed it with their spouses' employers (9%), children (6%) or extended family (3%). In about 16% of the cases, participants said the assignment just grew out of more and more business travel and was never explicitly discussed.

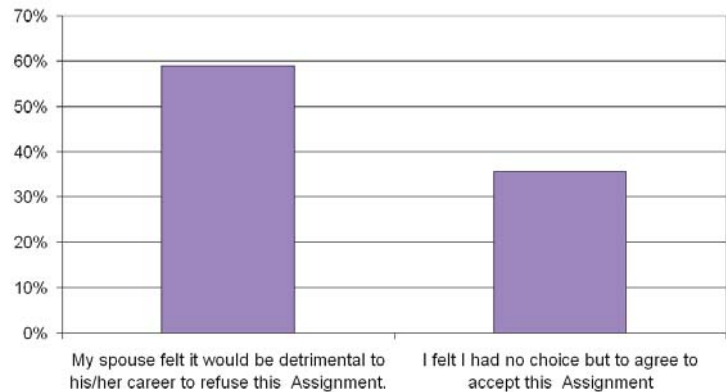




Fifteen percent of the participants said their spouse decided all alone to accept the assignment, and another 15% said their spouse had no choice but to accept it. The distinction between these two categories may reveal a telling dynamic within the couple, in which responsibility for the decision is seen as having been the spouse's or out of his/her control. About another third said they discussed the assignment as a couple but the traveling spouse had more influence over the final decision. Only about one third claimed equal involvement in the decision.

We next wondered whether couples felt any real choice about the assignments, and asked about a sense of coercion on their or their spouses' part.

Almost 60% of the participants said their spouse felt it would be detrimental to his/her career to refuse this assignment; about one third felt they themselves had no choice but to agree to accept the assignment.



## In Their Own Voice

### *Are there other aspects of the Assignment that you wish you could control but cannot?*

The most frequent responses concerned the length of assignments (and, in particular, the ambiguity about their length), and visits.

#### Length of Assignment

- Length of time - as much as I ask and get him to ask / plan there is no commitment to when this assignment will end and there is still uncertainty as to whether or not we may relocate as a family in coming 6 months.
- Length of the assignment and a final leaving date.
- When he is to go away, for how long he will be gone, the next time he will be home and for how long that will last. And also then there are these prolongations; there should be an option whether he will continue or not.

#### Visits Home

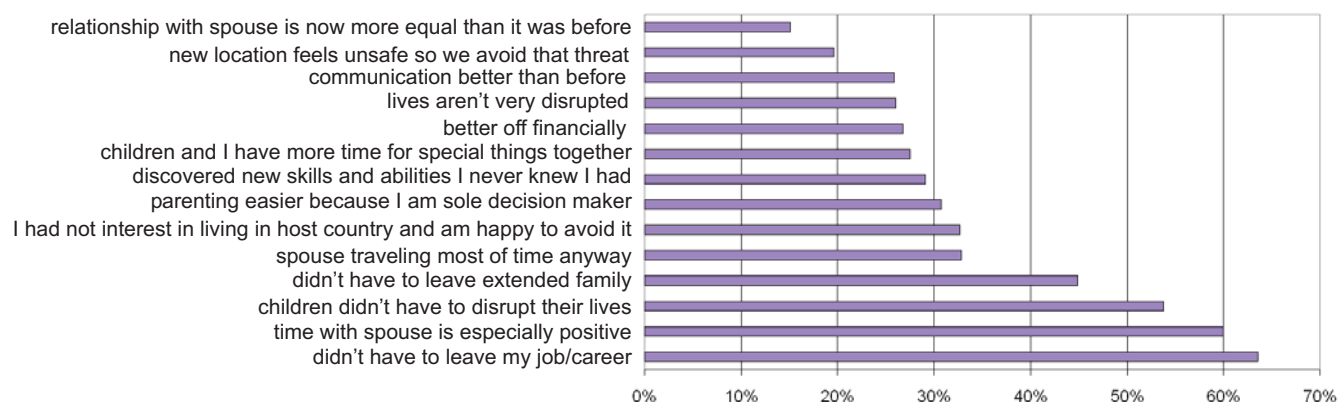
- I wish I could travel to meet him during the time off that I have. However, since the trips are 4 weeks long, according to company policy, the time away is apparently not enough to justify me flying out to meet him.
- I wish control on family special dates.

#### Other

- The fact that my husband could never guarantee a day, much less an afternoon off from work. Weekends and holidays were fair game. He was allowed to take little or no vacation time for 3 years.

## Potential Advantages to the Assignment

While we were primarily attuned to potential challenges of these unaccompanied assignments, it was important also to examine the potential advantages to families, especially given the basic premise by many families and employers that these assignments are less stressful than expatriate ones. We asked participants to describe how “true” for them each of the potential advantages was. This chart shows the percentage of participants who said each potential advantage was “fairly true” or “very true” for them



The most frequently-claimed advantage (by 64% of participants) was that the unaccompanied assignment meant that the participant did not have to leave her/his job/career. A majority (60%) also reported that the time they do spend with their spouse is especially positive. About one third to one half of the participants said the assignment meant less disruption. About the same number said their spouse would be traveling most of the time anyway or that they were not interested in living in the host location. One quarter to one third reported some other advantage in their or their children's lives.

## In Their Own Voice

*Please expand on any advantages this assignment has offered.*

By far, the most common advantage listed was the participant's increased independence, although even in noting this advantage, some participants reveal a degree of ambivalence about it. Several other benefits pertaining to their children and their relationship with their spouse were also mentioned, again, sometimes with a bittersweet twist.

### Independence

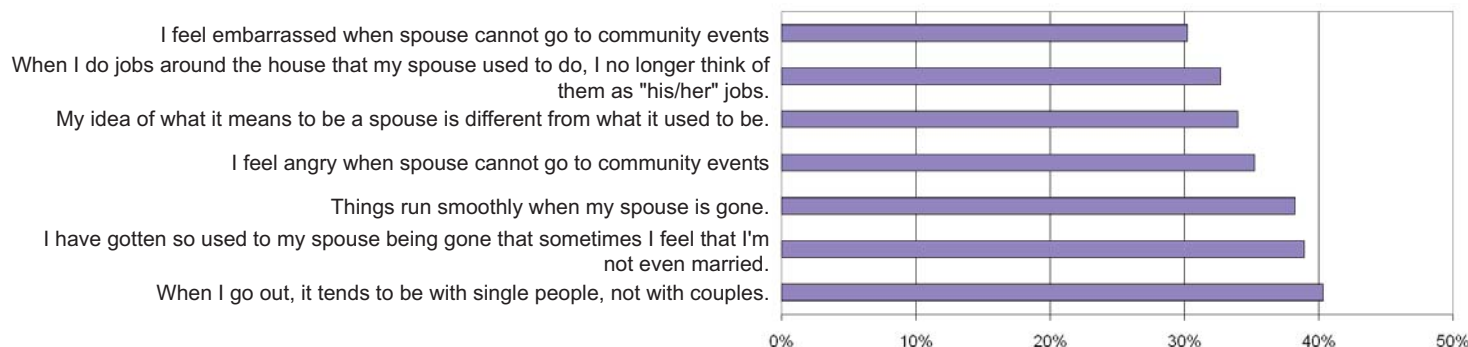
- The worst realization is that, yes, you can really survive without your spouse and over a period of years of long-term travel that starts to seem attractive as the relationship worsens and the strain rises. The physical, emotional and psychological disconnect is too great.
- I have learned to be a single parent and learned to take care of a household alone. When I have an emergency, there is only me to deal with it, considering we have a nine-hour time difference, advice usually isn't readily available.
- I have grown as a person, and am much more independent than I used to be. My career keeps me busy, and we have 2 great teenagers. There have been times when we have missed him, but we are a very close knit family. He makes us his number 1 priority when he is with us.
- I am able to live in a foreign country on my own and manage my day to day life. However, this is not the life I want to lead. I left my home and job to move to be with my partner and I have ended up being on my own with our child more often than I wanted or indeed he wanted. Yet he is unhappy to be on his own hence the need for me to follow....

### Other

- I wanted to be at home with my children and my husband's job not only supports it, but requires it by the situation we are in. Our children are very young, so we wanted to get the moving and traveling out of the way before their lives were disrupted.
- Life is in some ways easier since it's just me and my daughter. We eat when it fits our schedule and what we want, we do what we want etc. Less "cooks" stirring the pot, BUT life is also SO much more quiet and boring. On top of that when things go wrong you really miss the spouse who could help you out.
- Our marital relationship is much more honest and raw than ever before. I have pushed and pushed for long and deep discussions because with him being gone, we need to look for other means to stay closely connected. My husband has made tremendous effort to develop closer and more connected relationships with our children.

## Impact of Separation

When one family member is absent for extended periods of time, his/her role in the family can understandably change in significant ways. Sometimes this phenomenon is called “boundary ambiguity,” that is, ambiguity about whether the member is “in” the family in usual ways or not. We asked several questions designed to capture this concept. This chart shows the percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement:



First, note that the majority of participants did not agree with *any* of these statements; family membership appears not to be that ambiguous. Still, 30-40% did agree that their view of what it means to be married had changed, as had their socializing patterns. About that number reported feeling embarrassed or angry when their spouses missed community events, and 39% even reported sometimes feeling not married any more. About 33% said they no longer considered their spouses’ jobs as “his/her” jobs, possibly a sign of boundary ambiguity. Just 38% said things run smoothly while their spouse is gone. Clearly, in some couples there are signs of a major impact of the separation on couple dynamics and the meaning of being married.

In a related set of questions, we posed five scenarios to participants in which a decision had to be made (how to manage a home repair, whether to take a new job, whether to change banks, whether to hire a tutor for a child and whether to let a child socialize with a friend), and asked whether they would (a) decide on their own, (b) try to reach their spouse prior to making the decision but go ahead and decide if not, or (c) definitely wait to talk to their spouse and not decide alone. Participants were mostly likely to say they would wait to talk to their spouses for the two child-related scenarios (posed only to participants with children), and would most likely decide about the new bank on their own.

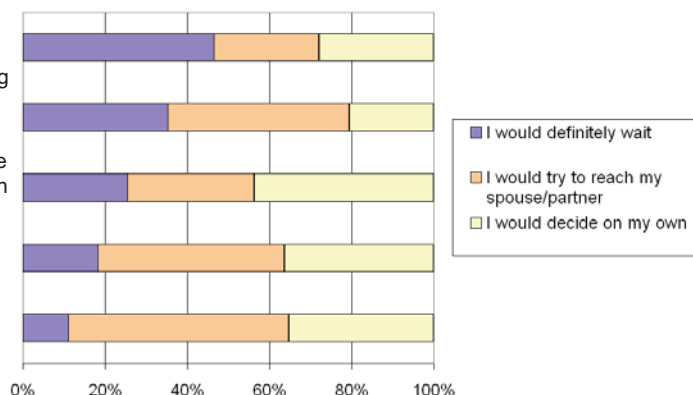
Your child has been invited to a friend's house for the weekend along with several other friends. You and your spouse have never gotten along very well with the friend's parents. Your child really wants to go.

Your child's teacher says your child seems to be having trouble understanding the material and suggests that you hire a tutor to help once or twice a week.

The neighborhood branch of your bank has just closed. You have to decide whether to start going to a less convenient branch of your bank or to switch to a different bank so you can stay in your neighborhood.

You have just been offered the opportunity to do some work you've always wanted to do, but it would mean spending less time with people you've always liked.

Your furnace is making a loud noise. The repairman says a proper repair would cost \$1500, although he could do a \$100 repair that would probably get you through the winter.





# In Their Own Voice

## *Has your relationship with any of your children changed since the Assignment began?*

Only 25% of those who answered this question said that their relationship had not changed at all. The others reported an array of positive changes and a need for more attention. Many of the positive comments reflect on children's increased maturity or responsibility which, in fact, may have strains of its own.

### Positive

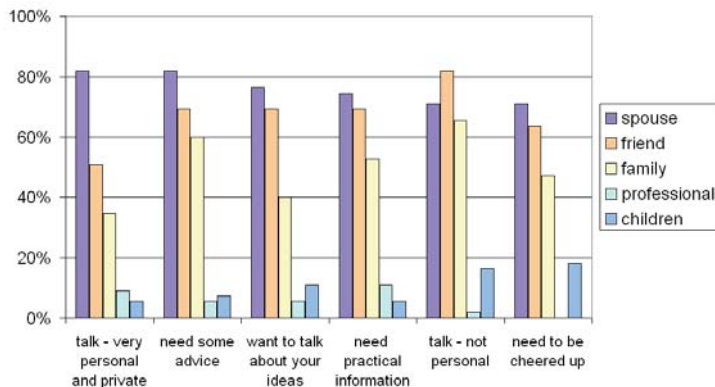
- If possible we are even closer now than we were and we have gotten 'into a groove'.
- It has gotten much better - we talk more and spend more quality time together.
- Yes, my youngest son has stepped up to handle things around the house. I think because he is the only child home, since his sisters are away at college and he feels like the man around the house. It has been one of the few positive effects of this assignment.
- I talk with my oldest child more on an adult level.
- I push my 3 year old to be more independent i.e. eating, washing, dressing. I sometimes worry that I am pushing too hard.

### Need for More Attention

- The oldest is more defiant, the youngest is more "Mice can dance when cat is not around" and tries to act so. The rules need to be re-enforced more often when the father is not around the corner.
- I find myself focusing on my children's needs more now since they only have one parent around to provide emotional/physical support should problems arise. I work hard to mitigate in advance problems that may arise.
- I need to give more support and rules and play both roles.

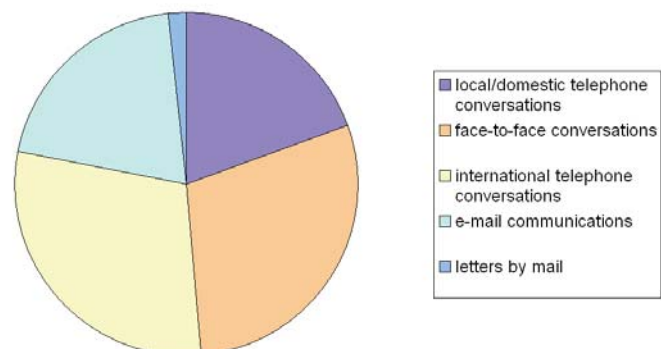
## Social Support

We asked participants whom they turned to for various kinds of support during the assignment.



