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Expatriates on the run: The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions

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ABSTRACT

Extant research on expatriation in high-stress environments where stress is caused by ongoing and unexpected natural crises remains limited. Drawing on stress theory, in this study, we develop a model to examine the stress-inducing effects of intra-family concerns and workplace discrimination on the intentions to leave the host country among expatriates in the high-stress environment of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We also explore whether gender and the level of work adjustment moderate the propensity of intra-family health concerns and workplace discrimination to induce psychological stress. Based on our analysis of 381 expatriates living and working in the United Arab Emirates, we find the model to be generally supported. We also reveal an intriguing moderating effect of work adjustment on the relationship between intra-family health concerns and psychological stress. Overall, the analysis is among the first ones to shed light on the role of natural crises' stressors in defining expatriate outcomes.

1. Introduction

Research on expatriation, broadly defined as a process whereby individuals relocate temporarily to a host country for work with or without support of an employing organization, in high-stress environments has been growing of late (Faeth & Kittler, 2020; McNulty, Lauring, Jonasson & Selmer, 2019). It is notable though that such research on the "dark side" of expatriation has thus far predominantly focused on expatriates working in different parts of the world known and/or expected to be 'hostile' and 'dangerous', and where the sources of stress are manmade (e.g., terrorism or civil unrest), and thus at least partially avoidable (for a similar point see Tripathi & Singh, 2021). At the same time, extant research on expatriation in high-stress environments where stress is caused by ongoing and unexpected natural crises remains limited (Fee, 2017; Tripathi & Singh, 2021). When relocating to contexts known to be dangerous or hostile, expatriates can mentally prepare for it, but little is known how unexpected natural crises impact expatriates and their responses.

In this light, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the currently ongoing natural crisis, has caused sudden and unprecedented disruption to normal human lives and activities worldwide. Unlike manmade crises that usually affect a single or several countries, the COVID-19 pandemic

has no borders, is not attached to any specific location, and has ultimately affected and continues to affect practically everyone on a global scale. However, it has been argued that expatriates are affected especially severely by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailey, 2021; Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke & Zimmermann, 2020) as they are more vulnerable to crises than host country nationals (Algarni et al., 2021; McNulty et al., 2019) and are restricted in their choice of available crises' responses, the most sensible of which is often limited to leaving the host country altogether. Yet, the global nature of the pandemic does not make it an obvious and easy choice. Numerous reports have revealed a growing concern among international companies with expatriates' wellbeing in the times of COVID-19 (Mercer, 2020). Many expatriates experience previously unprecedented levels of stress rooted in future uncertainty, growing discrimination against foreigners, lockdown measures and controls, and the need to adjust to the new reality of the host country both at work and beyond (Deloitte, 2020).

Taking a closer look at the sources of stress for expatriates in high-stress environments such as the one caused by the current pandemic, both nonwork- and work-related factors can induce stress and lead to negative expatriation outcomes. As for nonwork-related factors, there are numerous indications that expatriates' concerns about their family members' health and safety further exacerbated by travel bans and

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restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic constitute a significant source of stress (Dill, 2020; Mello & Tomei, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the health and safety of family members, irrespective of whether they are in the home or host country, is at risk and is thus a matter of concern for expatriates. As for work-related factors, the pandemic-related forced lockdowns, the compulsory online work, and the restrictions on social activities make expatriates feel anxious and lonely in the host country and the host organization exacerbating their vulnerability and sensitivity to how they are treated at the workplace during the pandemic. Given that expatriates often find themselves as being treated differently and with certain prejudices and biases by host country nationals due to their foreign status (Bader, Stoermer, Bader & Schuster, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2013), such perceived workplace discrimination is likely to constitute an important work-related stress-inducing factor in the high-stress environment of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this light, research is needed to understand how the stress-inducing factors of intra-family health and safety concerns (Lazarova et al., 2010; Shaffer et al., 2016) and perceived workplace discrimination from host country nationals (Bader et al., 2018; Hutchings et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2019) affect the psychological wellbeing of expatriates, and how it affects their host country withdrawal intentions in the high-stress environment of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the stress-inducing effects during the pandemic are also likely to be experienced differently by different expatriates, yet our current understanding of these differences remains limited. Previous research shows that expatriation experiences differ significantly between male and female expatriates (Haslberger, 2010) and between expatriates with different levels of work-related adjustment to the host country (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer & Luk, 2005). It remains to be studied how these factors influence the possible effects of stress-inducing environments such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on expatriates.