It is interesting that spouses were by far the major source of support, even when absent. Only when talking about things that were not particularly personal did they turn more frequently to friends.

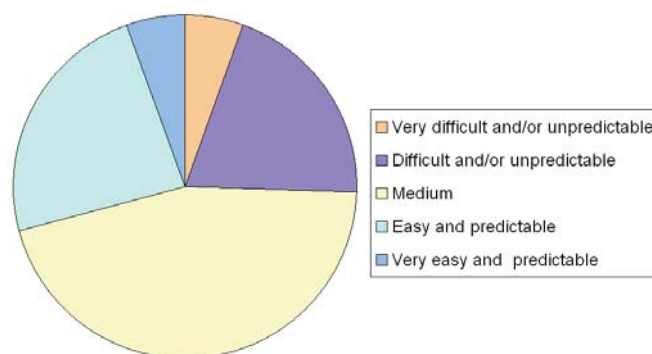
We asked what percent of their support came from local sources (domestic telephone and face-to-face conversations) and how much from long-distant sources (international telephone, email, and letters — 0% reported using fax). About half was local and half long-distant.





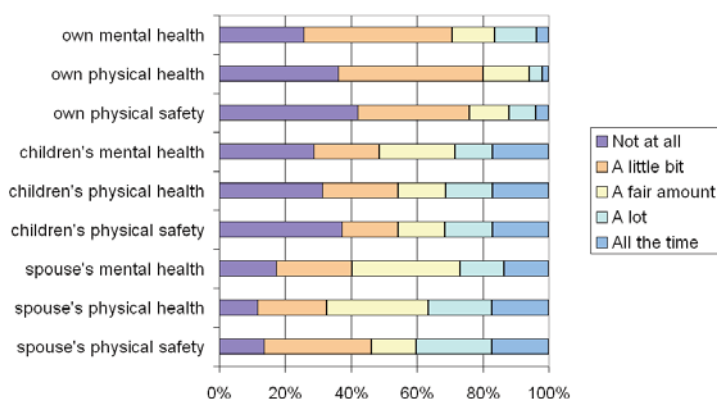
We asked participant: "How easy is it for you to reach your spouse whenever you want to?"

About 29% said it was "easy" or "very easy;" 26% said it was "difficult" or "very difficult" to reach their spouse.



## Worry

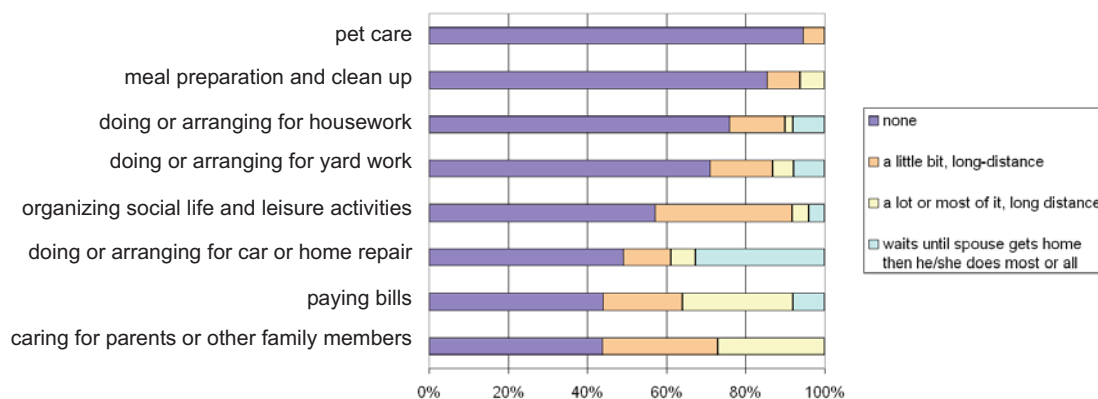
We assumed the reality of unaccompanied assignments would be dependent on the level of concern spouses had for each others' well-being and that of their children, so we asked participants to describe how much they worried about their traveling spouse's, children's and own (a) physical safety, (b) physical health, and (c) mental health. Generally participants were more concerned about their traveling spouses than about themselves.



Forty percent of participants were worried "a lot" or "all the time" about their spouse's physical safety; 37% were worried "a lot" or "all the time" about their physical health. About 30% were worried this much about their children's safety and health.

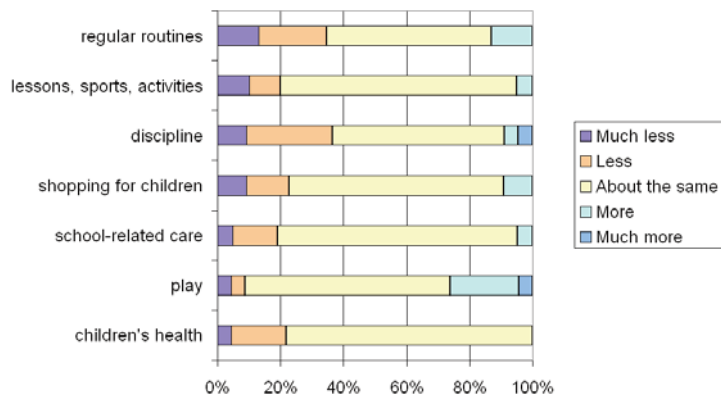
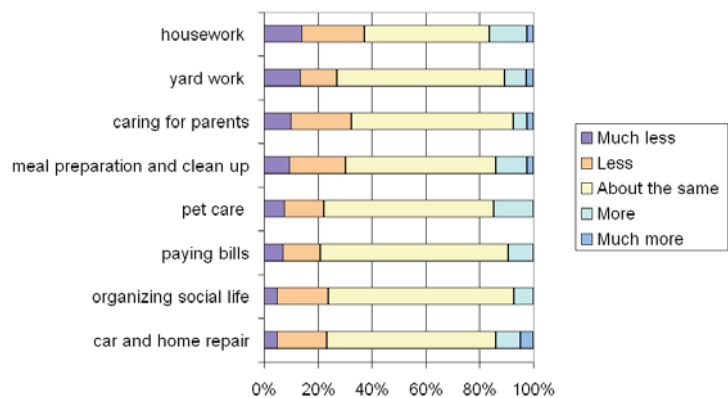
## Housework and Child Care Tasks

One of the practical challenges of unaccompanied assignments involves getting the day-to-day household and child care tasks completed. What may under other circumstances be shared between spouses now may fall to the at-home spouse, although some aspects of these tasks may be able to be done by the traveling spouse. Indeed, as shown below, participants said their traveling spouses were able to do some amount of arranging elder care, paying bills, and organizing social life and leisure activities while on assignment. Car and home repair was left until home visits, for one third of the participants.



We also asked participants about how household and child care tasks got done when the traveling spouse was at home on visits, and whether he/she did more than before the assignment (perhaps to make up for having been gone) or less than before (perhaps out of deference to his/her limited time at home).

Most participants said their spouses did “about the same” as before the assignment began; otherwise, it was more common to do less than to do more than before the assignment.



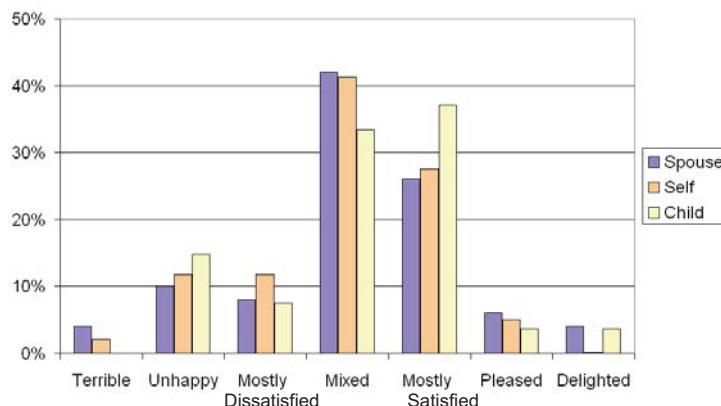
Similarly, most participants said their traveling spouses did “about the same” amount of child care when they were home on visits compared to before the assignment. But it was more common for spouses to do less than before, especially discipline and regular routines. An exception is that about one quarter of the participants said their spouses played more with their children while home on assignment compared to before the assignment began.

## Work Outcome

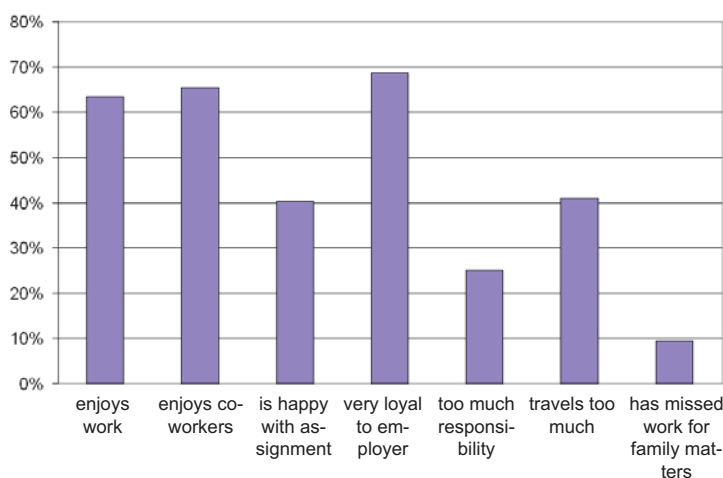
### Participants' View of Assignment

We asked participants to describe their own, their traveling spouse's, and their oldest child's view of the assignment on a 7-point scale, from "Terrible" to "Delighted."

For all, the most common description was "Mixed" or "Mostly satisfied." Twenty-two percent said their traveling spouse and child would rate the assignment as "Terrible," "Unhappy," or "Mostly dissatisfied;" 25% described their own rating in these negative terms. Only 10% said their spouses would say they were "Pleased" or "Delighted;" 7% said their child was so positive. Five percent of the participants said they themselves were pleased; 0% called themselves "Delighted."



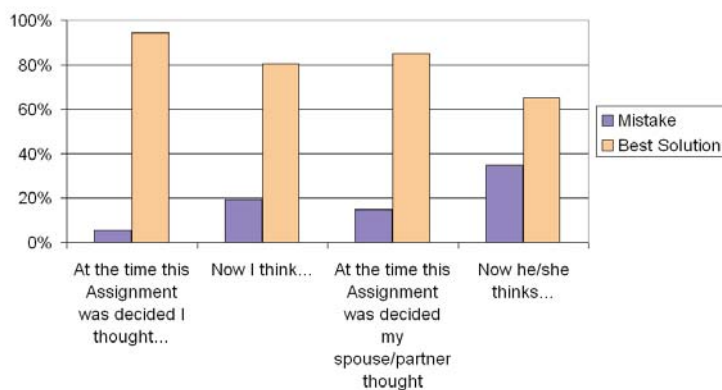
We also asked participants to describe their traveling spouse's job. The chart below shows the percentage who answered "true" or "very true" for each item.



About two thirds said their spouses enjoyed their work and co-workers and felt loyal to their employers. A smaller number (40%) said they thought there spouses were happy they had accepted this assignment. About 40% said their spouses had to travel too much, unsurprising given the nature of the assignments. Complaints about level of responsibility, and family interference were not very common.

And we asked participants to recall how they and their spouse felt about the decision to take this assignment at the moment of the decision to do so, and also to report how they felt about it now.

Interestingly, participants reported feeling somewhat more positive both initially and now, compared with their spouses. In general, they said both their spouses and they were somewhat more negative about the assignment now than at the time of the decision.



## In Their Own Voice

***Taking everything into account, do you think taking this Assignment was the right thing for you and your spouse/family at this time?***

46% of those who answered this question said, in one form or another, "yes;" 25% said "no." Here are some sample responses:

### Yes

- Yes. It was his job when I married him and it will be his job until he retires. In return, I get to travel and live abroad, my children get to attend wonderful schools free of charge, and my husband will get an early retirement. It is not always easy and it is lonely even when all my friends are in the same position, but it is still a good life.
- Yes, at the time it was the right thing to do as we had financial considerations of school fees. However when we started this work four years ago, the children were younger, wish I had known/read more about the difficulties I would encounter down the line in their father's absence, and some helpful tips to make life easier would have helped.
- Yes, he is enjoying his job, being challenged, and learning new skills. The salary is attractive and helps pay the education bills of our children. I miss him when he is at work but I know he loves this assignment.
- Yes, although the travel has got to decrease. We normally operate on a travel schedule of 25 to 30% of the time. The past three months have been unusual and nuts!

### No

- Personally no. It has been very stressful for both of us and will probably cost us our marriage
- I don't feel it was in the family's best interest to take this position. I would never say that a husband and father being away long periods time is healthy for a family. The benefit to this situation is financial stability, now and for the future. My husband feels a strong sense of duty in making provisions for his family's financial future. For my husband's mental health at the time, (this was a demotion) I had no other option but to allow him to take this assignment. He was desperate and broken and I felt it was my duty to support him in any way I could to make him feel whole again.
- No. Our family has suffered from this assignment. Our daughter wishes he would get fired. He has missed birthdays, holidays and special family events. He has missed out on a year of our children's lives.

## Personal and Family Outcome

To assess personal and family adjustment, we used a number of widely-used research scales; average scores are not useful in the abstract, so descriptive data are not included here. Rather, the scores will be used to assess relationships with contextual factors below. A description of these scales follows:

**Mental Health Inventory:** Participants were asked much of the time during the last month they had...?

- ♦ Been a very nervous person
- ♦ Felt calm and peaceful
- ♦ Felt downhearted and blue
- ♦ Been a happy person
- ♦ Felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up

(Items rated on six-point scales from *None of the Time* to *All of the Time*) (Mental Health Inventory-5: Berwick, Murphy, Goldman, Ware, Barsky & Weinstein, 1991)

**Profile of Mood States:** Participants were asked how they had been feeling in the past week. This is a 20-item scale; here are some sample items:

- ♦ Full of energy
- ♦ Unhappy
- ♦ Content and sunny
- ♦ Sorry for things done
- ♦ Sad
- ♦ Full of pep

(Items rated on five-point scales from *Not at All* to *Extremely*). This questionnaire yields a measure of **Depression** and of **Vigor** (a sign of psychological health.) (Profile of Mood States: McNair, Lorr & Droppleman, 1971)

### Work-Family Interface

Participants who were working outside the home or in school were asked whether their work interfered with their personal lives and vice versa? (Items were rated on five-point scales from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*).

*Does your work interfere with your personal life?*

- ♦ I work longer hours because my spouse/partner is away.
- ♦ After work I come home too tired to do some of the things I would like to do.
- ♦ On the job I have so much work to do that it takes away from my personal interests.
- ♦ My family/friends dislike how often I am preoccupied with my work while I am at home.
- ♦ My work takes up time that I would like to spend with family/friends.

*Does your personal life interfere with your work?*

- ♦ I am often too tired at work because of the things I have to do at home.
- ♦ My personal demands are so great that it takes away from my work.
- ♦ My superiors and peers dislike how often I am preoccupied with my personal life while at work.
- ♦ My personal life takes up time that I would like to spend at work.
- ♦ I have had to cut back how much I work because of increased family commitments.

**Children's Behavior Problems** Participants were asked to rate their children (age 21 and younger) on a 25-item scale of behavior problems. Sample items:

- ♦ doesn't seem very interested in things
- ♦ is calm and easy-going
- ♦ often complains of stomachaches or headaches
- ♦ is nervous or highstrung
- ♦ is not easily bothered or upset
- ♦ is picked on by other children
- ♦ likes to disobey or break rules

(Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory, Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson & Measelle, 2005)

## In Their Own Voice

### *Has your children's behavior changed in any way since the beginning of the Assignment?*

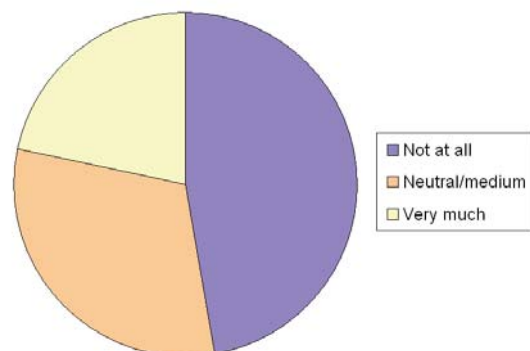
Thirty-eight percent of those who answered this question said their children's behavior had not changed at all; the rest reported some level of increased depression, anxiety, or emotional strain:

- Yes, one child is more anxious and keeps more to himself. Another is much more emotional and has many sad and reflective times while her father is away.
- Frequent nightmares and prolonged separation anxiety that continues to this day. I cannot be in another room of the house without hearing "momma, where are you?" My child cannot bear to be even alone in the basement or 2nd floor without me.
- My son found his father's absence very difficult at first, and was very unhappy at school which did not help. however since he has changed school it is better, and he keeps in touch by regularly e mailing and speaks to his father twice per week, daughter misses Dad, but is a more resilient character, gets on with stuff, and then once every few months has a major stress, I feel as though i get all their frustrations to deal with, they look to me for help answers, sometimes i feel inundated with responsibility, and am aware that most is done to my specifications, often don't have the time to think first, tend to speak and think later
- Yes, the youngest is felling less control as a permit or a privilege to break the rules.
- They missed school, they feel sick more often when the father is traveling.

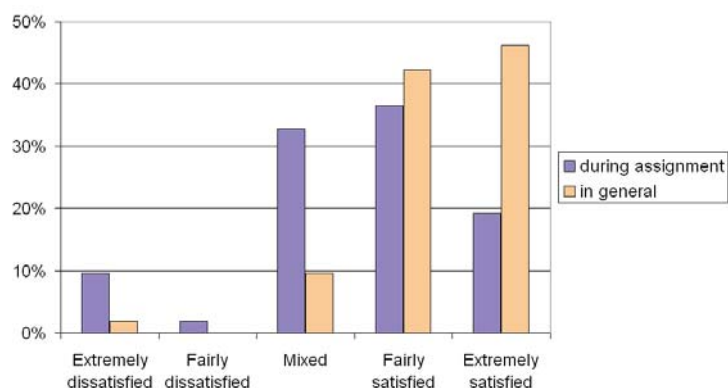
## Marital Concerns

We asked married participants if they were worried about their marriage during the assignment.

Almost half said they were not worried about their marriage during the assignment, but 22% said they worried about it "very much."

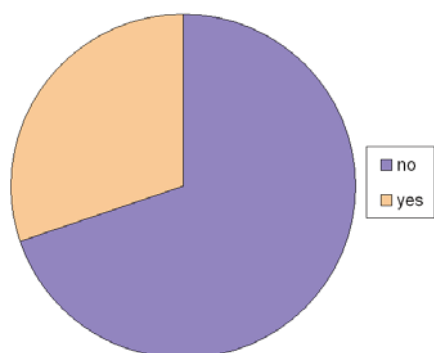


We also asked how satisfied with their marriage they were, both in general, and during this assignment.



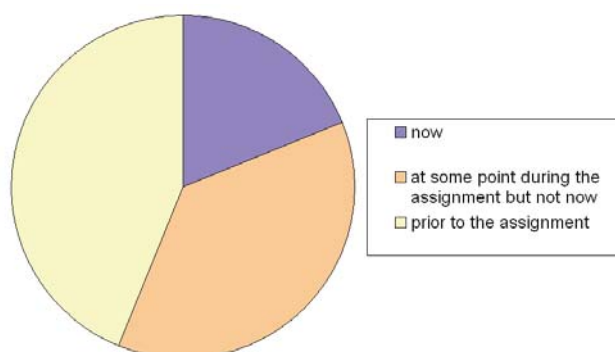
While the general level of satisfaction is fairly high, the discrepancy with how they feel during the assignment is striking — ratings are considerably lower during the assignment than in general.

Finally, we asked whether participants had ever considered separation or divorce, and if so, when — now, not now but at some point during the assignment, or prior to the assignment.



Thirty percent they had considered separation or divorce.

Of those who had ever considered divorce, about about 19% were considering it now; 38% said they had considered it at some point during the assignment though not now; and about 44% said they had considered it prior to the assignment only.





# In Their Own Voice

**Are there other ways, positive or negative, that your relationship with your spouse has been affected by this Assignment?**

Participants offered roughly equal numbers of positive and negative effects of the assignment on their relationships, and in fact, it was common for participants to offer both positive and negative aspects to their own situation:

## Positive

- It is very positive, because absence enhances the partner's qualities, and gives him and you enough time to define who each is, each one's priorities and build a new stage for a true dialog.
- His being away for weeks at a time allow me to focus on my interests. Not bad at all!

## Negative

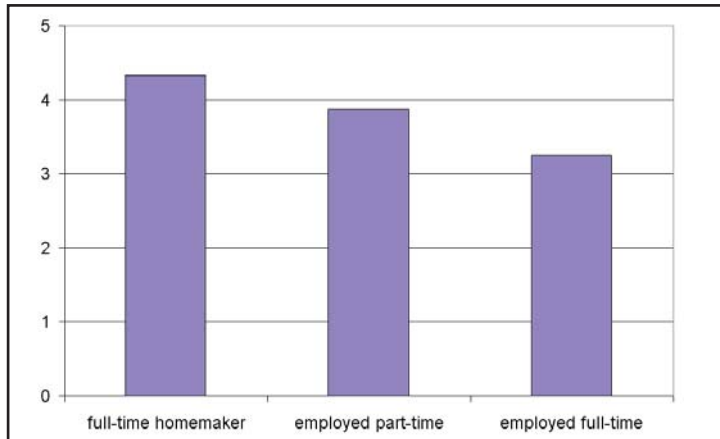
- Having a 1 year old, I basically feel that my spouse is missing our baby's childhood, and just being a "weekend-visitor." We had some arguments because of not been able to come home for bank holidays.
- We are both most certain that we want to spend the rest of our life together and are therefore to get married in the fall (if his assignment doesn't get in the way...) But we both agree that neither of us will never go on this type of assignment without the other.
- You get very tired travelling to see each other, you disrupt your life/routine of children.

## Mixed

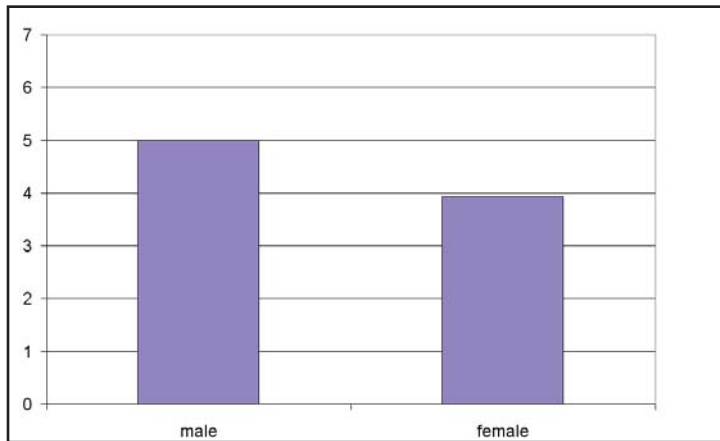
- Because my husband and I have been forced into emotional places we have never had to go before, and in TALKING about those emotions, we are much closer to one another. This is a huge positive. My husband has also made huge efforts to become close, and more affectionate towards the kids. He also recognizes my needs and responds to those needs. As far as the kids are concerned, it is a positive that their dad is trying to become closer to them, but missing him and all the anxieties that go along with him being away, on top of not having his a father present most of the time is a huge negative. Time lost with your loved ones can never, ever be replaced in anyone's hearts or memory bank.
- Negative: We lost important family days, that have no price! Positive: We improve communication.
- Positive - we have experienced different and exciting ways of living. We have gained insights into each other we would never have had if we had stayed in home country and we like these facets and our relationship is strong although suffers on the communication and support front at times. Negatives - I feel I gave up too much for no pay off. Moving abroad and being the non working spouse has affected my self esteem, each move you have to start again and you feel stupid at times (language, getting it wrong with the neighbours, not knowing where things are to do, shopping etc). Whereas he's off to work - pretty much as he did in last country/ assignment and treated with more or same respect, regard etc.
- Positive - we communicate better between ourselves and our children. Negative - loneliness for all parties.
- These experiences have been a tremendous opportunity for my husband. I encourage them especially now that we do not have children. However, later in life when we are thinking of starting a family, we will not so easily agree to these assignments.

# Demographic Differences

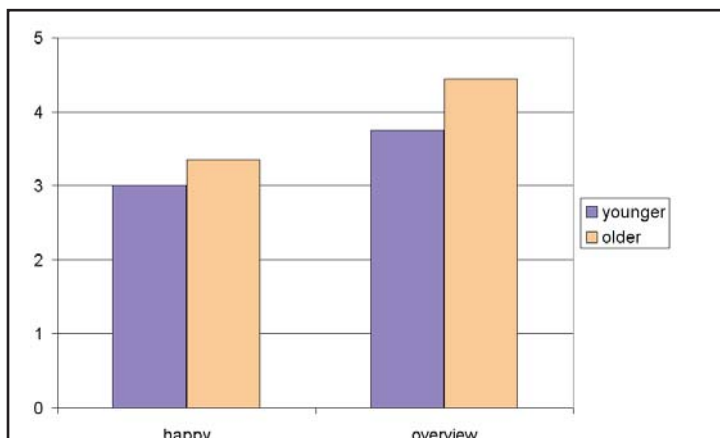
Before examining whether the context and outcome measures were related to each other, we asked whether there were any work or personal/family outcome differences based on sex, age, work status, and whether participants' work status had changed as a result of the assignment. These demographic indicators were not related to any personal/family outcome measure. That is, the differences we observed in personal outcome were not related in any consistent way to participants' sex, age, work status, or whether their work status had changed. For the most part, this was true for work outcome measures too — the range in outcome was not related to whether participants' work status had changed. However...



...participants who were full-time homemakers said their traveling spouses enjoyed their work more than did those who were employed part- or full-time.



Male participants described their traveling spouses as more satisfied with the assignment than did female participants; this finding should be treated as preliminary, however, because of the relatively small number of male participants.

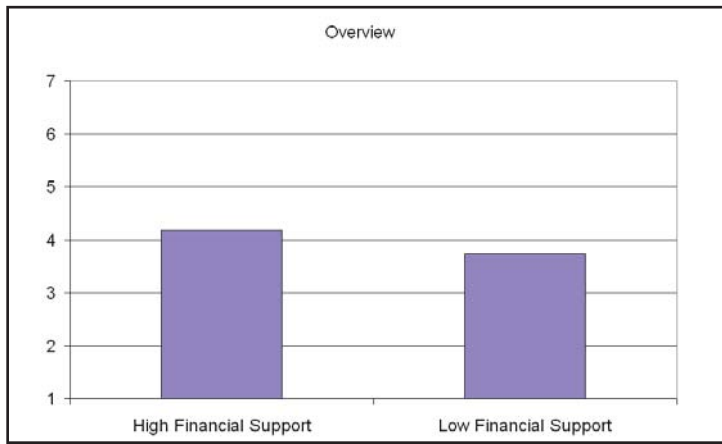


And finally, older participants tended to see their spouses as happier with the assignment and to rate it more positively. We thought that might be because older employees might have better financial support or more control over the assignment, but in fact these factors were unrelated to age.