Therefore, in this paper, we draw on stress theory and investigate *whether and how intra-family health concerns and perceived workplace discrimination affect the psychological wellbeing of expatriates and through that influence their intentions to leave the host country in the high-stress context of the ongoing natural crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic*. We also examine *whether the stress-inducing effects are moderated by expatriates' gender and the level of work adjustment*. Empirically, we test these relationships among 381 expatriates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country highly reliant on foreign workforce.

We have chosen the UAE as our empirical context for several reasons. Prior to the pandemic, close to 90% of the UAE population were expatriates (Dubai Statistical Center, cited in Haak-Saheem, 2020). For decades, the UAE has been viewed by many expatriates as an attractive expatriation location with high standards of living and income. Yet, for some time already, there has been a growing tendency in the UAE to replace foreign workforce with local talents to ensure a sustainable transition into a post-oil economy (e.g., Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014). Although a large share of the workforce in the UAE is of foreign origin, the nationalization initiative by the UAE government (i.e., Emiratisation) has increasingly incentivized local organizations to employ host country nationals in the public and private sectors (Rees et al., 2007) to reduce the country's dependency on expatriate labor force and prepare nationals to take up jobs performed by expatriates (Abdelkarim, 2001). The trend toward Emiratisation has been strengthened by and during the pandemic (Haak-Saheem, 2020) further deepening the divide between foreign and local employees in local organizations.

Moreover, most expatriates coming to the UAE traditionally have a relatively clear exit strategy in mind as the strict visa requirements equate residency with employment. As Haak-Saheem et al. (2021) discuss, expatriates' residence permit is connected to employment (i.e., losing one's job would mean the expatriate would have to leave the country) and at the same time unionization and collective bargaining in organizations do not exist. It also means that expatriates' employment

and the extent to which expatriates adjust to their workplace and work environment play a crucial role in determining the wellbeing of expatriates in the UAE and their intention to either stay in or leave the country. Finally, research found the experiences of female expatriates in the UAE affected by gender and cultural stereotyping toward them (Hutchings et al., 2013), thus we can expect gender to be an important factor in determining how expatriates experience and react to stress-inducing factors in the high-stress environment of the UAE in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, we believe that the context of the UAE offers a relevant empirical setting for the purpose of our study to examine how the stress-inducing factors affect the psychological wellbeing of expatriates and through that influence their intentions to leave the host country in the high-stress environment of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the context of the UAE shares certain similarities with other contexts such as for instance the emerging markets of Russia, India, China, and Brazil. These are, among others, strict visa regimes closely associated with the employment, prejudiced attitudes toward foreign employees, the non-transparency and complexity of governmental institutions, significant cultural differences, gender-related challenges experienced by female expatriates. Therefore, we posit that our findings from the UAE are, at least to an extent, generalizable not only to other high-stress environments due to ongoing crises, including both manmade and natural crises, but also to other countries that share similar characteristics with the UAE.

The study makes two key contributions. First, it adds to our currently limited knowledge of expatriation in high-stress environments due to ongoing natural crises (Bader et al., 2019; Faeth & Kittler, 2020; McNulty et al., 2019) by developing a model that explains how stress induced by family-related concerns and perceived workplace discrimination influence expatriates' psychological wellbeing ultimately increasing their intentions to leave the country in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dill, 2020). We focus on the psychological consequences of the pandemic that comprise concerns about the wellbeing of one's family members as well as feelings of being discriminated at one's workplace that together act as influential push factors for expatriates to consider leaving the host country during natural crises (Tripathi & Singh, 2021). In this way, we complement extant research on "the dark side" of expatriation that has thus far predominantly focused on stress due to expatriates expecting a manmade crisis (Bader et al., 2018, 2019; Faeth & Kittler, 2017) by broadening it to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, we address the gap recently highlighted in extant research that there is "no evidence yet on how different forms of danger... are perceived differently by expatriates and influence their fears and stress levels and eventually have consequences for their well-being" (Faeth & Kittler, 2017, p. 392). We also respond to the recent call for studies to address the fact that "little is known about the role of natural crises' stressors in defining expatriate outcomes" (Tripathi & Singh, 2021, p. 3).

Second, we shed light on whether expatriates' gender and the level of work adjustment moderate the relationships between the focal stress-inducing antecedents and psychological stress. The role of gender has been previously examined in expatriation literature from several angles (e.g., Haslberger, 2010; Koveshnikov et al., 2014), yet possible gender differences among expatriates in experiencing and reacting to stress-inducing expatriation challenges have received relatively little attention, and we know nothing about these differences in high-stress environments caused by ongoing natural crises. Moreover, although the critical and central role of work adjustment in the expatriation process has been acknowledged (e.g., Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison & Diehn, 2016), we know little about whether and how the level of expatriates' work adjustment moderate expatriates' experience and reaction to both work- and nonwork-related sources of stress during expatriation in the context of natural crises. All in all, the high-stress context of the currently ongoing COVID-19 pandemic offers a suitable setting to shed light on these important issues. In terms of

practical implications, our research is important because our results could help organizations develop effective HR strategies and practices to alleviate or at least minimize the stress-inducing effects of natural crises like COVID-19 on expatriates (Fee et al., 2019).

2. Theory section

2.1. Expatriation, stress, and COVID-19

Stress theory (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) postulates that stress as such is an individual assessment of and reaction to external circumstances referred to as stressors. Whereas most of extant expatriation literature has engaged with stress related to continuous and ongoing characteristics of the host environment such as the threat of terrorist attacks or the possibility of political upheaval in politically unstable countries (see e.g. Bader et al., 2019) or the challenges associated with work-related and cultural adjustment (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Chen, 2019), we know much less about how stress affects expatriates and their intentions during a manmade or natural crisis. In the former case, the expatriate is at least to some extent aware of the potential challenges, threat and/or dangers in the host country and has time to psychologically prepare and make up their mind regarding their attitudes, expectations, and approaches towards stress-inducing environments even before agreeing to relocate (see Faeth & Kittler, 2017). In the latter case, awareness and preparedness are usually absent, and the expatriate must deal with the developing situation on the spot and often with a reduced sense of agency as the options available are radically stripped away with governments focusing their attention on the general population's survival (Courtney et al., 2020). The extent to which the expatriate can cope with the newly emerged stressor(s) by activating various resources predetermines the degree of stress that ultimately develops (Lazarus, 1991).

The current COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a natural crisis that hardly anyone, including expatriates, could anticipate and mentally prepare for. For expatriates, it has created serious challenges that have gone far beyond the usual cultural and work-related adjustments (see Bailey, 2021). Even those expatriates who were well adjusted to their host environments found themselves in completely different circumstances and conditions than the ones they were used to. As the pandemic developed and many countries have imposed quarantine measures, many expatriates had to readjust to their new reality from the basic daily routines like shopping online and curbing various social activities to getting used to new work demands and procedures of working remotely. In addition, several host countries imposed strict quarantine control measures and introduced severe punishments for noncompliance (International Investment, 2020a). Consequently, many expatriates found themselves locked in foreign countries without a possibility to travel back to their home countries and families. Moreover, those countries that have historically been welcoming expatriates, e.g., the countries of the Gulf region including the UAE, as a result of the pandemic increasingly started to call for local companies to lay off foreigners rather than local employees (Haak-Saheem, 2020) because expatriates are perceived as opportunistic and as "hav[ing] no shame and know[ing] nothing about loyalty to the country" (CGTN, 2020). In these circumstances, many expatriates have felt stressed and have been nurturing plans to return 'back home' (International Investment, 2020b) or to relocate to a third country where the COVID-19 situation might, but not necessarily, be better.