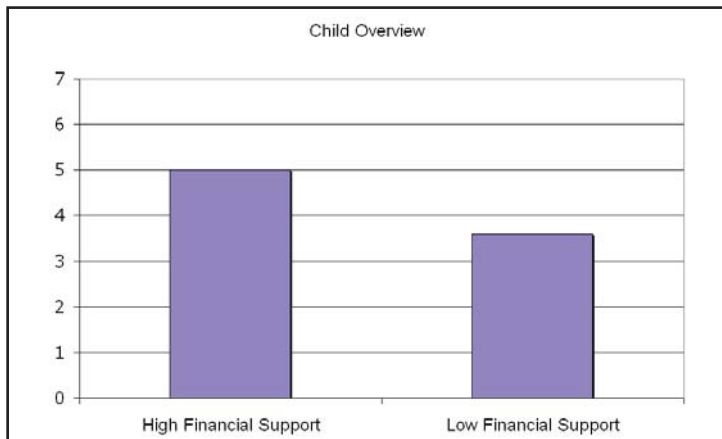
# What Work Context Factors are Related to Work and Family Outcome?

In this section, we ask whether the work context (financial support, services used, personal input) was related to the participants' view of the spouse's assignment (overview ratings, measures of job attitudes, and whether the couple saw the assignment as the best solution or a mistake) and to family adjustment (mental health, work-family interface, children's behavior problems and marital concerns).

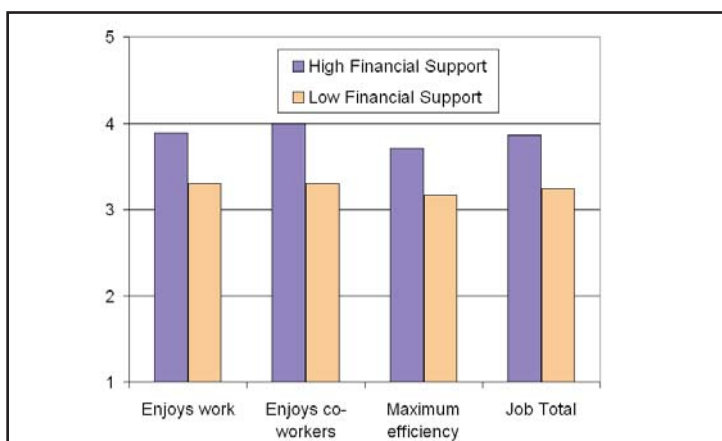
## Is feeling well-supported financially related to better outcome?



Participants who felt financially better supported by their spouse's organizations rated the assignment more positively for both themselves ...



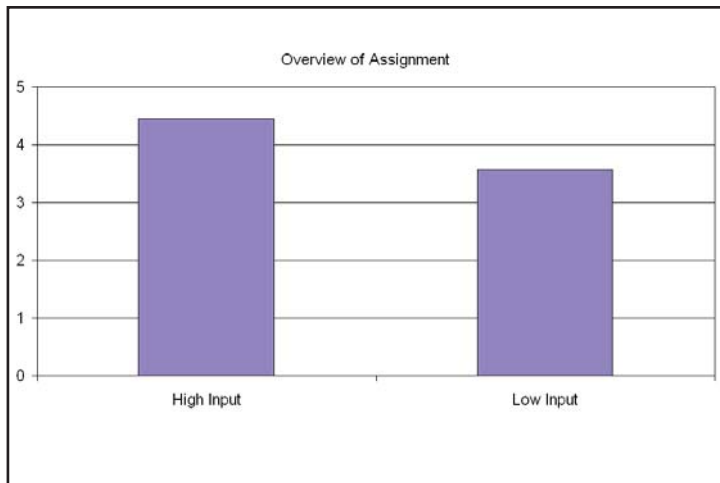
...and their children.



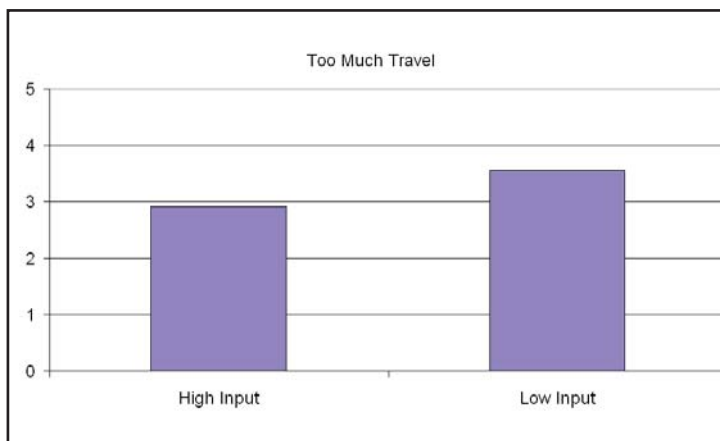
They also said their traveling spouses enjoyed their work and co-workers more, could work more efficiently, and were more loyal to their employer.

## Do those who have more input into aspects of the assignment have better outcome?

Participants who reported having more input into aspects of the assignment (e.g., whether to take the assignment, where it would be, how long it would last, and how often and when trips home would be allowed) had better adjustment, as did their children.



They rated the assignment more positively,...

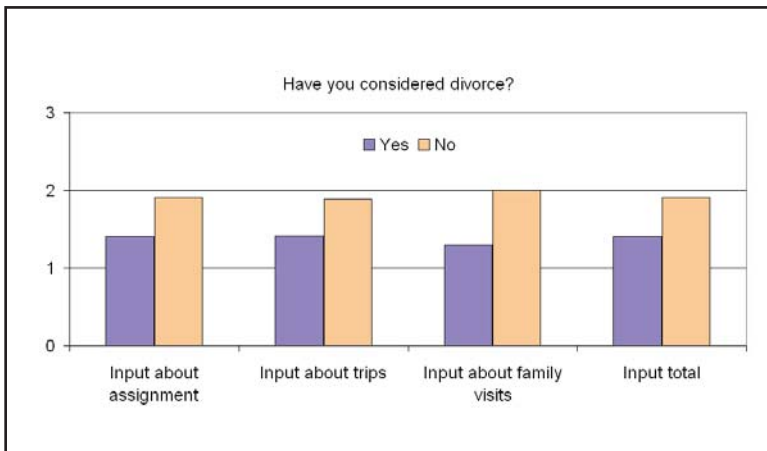


...and complained about their spouse's travel less,



In addition, those who had more input into various aspects of the assignment trips home reported less interference by family obligations on their own work.

*"It is so much more expensive in Saudi. He spends over 400 a month just on food for himself. We had to pay up front for motels and food (which was very expensive since he had to eat out) when he was in training plus all the high cost of gasoline on the rare occasion when get got to come home on a weekend. This ran us very short on money. Then the long wait to be reimbursed. Now they have reduced the COLA!"*



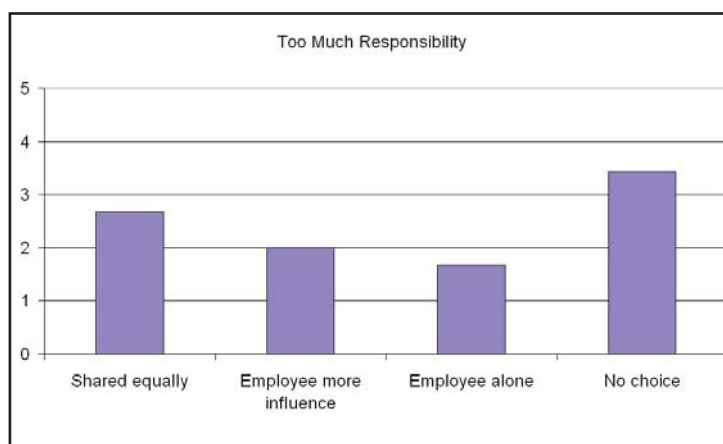
Finally, we found that those participants who said they had considered divorce reported significantly less input into aspects of the assignment, less input into decisions about trips home, less input about family visits to the assignment site, and less input overall.

*"I wish the company would pay more attention to the arrangements (accommodation, staff, office) pre-assignment) and put some basic blocks in place, rather than just leaving it all to the short term assignee to sort out, because he knows the culture. That the company are more realistic about the effects of this lifestyle on the family and ways in which they could help improve the stresses on both assignee and family."*

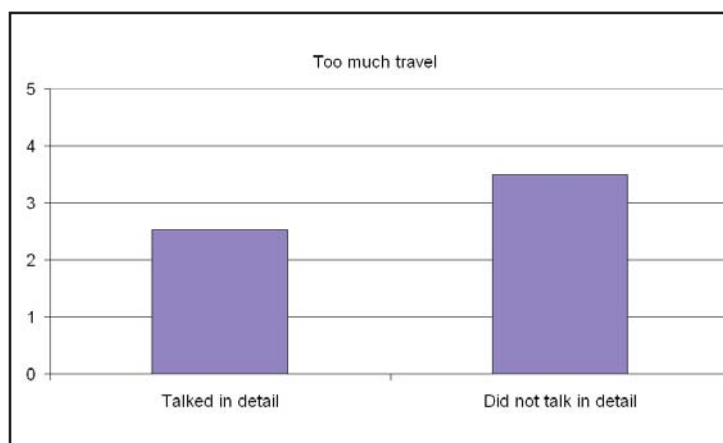
# What Family and Personal Context Factors are Related to Work and Family Outcome?

Here, we ask whether the family and personal context (decision making about the assignment, potential advantages to the assignment, impact of the separation, social support, communication with their spouse, level of worry, housework and child care during and after the assignment) was related to the participants' view of the spouse's assignment (overview ratings, measures of job attitudes, and whether the couple saw the assignment as the best solution or a mistake) and to family adjustment (mental health, work-family interface, children's behavior problems and marital concerns).

## How was the decision to take this assignment made? Did the couple feel pressured?

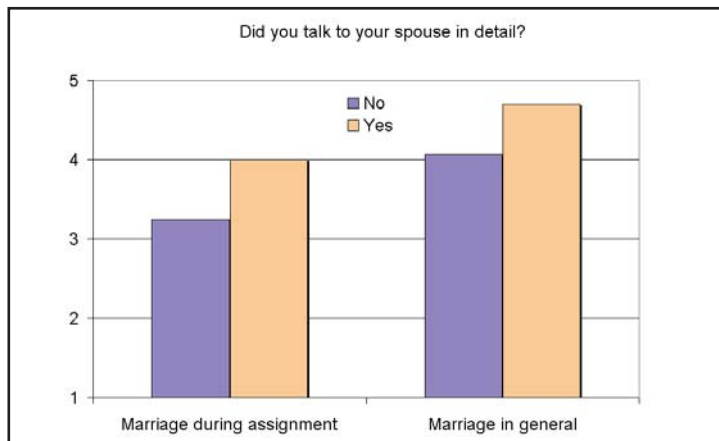


Participants who said their spouses had no choice but to accept this assignment said their spouses had too much responsibility.

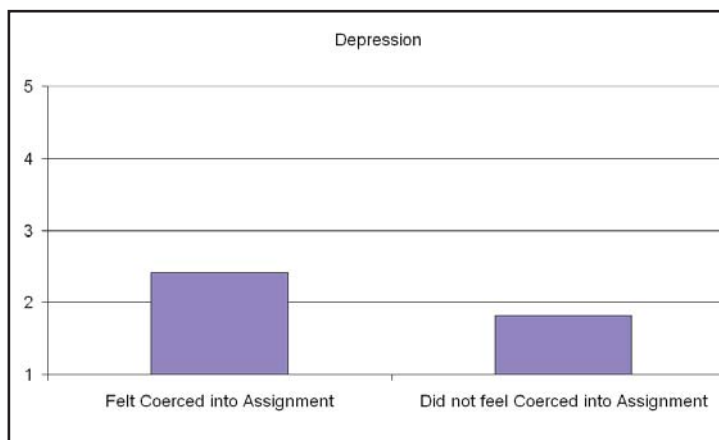


Those who said they discussed the decision to take the assignment with their spouse in great detail had fewer complaints about the spouse's travel...

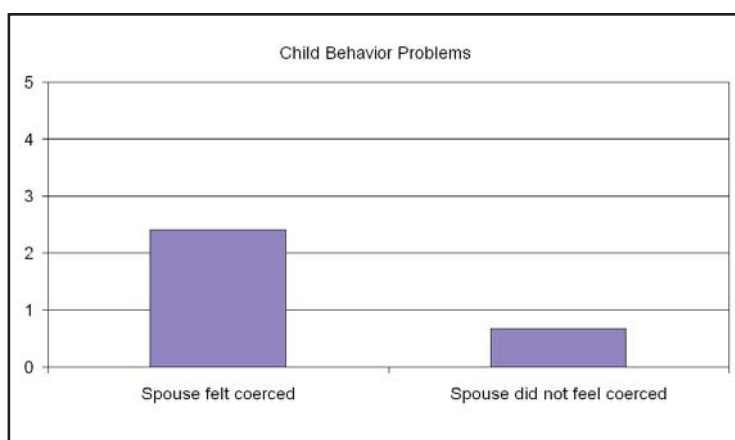
*"He could walk out tomorrow and get a higher salary and status role but this could affect our moving and settling again, especially as I do not work and haven't for 4 years. To return to London (our home) would be stressful and not affordable as we are no longer dual income. I sometimes feel frustrated and angry that I left my job and enjoyable life to help him develop and progress and this hasn't happened, so was it worth it?"*



...and higher ratings of their marriages, both in general and during the assignment.



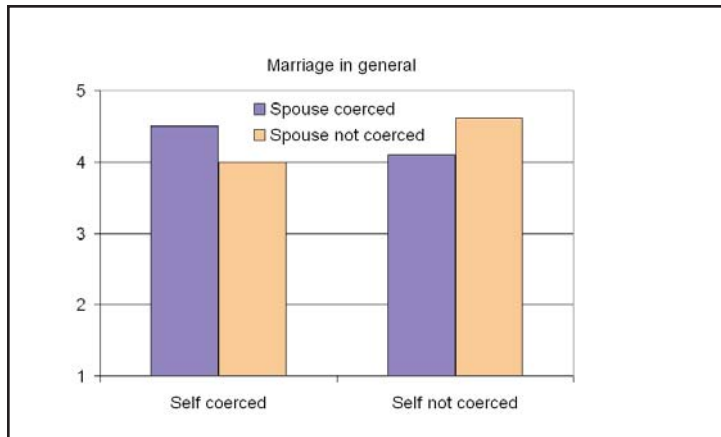
Those who felt coerced into taking the assignment were more depressed.



Those who said their traveling spouse felt coerced into the assignment had children with more behavior problems.