Although we still do not fully understand how the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic affect expatriates in terms of their wellbeing, health, family relations, or employment situation, there are consistent indications that these challenges are significant (Bailey, 2021; Haak-Saheem, 2020; Mercer, 2020). For instance, we know that the pandemic has already caused a tremendous amount of stress for expatriates. Together with increased anxiety and depression, decreased motivation and commitment, and sleeping disorders and overall

negativity, all of which were found to affect expatriates in crisis situations and dangerous environments (Bader & Berg, 2013, 2014; Mainiero & Gibson, 2003; Reade, 2009), another expected outcome of such increased stress is likely to be expatriates' higher intentions to leave their host countries and either repatriate back to their home countries or seek for alternative locations (Bader et al., 2019). Such exodus of expatriates might have a devastating consequence for countries reliant on foreign workforce and thus the mechanisms behind it need to be better understood (Haak-Saheem, 2020).

Thus, in this study, we utilize a stress perspective (see also Bader et al., 2019) to examine two antecedents, one mediating and two moderating mechanisms of expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions during the natural crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we investigate whether expatriates' concerns about their family members – either living with them or in other locations - and these members' health and safety as well as perceived workplace discrimination contribute to the level of psychological stress that they experience. Second, we investigate whether the resultant level of psychological stress influences the level of expatriates' intentions to leave their host country. To this end, we examine how the pandemic-induced psychological stress affects the withdrawal cognitions of expatriates. Finally, we explore whether gender and the level of work adjustment moderate the relationship between the two antecedents and psychological stress. In the following section, we elaborate on our theoretical model (see Fig. 1) and hypotheses.

3. Hypotheses development

3.1. Antecedents of psychological stress among expatriates

Despite that extant literature has largely focused on the expatriate and paid much less attention to the role of other family members such as spouses, partners, children as well as members of the extended family (e.g., mothers and fathers) during the expatriation process (cf. Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012), family relations were shown to affect expatriates' wellbeing and expatriation-related decisions by influencing the level of stress that expatriates experience (e.g., Lazarova et al., 2010; Takeuchi et al., 2002). It is especially the case when other family members' wellbeing is perceived to be threatened in some ways (e.g. Bader et al., 2019). In this regard, family system theory explains it by conceptualizing the family as a whole and the members as interdependent. It implies that each individual member is strongly influenced by the structure, organization, and transactional patterns of the family system. Family systems are open because the individual members and the family itself can be influenced by the internal and external environment, adaptive because they meet the demands of the changes that affect them, and information-processing because they are constantly informing the other members of important information related to particular events or circumstances (Broderick, 1993; Kantor & Lehr, 1975).

Applying these ideas to expatriates, the situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect the whole family and make family members exchange their concerns and feelings with each other as well as discuss possible actions and adaptations to navigate through the uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. These concerns will be communicated to the expatriate through family discussions and other family members' articulated fears. Such fears and concerns over one's own and other family members' health and safety are likely to constitute a powerful stressor for the expatriate and affect negatively his/her wellbeing (Bader & Berg, 2013; Brown, 2008). It implies that the expatriate will experience being less in control of things, because of not being able to cope with important changes in his/her life in high-stress host environments and will feel increased frustration and decreased confidence (cf. Bader & Berg, 2013, 2014; Mainiero & Gibson, 2003; Reade, 2009). Moreover, the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its consequences in terms of lockdowns and travel restrictions make it difficult for expatriates to join their families or to relocate their