*"One of the biggest problems was integrating the family calendar into the work calendar instead of the other way around. Missed birthdays, school recitals, parent/teacher conferences, anniversaries, etc. became a part of life because the employee/spouse always put work/travel first. I think a better balance was possible but not a stated goal to achieve."*

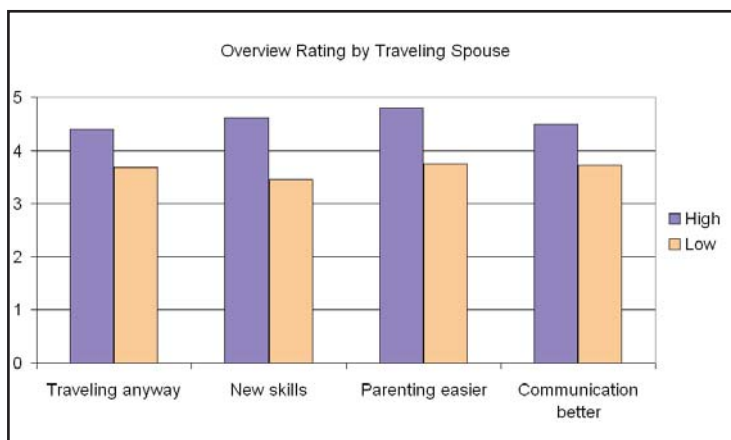




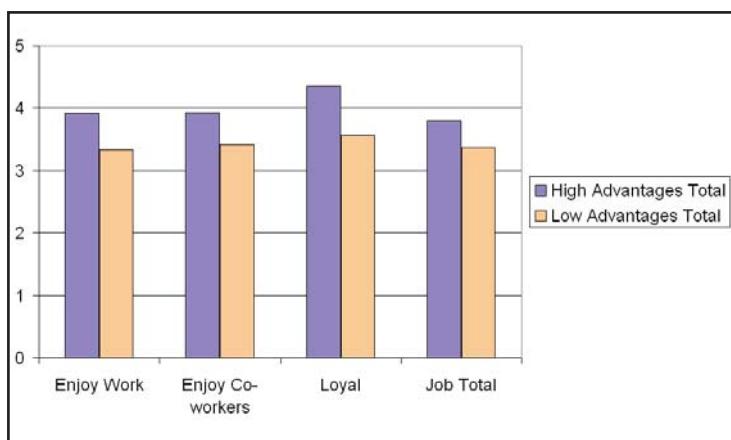
Interestingly, in a kind of "we're in this together" finding, the highest ratings of the marriage were found in couples where either neither spouse felt coerced, or both felt coerced.

## How were personal perceived advantages to the assignment related to work and family outcome?

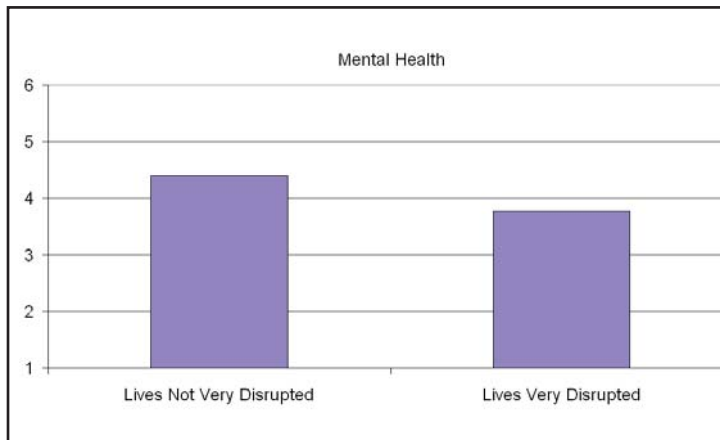
We asked participants about any benefits that may have accrued as a result of the assignment.



Participants who said it was more true that they had certain advantages as a result of the assignment (were avoiding an absent spouse, had gained new skills, found parenting easier, communicated better with their spouse) also said their spouse rated the assignment more positively.

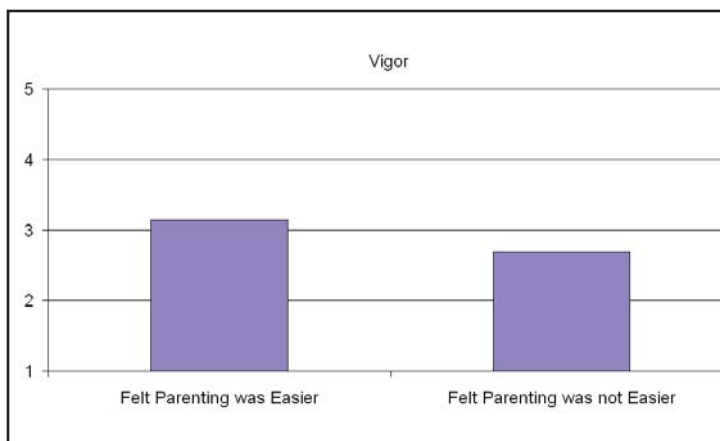


Traveling spouses were also described as enjoying their job and co-workers more, feeling more loyal to their employers, and being more positive about the job in general when the at-home spouse reported more advantages.

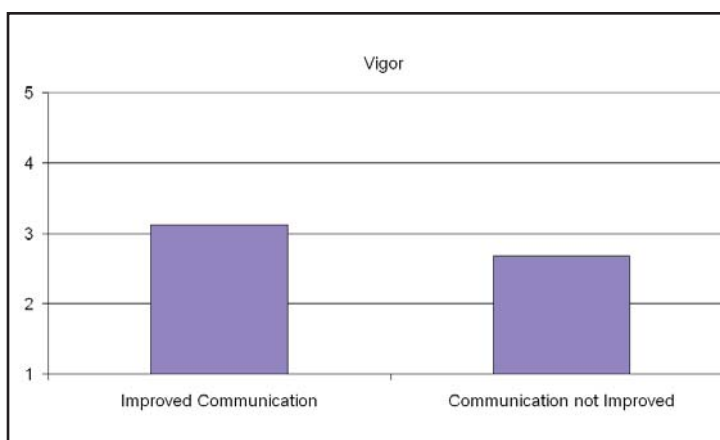


The at-home spouses themselves reported better mental health when they perceived more advantages to the assignment.

Easier parenting, better communication, avoiding life disruption, and developing new skills were especially important advantages.

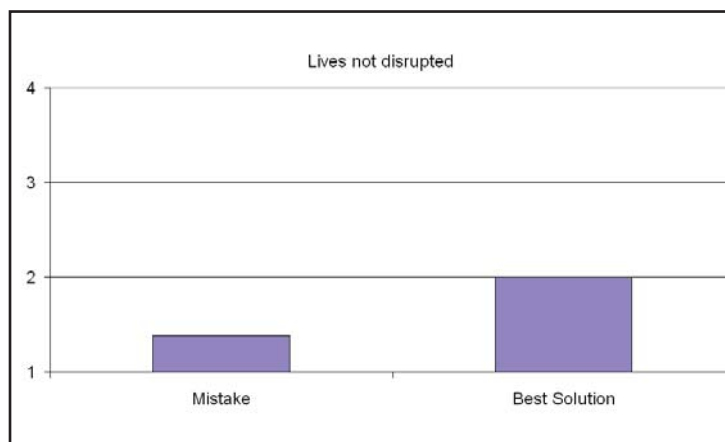


Participants who said parenting had gotten easier during the assignment because now they were the sole decision maker had higher levels of psychological vigor, an indicator of positive mental health.



They also had higher levels of psychological vigor when their communication with their spouses had improved.

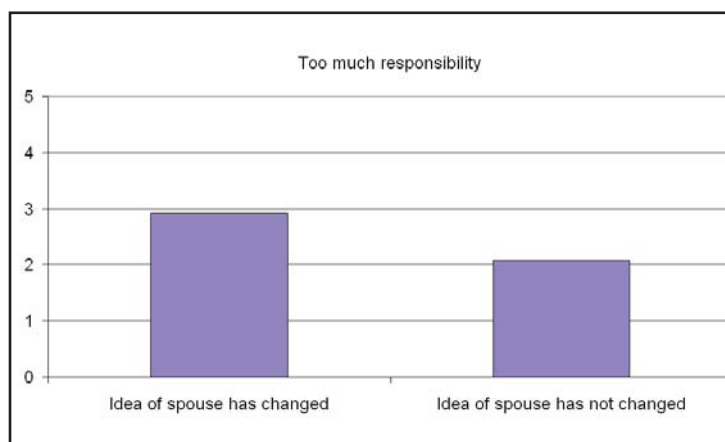
*"My relationship with both children has changed a lot. At times it is too close and we would all benefit from time away from each other. My 16 year old went to boarding school in September as a weekly boarder; that has helped as it gives me a bit of time without the constant arguments we were having, find myself on duty 24/7. I find it hardest when they are both sick or want reassurance especially if I am feeling low.*



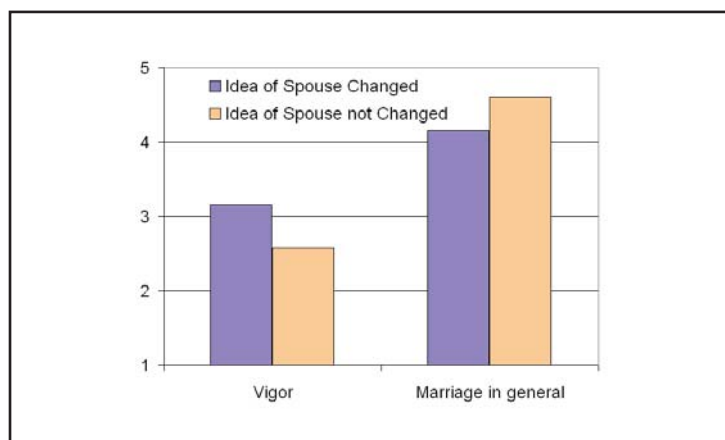
Finally, participants themselves saw the assignment as the best solution rather than a mistake when the assignment had helped them avoid life disruption.

## How does the separation influence marriages?

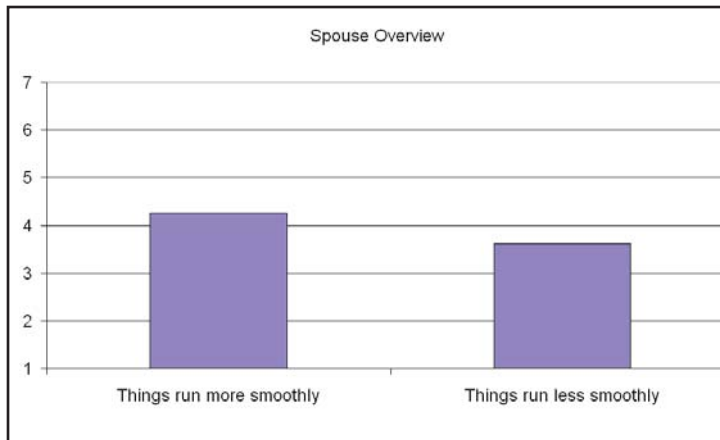
We asked a number of questions designed to tap the concept of “boundary ambiguity,” or the changing role of traveling members in a family and the potential for shifts in the couple’s view of marriage. Boundary ambiguity was found to be related to both work and personal outcomes.



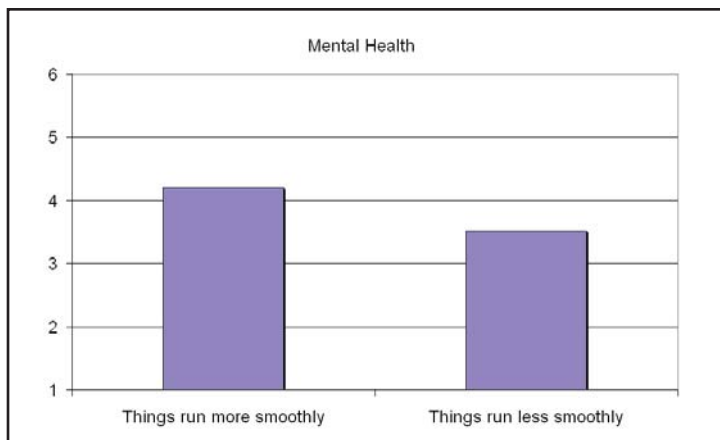
Participants who said their idea of what it means to be a spouse had changed as a result of the assignment were more likely to describe their traveling spouse’s job as involving too much responsibility.



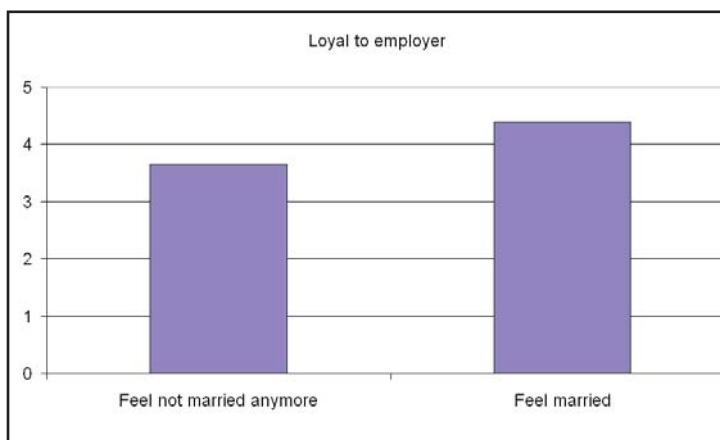
Changed ideas of the meaning of being a spouse was also related to lower ratings of the marriage in general, but also, surprisingly, to *higher* psychological vigor ratings. There may have been some invigorating aspect to this role change, even though it was accompanied by a negative view of the spouse’s job and of their marriage.



Participants who said things around their house ran smoothly during the assignment were more likely to say their traveling spouse rated the assignment positively,...

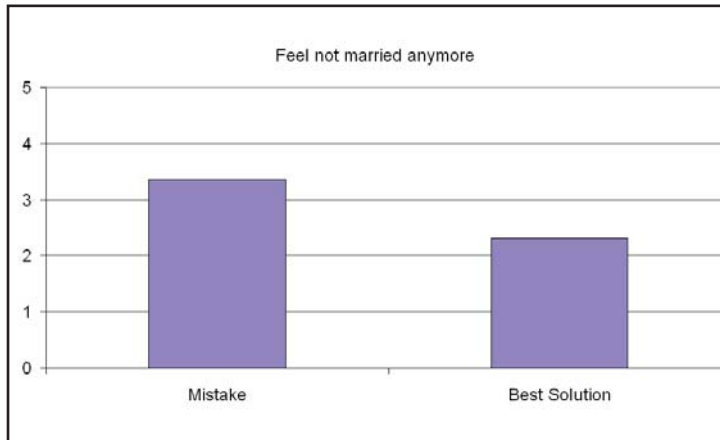


...and they, themselves, reported higher mental health scores.

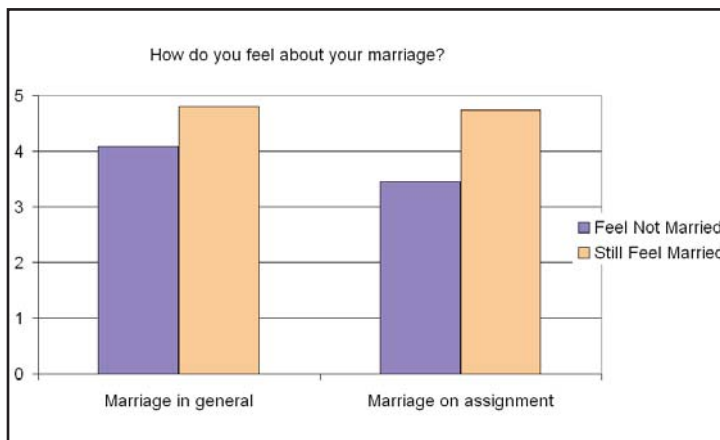


Those who said sometimes they don't even feel married any more said their traveling spouse feels less loyal to his/her employer,...

*"It was his job when I married him and it will be his job until he retires. In return, I get to travel and live abroad, my children get to attend wonderful schools free of charge, and my husband will get an early retirement. It is not always easy and it is lonely even when all my friends are in the same position, but it is still a good life."*



Those who saw the assignment as a mistake also were more likely to say they did not feel married any more, as a result of the assignment

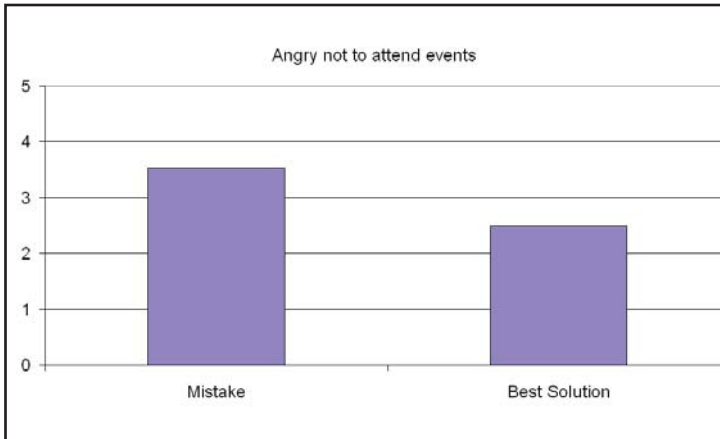


Not surprisingly, those who said they sometimes did not even feel married any more rated their marital satisfaction lower, both in general and specifically during the assignment.

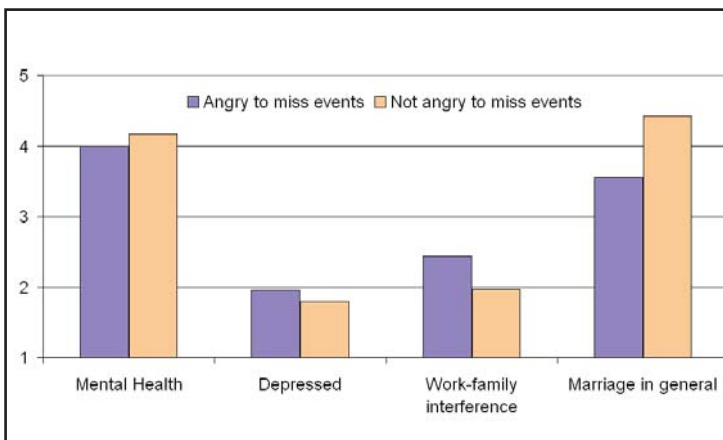


Participants who said they were embarrassed that their traveling spouse sometimes had to miss community events described the spouse's job as involving too much responsibility and, perhaps reflecting this conflict, having to miss work to attend to family issues.

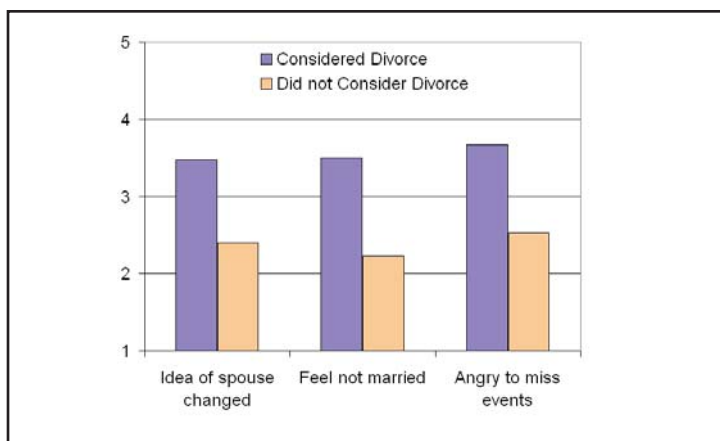
*"My husband hates conflict and is very uncomfortable talking about the fact that his career is straining the family. I completely understand that by confronting these issues it creates feelings of guilt/anger in him. I tell him all the time I don't blame him for what we are going through and I realize he was forced into this situation. I think he feels that he is failing us at some level by not being able to financially provide for us and be with us at the same time."*



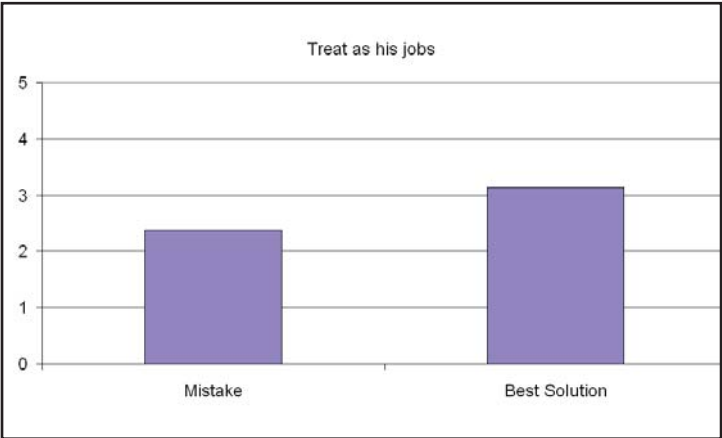
Those who were angry about their spouse's missing family events were more likely to see the assignment as a mistake.



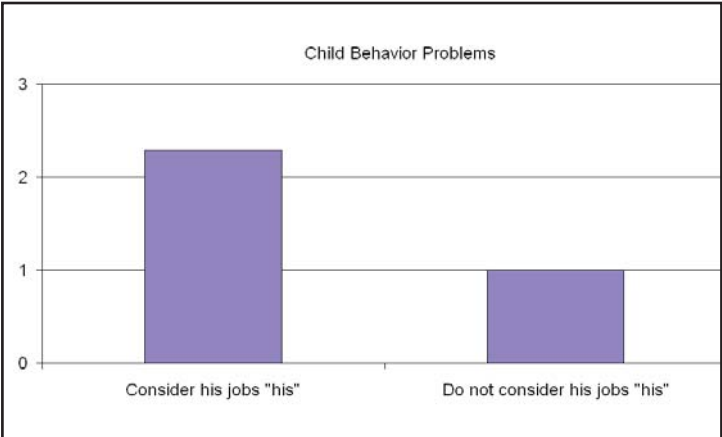
Being angry about missing events was also related to a number of personal and family adjustment measures — those who were angry about their spouse's missing family events had lower mental health scores, were more depressed, reported more interference between work and family obligations, and rated their marriages, in general, more negatively.



Participants whose idea of what it means to be a spouse had changed, who sometimes do not even feel married any more, and who were angry that their spouses missed community events were more likely to have considered divorce.

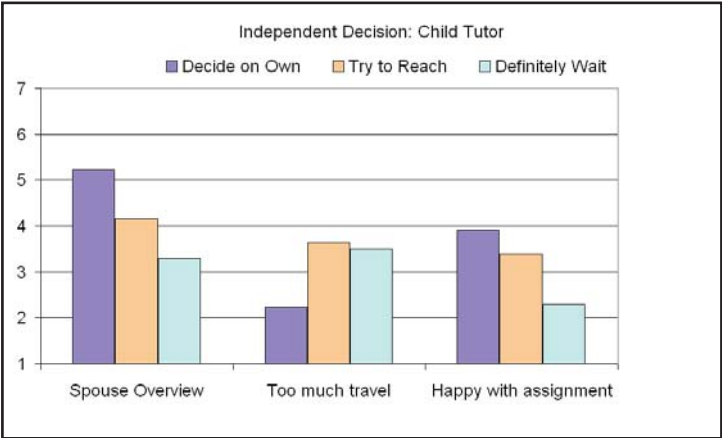


Participants who said they continued to see the jobs traditionally done by their spouses as “his/her jobs” even though they were now doing some of them during the assignment described the assignment as the best solution. It may be that this practical sign of family membership was especially important for these families. In addition, see the discussion below about household tasks, and the ways in which their completion was related to optimal outcome.



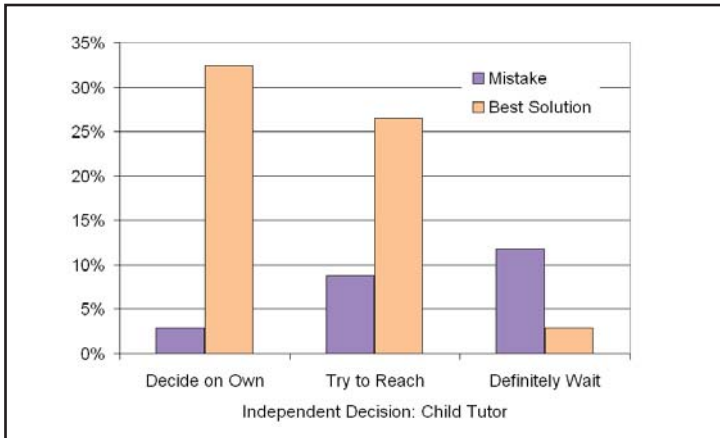
On the other hand, those who still considered the spouse’s traditional jobs as “his/hers” described their children as having more behavior problems. This is consistent with the idea that it may be more adaptive for families to change their rules and roles during an assignment, rather than harbor resentment or unmet expectations.

Finally, we asked participants how they would make decisions about a variety of practical, social, and personal decisions — whether they would decide all on their own, try to reach their spouse but decide alone if unsuccessful, or definitely wait till they had talked with their spouse. Independence in decision making was related to more positive work and personal outcomes.

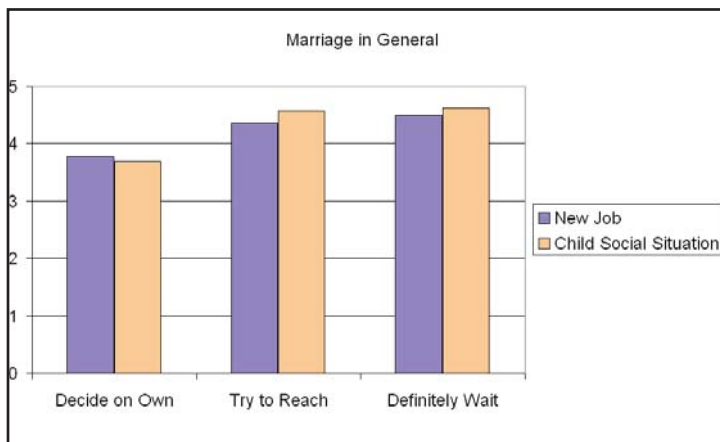


When asked how they would handle their child’s teacher recommending a tutor to deal with academic difficulties, those who said they would decide on their own described their traveling spouse as rating the assignment more positively, complained less about the amount of travel, and said their spouse was happier with their assignment.





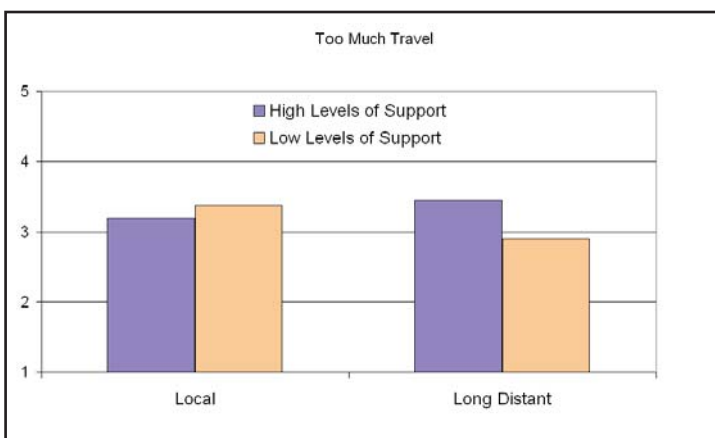
This group who would decide about the child's tutor on their own also was most likely to call the assignment the best solution rather than a mistake.