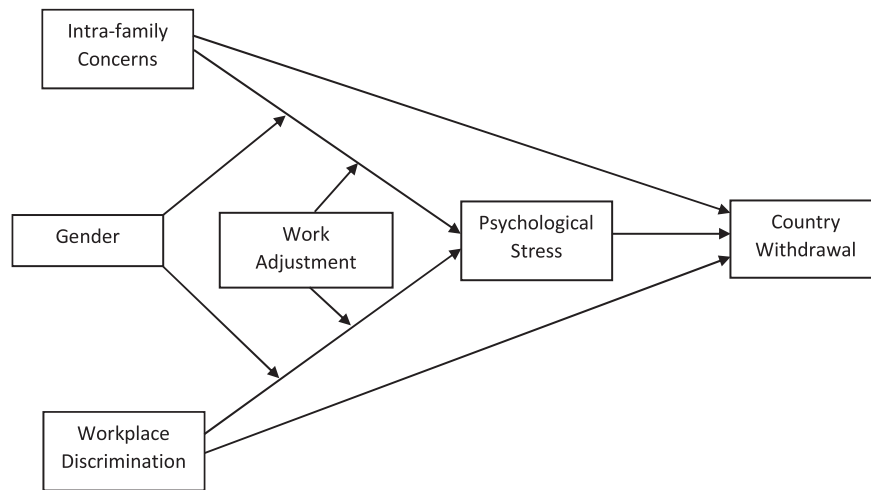


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

families to a safer place. These family-related challenges are likely to add further to the expatriates' stress-inducing sense of not being in control. Therefore, we put forth the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Expatriates' intra-family concerns are positively related to their psychological stress.*

Extant expatriation research indicates that expatriates are often treated by host country nationals with mistrust and suspicion (Moeller & Harvey, 2011) based on the idea that expatriates are 'outsiders' and 'exploiters' (Toh & DeNisi, 2007). As a result, several studies have argued that host country nationals might have prejudiced attitudes toward expatriates manifested in social exclusion and stigmatization of expatriates (Köllen et al., 2020; Moeller & Harvey, 2011). Others have found evidence of expatriates' discrimination especially among female expatriates (Bader et al., 2018; Hutchings et al., 2013) and expatriates employed at lower-level positions based on their racial and/or ethnic identities (Haak-Saheem et al., 2019). For instance, in the UAE, the focal context of this study, the process of talent localization, the above-mentioned Emiratisation (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014), has been on the agenda of local authorities for some time now (Haak-Saheem, 2020).

The issue of perceived workplace discrimination is likely to be an important stress-inducing factor during the COVID-19 pandemic among expatriates. There is growing evidence suggesting that pandemics - including the COVID-19 one - have a propensity to unveil existing societal prejudices that are often manifested as xenophobic tendencies at a societal level such as blaming of 'out-group' members and increased 'in-group' protectiveness (Clissold, Nylander, Watson & Ventriglio, 2020; Passini, 2022). Given this, being perceived as 'outsiders' and 'exploiters', trying to adapt to new ways of working in the host country environment and having fears about one's job security, expatriates are likely to be sensitive to instances of workplace discrimination. Despite that presumably many expatriates, who came to the UAE before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, were aware of the ongoing nationalization policies and possible prejudiced attitudes that they could face there, still these expatriates were willing to tolerate it because of the financial and career-related reasons. Yet, workplace discrimination is likely to be a powerful stressor for expatriates in the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic given the expatriates' precarious status, job-related uncertainty, social isolation, and remote work (see Bailey, 2021; Haak-Saheem, 2020) in the global world characterized by rising nationalism, stigmatization and xenophobia toward foreign workers (e. g., Elias, Ben, Mansouri & Paradies, 2021; Ullah et al., 2021). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2. *Expatriates' perceived workplace discrimination is*

positively related to their psychological stress.

3.2. Mediation effects

The induced stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect negatively how comfortable expatriates feel in their host environment in general and how committed to it they are likely to be. Previous research on expatriation in terrorist-endangered contexts found the stress induced by such contexts to increase safety concerns (Harvey, 1993), perceived constraints in the work and nonwork domains (Bader et al., 2019), negative emotions at work toward supervisors and colleagues (Mainiero & Gibson, 2003), and decrease employee commitment, motivation and involvement (Bader & Berg, 2013, 2014). Therefore, we can expect that the psychological stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to make expatriates consider leaving the host country. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3. *Expatriates' psychological stress is positively related to their host country withdrawal intentions.*

Further, we expect the resultant psychological stress caused by expatriates' family-related concerns and perceived workplace discrimination to mediate the relationships between the two antecedents and expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions. In line with extant research (Bader & Berg, 2013, 2014) and stress theory (Lazarus, 1991), we posit that increased intra-family concerns and discrimination experienced at the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to increase expatriates' intentions to leave the host country because they will induce stress and relational strain that will make expatriates consider leaving the stress-inducing host environment. The nature of any stress is such that being an individual's evaluation and reaction to external stressors, it develops in the absence of sufficient resources to cope with these stressors (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To deal with stress, individuals are likely to either seek for extra resources to be able to deal with the stressors or try to distance themselves from these stressors.