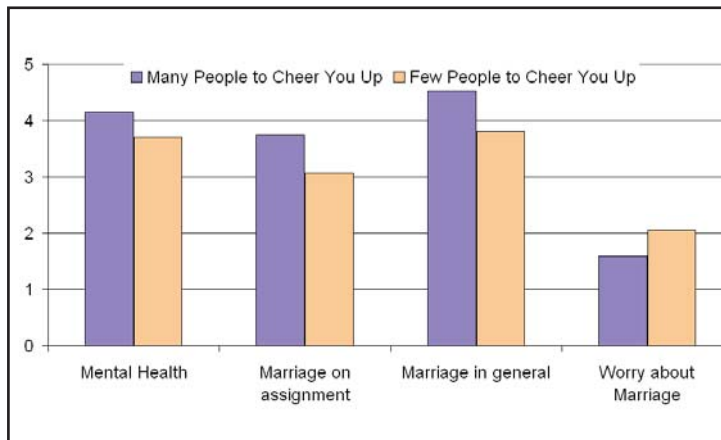
In contrast, participants rated their marriages more positively when they would definitely wait, or even try to reach their spouse, to decide about either a new job for themselves or about a situation in which their child had a questionable invitation to a friend's house.

Generally, then, those who see their marriage as fundamentally unchanged by the assignment and whose decision-making still includes the traveling spouse were better off; the one exception to this is that in making decisions about children's academic needs, more independent decision making was related to better outcome.

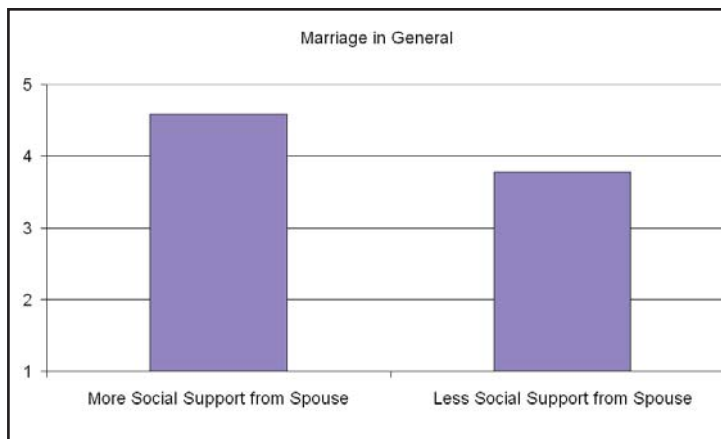
### How is the availability of social and emotional support related to assignment outcome?



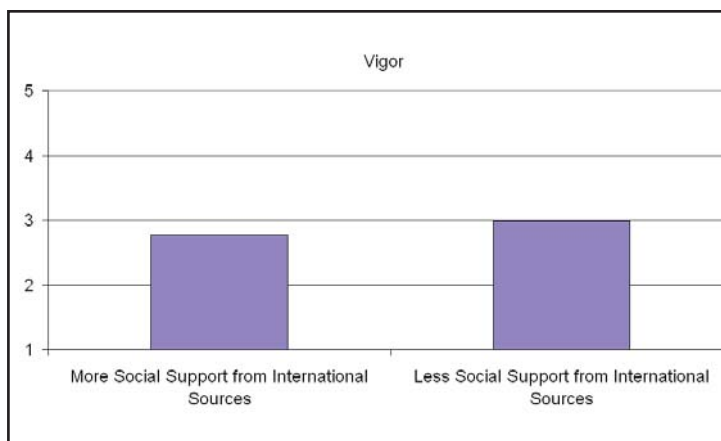
Participants who said most of their social and emotional support came from local sources (like face-to-face interactions and domestic telephone calls) complained less about the amount of their spouse's travel; similarly, those who got more of their support from long distant sources (like email and international telephone calls) complained more about their spouse's travel.



Participants who said they had more people around who could cheer them up when needed had higher mental health scores and were more positive about their marriages on all measures — higher rating of their marriages during the assignment and in general, and less worried about their marriages during the assignment.



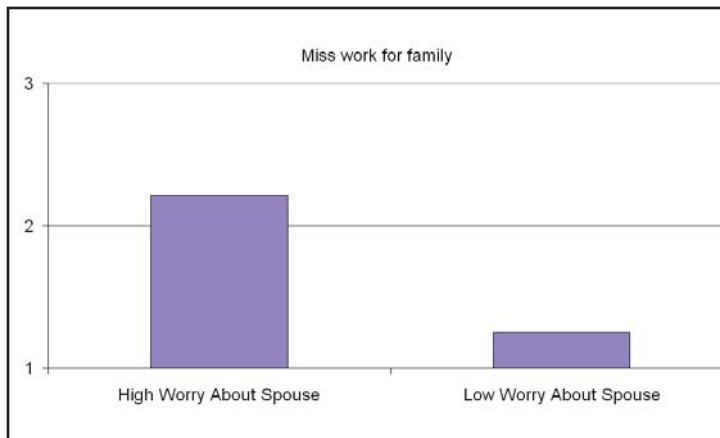
Not surprisingly, those who reported getting more social support from their spouses rated their marriages, in general, more positively.



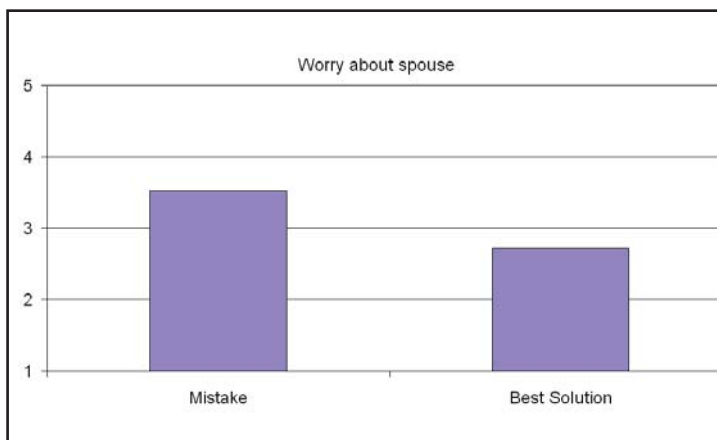
And, paralleling the findings above about the importance of not depending on distant sources of support, those who had relatively less support from email and international telephone calls (and hence, more from local sources) had higher levels of psychological vigor.

*“Advice: get a web camera so that you can talk to each other, free of charge, and to be able to see one another even when you are far away from each other.”*

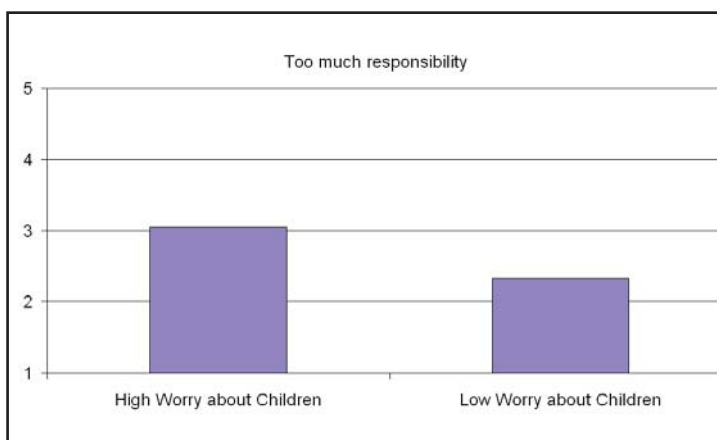
## How does being worried about one's family relate to assignment outcome?



The more participants worried about their traveling spouse's physical and mental well-being, the more they said their traveling spouse had missed work because of family obligations.

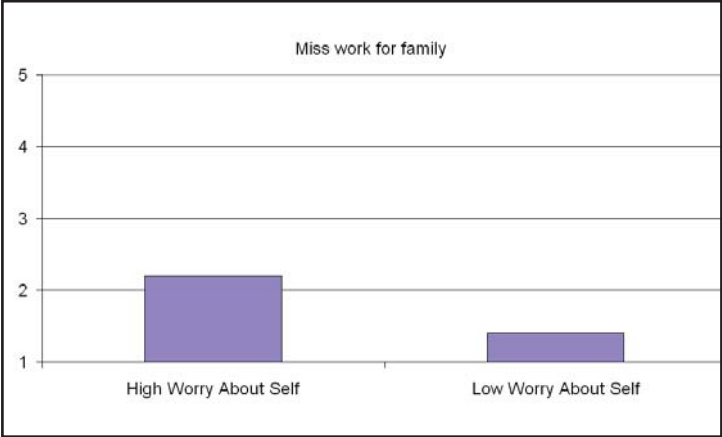


In addition, those who saw the assignment as a mistake were also more worried about their traveling spouse's physical and mental well-being.



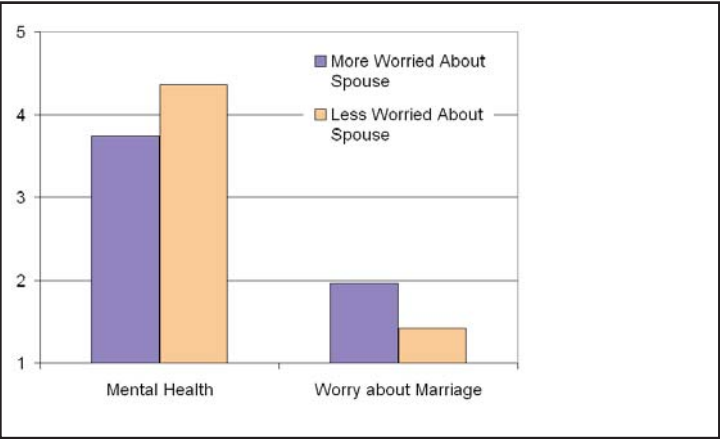
Participants who were more worried about their children's physical and mental well-being also described their traveling spouse's job as involving too much responsibility.

*"It was terribly difficult financially and emotionally. The work was exhausting and being a single parent was very hard. I do not recommend his particular assignment for a family with small children. Our daughter could not even look for my husband on TV (with his protectee) as she was so mad that the protectee 'took my daddy away'."*

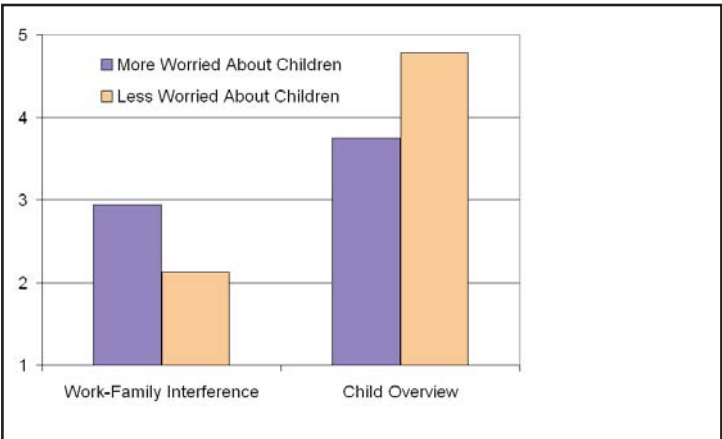


And those who were more worried about their own physical and mental well being said their traveling spouses had had to miss more work for family reasons.

Level of worry was related to family outcomes as well as work-related ones.



Participants who were more worried about their traveling spouse’s physical and mental well being had poorer mental health and were more worried about their marriages while on assignment.

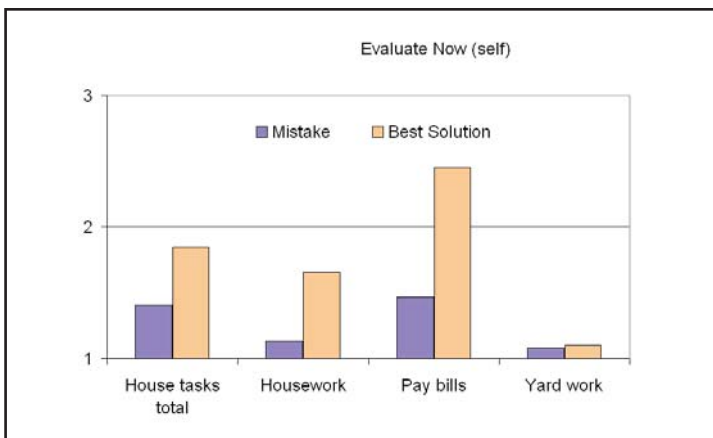


Those who were more worried about their children reported that their work was more likely to interfere with their family and personal life, and described their children as more negative about the assignment, compared to less worried participants.

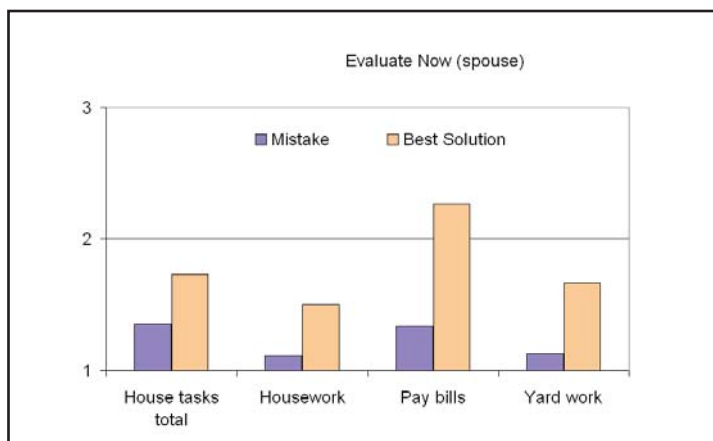


And those who were more worried about their own physical and mental well being, indeed, had lower mental health scores and had lower ratings of their marriage during the assignment.

## How are household and child care tasks related to assignment outcome?

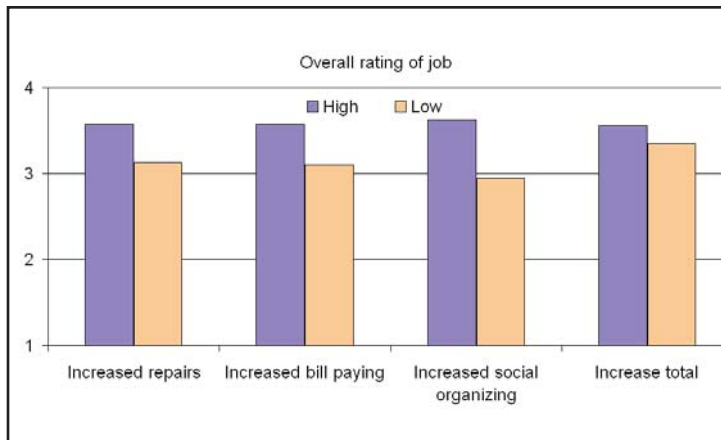


Participants who said their traveling spouses managed to do more house-related tasks — especially housework, paying bills, and yard work (perhaps by arranging for these tasks to be done or making decisions about them) were more likely to rate the assignment the best solution rather than a mistake.

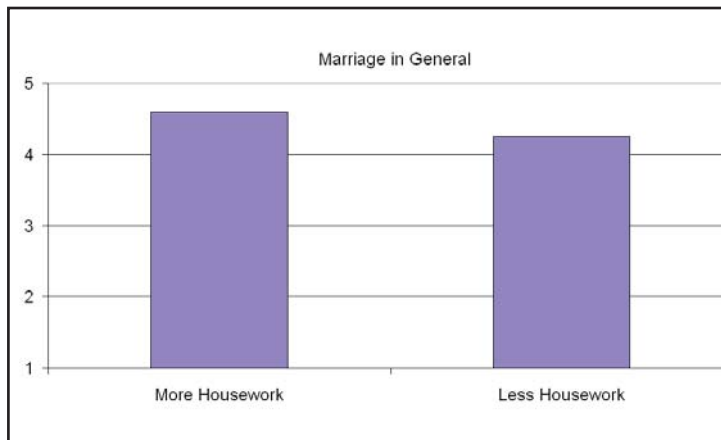


The same was true for evaluations of the assignment from their spouse's perspective — those who said their spouses did more housework while on assignment were more likely to say their spouses viewed the assignment as the best solution rather than a mistake.

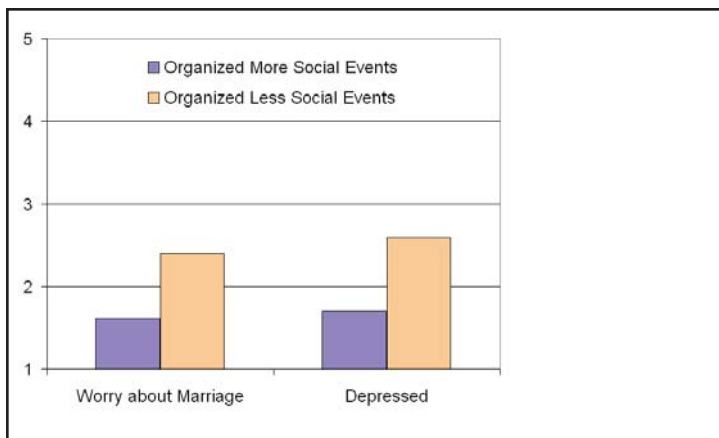
*“Realise you will spend a lot of time on your own (spouse or partner) and that you will have to reorganise and re-define roles within the family/ partnership. That these are not fixed in stone and should be re-negotiated and agreed on return (permanent or temporarily). Agree how you will communicate and that sometimes a cosy chat will not happen and respect that each other sometimes needs to sound off at the other but know this will happen.”*



Furthermore, participants who said their spouses did more household tasks, especially home repairs, bill paying and social organizing, when they came home on visits compared to before the assignment gave a more positive rating to their job (its work, co-workers, ability to do work efficiently, etc.).

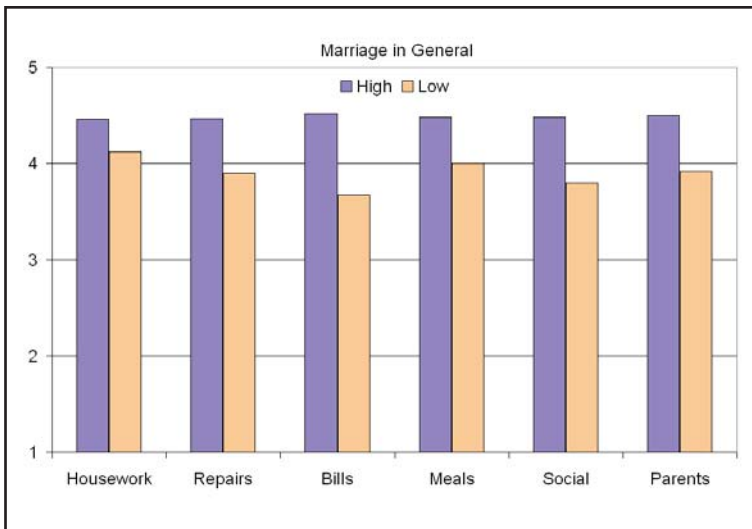


Similarly, participants who said their spouses were able to do more housework while on assignment described their marriages in general more positively.



Participants who said their spouses were more active in organizing social and leisure events when they were home on visits than they had been before the assignment were less worried about their marriages and were less depressed.

*"Realise that each one of you feels you want a rest when the partner comes home from assignment. I find that I'm hoping he will deal with some of the bigger issues or things I don't want to do when he returns, whereas he's coming home for a break/ to relax and doesn't want to take on anything too taxing."*



Those who said their spouses did more housework while on visits home compared to before the assignment — especially home and car repairs, bill paying, preparation of meals, organizing social events, and caring for elderly parents — rated their marriage in general more positively.

*“When he gets home he takes the first day off to spend with me - even if it is just grocery shopping. If the time away has been particularly traumatic (like the time the building our house is attached to had a big fire) we pull the kids out of school and they have a day with Dad on their own. If there are busy travel times, like we have just experienced, then make sure that there are long periods of time where the spouse does not travel or the family will suffer from long term consequences. We look at the schedule in terms of 12 months and try to make sure that the spouse is not gone more than 25 to 33% of the time. When my husband accepted his position they told him that the family would begin to unravel if he travelled more than this amount of time.”*



# What Advice Do Participants Offer?

We asked participants what advice they would offer other families or couples considering a similar assignment, and also asked what their traveling spouse's employer could do to make the assignments easier on them. Here is a sample of their responses.

## Advice to Other Families or Couples

***What advice would you give other families/couples considering assignment like this one? What has worked effectively for you? What are trouble spots to avoid?***

The most frequent piece of advice was to carefully tend one's communication with one's spouse, to manage the changing roles and responsibilities these assignments pose. Participants also advised careful consideration about the assignment, watching out for one's own needs, making sure there is a support system in place, and exercising independence in the face of the spouse's absence.

### Communicate with Spouse

- Talk, talk, talk. Express your fears and feelings so they don't completely sink you under. Try to get inside your spouses heart and mind. Understanding their motives and thoughts helps your total perspective. My spouse disagrees most of the time about the talking. He says it is picking at a sore. I think he would just like for there to be no emotional difficulties attached to this where we both just "buck up" and do what we need to do for our financial future and not to dwell on negative things. If negative feelings arise I think he would like to stuff them away. I know this approach would have a devastating impact on the outcome for our marriage and family.
- No one person in the family should have to bend to achieve/accommodate the travel goal. If the employee wants to pursue this opportunity then direct talks need to address WHAT WILL BE SACRIFICED to achieve/accommodate the travel goal. He can't have it all and needs to know there is a price to pay - physical, psychological, financial, emotional. When things start to slip, try to team up early and resolve problems early.
- To get a web camera so that you can talk to each other, free of charge, and to be able to see one another even when you are far away from each other. Also to sit down together and calmly talk about what this will mean to you and your relationship.

### Consider the Assignment Carefully

- Don't even consider it unless you have a rock solid, strong marriage. Any problems of trust in the marriage will be magnified 10 fold during the absence. You must be able to feel at ease with not knowing the whereabouts of your partner or what he's doing.
- Research the subject, get some pre-assignment training from company, talk to other people in same situation.
- Think hard and know what you are getting into. Try to make decision together. Be flexible - things always change.
- Consider the implications. Ensure the person at home (particularly if they work) has enough support with chores and/or emotional. Think of the effects the assignment will have on you and address any issues as early as possible.
- Do not do this with children, always consider an accompanied assignment. You will end up disrupting your life and spending family time travelling and getting very tired. Plus points is that you get to see a new location/country and experience new things.

### Take Care of Yourself

- Stand up for yourself first. As long as you feel comfortable with yourself everything is going to be OK. You will be like the sun with sunbeams around you: being happy yourself you will be able to make your partner and family happy too, and manage everyday's problems tremendously well.
- Make sure that the home spouse takes appropriate time to recharge their batteries. Get enough rest - you will need every bit that you get.

### Create and Maintain a Support System

- Make sure that you have a support system in place. It is very important. If family is not nearby and their presence is not stressful have them pay a visit while the spouse is gone.

### Exercise Independence

- The spot to avoid is to bother the partner with every single little problem occurring at home, and to the contrary, by not discussing the important decisions with him make him feel excluded from the life at home and make him resentful because he will feel worthless except as a wealth's provider: a very explosive situation.
- Don't leave discipline problems to the travelling spouse - deal with it as it comes.
- Learn to do things on your own. Anticipate problems. Have a confidante. Do not wait for your spouse to make decisions. Act when you need to. Listen to your gut feeling.

## Advice to Employers

### *What could your spouse/partner's employer do to make the Assignment easier from your perspective?*

Participants' advice to employers fell into several categories: (a) offering more or better pre-departure services to help the family anticipate and plan for the assignment, (b) more or better communication between the employer and the at-home spouse, both prior to and throughout the assignment, (c) more assistance in maintaining contact with the family, (d) better job and career planning for the traveling spouse, and (e) compensation for particular needs:

#### Offer Pre-departure Services

- Pave the way with training. Give more information on what to expect. Provide information on the country. Hook us up with people who have been through it.
- My spouse's employer has done nothing for me. They have never called or given any information to me. We have had no guidance in this move at all.
- Offer any type of support; currently, no support is offered whatsoever to spouses in my situation. We are told to "suck it up".
- Counseling and/or support group prior to and during the assignment.
- Some telephone contact, pre-assignment training, useful addresses/websites etc.

#### Communicate with Family

- They should have been more proactive in contacting me, instead of my spouse. They rely on him to communicate to me they are reaching out, which doesn't mean the information does get to me. Days are very busy for my husband, and when we do get a chance to talk, we talk about our children and us, not that someone from his company called to ask how things were going. Also, I think an employee is more apt to show his employer that things are running smoothly, that he/she is moving along successfully.

#### Assist in Employee Maintaining Family Contact

- Shorten the duration - maximum of 4 months, more frequent trips home or for us to visit spouse
- Maybe allowing trips during school breaks to visit Dad
- Make him accountable for the time he is away - that he not travel more than the parameters they suggested. Make him take his comp time - he works 7 days/week when gone - AND his holiday time.
- Families should be allowed if the assignment is more than 2 months. If the total travel in a year is more than 6 months, after that family should be allowed.
- Respect the bank holiday in the home country.
- Provide for facilities for children (cot, etc.)
- For those families who want or have to stay at home pay for regular flights so they can have time with their spouses in the country of the assignment.
- Never to make it an issue what the ticket home will cost. To make it easier to work more from home so that he would be able to stay home for longer time periods when he is here.
- Do not expect working weekends even if they include fun time. When spouses are in the home office let them take advantage of being home. Think about childcare facilities in the workplace.

#### Offer Job and Career Planning

- Be more effective in their ROI planning and efficient usage of the resource that they train, develop, grow. I get frustrated that my partner is seen as indispensable but that the organisation is unable to plan what they can do with him for a permanent role. There is no role to return to in his home country that matches the role he does now. He is also still paid the basic salary from prior to beginning the assignment despite the fact that his experience has developed him and the organisation has restructured including him at a higher level.
- Another thing they could do is be more effective in ensuring that their expats' internal communication is better. For instance where changes/ news/ vacancies occur in home function, the expat should be advised of it where-ever they are and where the expat is on assignment outside of host nation they should again be included in all internal communication.
- Set a date and try to stick to it. Our lives were terribly disrupted because he was leaving, not leaving, leaving, not going, then he left.

#### Be Generous with Compensation

- More days free to share with us, extra money for vacation
- Provide and pay for DSL connection and web cam to interact with the spouse through Internet
- Give more allowance to communicate with one's spouse/partner.



## Summary and Recommendations for Organizations Considering Short-Term Assignments

- While these assignments may be cost effective for the sponsoring organizations, they are not necessarily so for the employees and families themselves. Only about one third felt they were being adequately compensated in light of the additional costs they encountered – communication, food, household help, transportation, and child care.
- On the other hand, those who did feel adequately financially supported said that they, their children and their traveling spouses were all more positive about the assignment. Discern and address any financial costs families face and to be creative about how to minimize the sacrifices families make. Compensation for costs can be small in size but large in family impact.
- The more couples felt coerced into accepting these assignments, the more negative the outcome – the children had more behavior problems, and the at-home spouses were more depressed, more likely to have considered divorce, and more likely to see the assignment as a mistake. Those who had input into things like when visits would occur and how long they would last had significantly better outcome. It was particularly hard on couples for the length of the assignments to be ambiguous. Give couples as much input into the assignment as is feasible, as early and as often as plausible, and be as clear, open and flexible about assignment length as possible.
- Consider shorter assignments, alternating overseas with at-home assignments, and more frequent visits home or family trips. These can all address the impact on employees' personal and family lives.
- Most employees left household and childcare tasks to be done by their at-home spouses during the assignment and returned to their pre-assignment levels of involvement when they came home. But those who managed to find ways to participate while absent (e.g., electronic banking, elder care via telephone) and who actually did more tasks than usual when they returned home had spouses who were happier with the assignment and their marriages.
- In a similar vein, participants whose ideas about marriage remained fundamentally the same during these assignments were more positive all around. While organizations may be reluctant to advise employees on these kinds of family matters, ensuring that employees have the time to stay connected with their families while they are gone, and have the time, space and energy to re-connect with them while home, is clearly within the purview of organizations.
- In addition, employers should support and facilitate couples' seeking professional counseling and/or connections with support networks of others in a similar situation. Tips from peers and guidance from experts can help couples manage the challenges these assignments pose.
- Employees' personal and work lives are highly inter-related. When one is positive, so is the other, and vice versa. Provision of support to families clearly can have a positive impact on work outcome.