Thus, once stress develops, expatriates can be expected to cope with it by considering a possibility to relocate further from the stressors in question to an environment where the source(s) of stressors are absent or where expatriates might have more resources (psychological, social, emotional, etc.) at their disposal to deal with the stress (Andresen et al., 2018; Bader et al., 2019). Extant expatriation research supports this expectation as several studies have found the general stress related to expatriation to increase expatriates' withdrawal intentions (e.g., Bhannugopan & Fish, 2006; Silbiger & Pines, 2014). Therefore, we posit that intra-family concerns around health and perceived workplace

discrimination in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic are likely to increase expatriates' psychological stress which in turn is likely to result in higher expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions. Based on this, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4a. *The relationship between expatriates' intra-family concerns and host country withdrawal intentions is partially mediated by expatriates' psychological stress.*

Hypothesis 4b. *The relationship between expatriates' perceived workplace discrimination and host country withdrawal intentions is partially mediated by expatriates' psychological stress.*

3.3. Moderation effects

As argued above, when expatriates feel stressed, they are less likely to feel psychologically comfortable in the host country. At the same time, the level of existing work-related adjustment might smoothen out the negative psychological effects of intra-family health concerns and workplace discrimination. Work adjustment refers to the degree of an expatriate's psychological comfort regarding his/her employment and its various aspects such as job responsibilities, tasks at work, workload as well as communication, collegiality, and teamwork among colleagues (Shaffer et al., 2016). During the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions, feeling psychologically comfortable with one's job responsibilities and social relations with coworkers can act as a psychological buffer providing expatriates with psychological resources needed to cope with the imposed stress, for instance by engaging deeper with one's work and/or finding comfort and support in work-related relationships with colleagues and peers (Chen, 2019). Previous research shows that well-adjusted expatriates report higher job and life satisfaction (Takeuchi et al., 2002) and lower intentions to return home prematurely (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

Importantly, we argue that high levels of work adjustment can attenuate the effects of stressors in both work (such as workplace discrimination) and nonwork (such as intra-family concerns) domains. Our argument builds on research that found spillover effects between expatriates' nonwork- and work-related domains (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Takeuchi et al., 2005). Just like stress induced in one of these domains (e.g., work-related) can spill over to another domain (e.g., daily life), more positive experiences and emotions can do that as well and act as psychological resources across domains. Work-related adjustment involves a socialization process with colleagues and peers whereby the expatriate acquires the social skills, knowledge and behaviors needed for an organizational member. When this process goes well and the expatriate feels well-adjusted at the workplace, he/she is likely to be less sensitive to possible workplace discrimination. In addition, the positive effects are likely to spill over to the expatriate's nonwork domain providing him/her with additional psychological support in various stressful situations, including the ones caused by intra-family health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. In support, in a recent meta-analysis, Biswas, Mäkelä and Andresen (2021) identified nine articles reporting positive statistical correlations between work adjustment and expatriates' well-being and one showing that higher expatriates' work adjustment leads to better mental health (see Nicholson & Imaizumi, 1993) thus providing evidence of work adjustment having positive spillover effects on expatriate outcomes beyond the work domain. Based on the above, we formulate the following moderation hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5a. *Expatriates' work-related adjustment moderates the relationship between expatriates' intra-family concerns and psychological stress, so that the relationship weakens when work adjustment is high.*

Hypothesis 5b. *Expatriates' work-related adjustment moderates the relationship between expatriates' perceived workplace discrimination and psychological stress, so that the relationship weakens when work adjustment is high.*

Research shows that on several fronts female expatriates are better in coping with various stressful situations that might occur during expatriation (e.g., Cole & McNulty, 2011; Haslberger, 2010). By extension, we expect that the propensity of expatriates to develop psychological stress due to family-related concerns and perceived workplace discrimination during natural crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is likely to differ among male and female expatriates. In line with more general research arguing that females on average have higher emotional intelligence, respond more adaptively to stressors and are more willing to seek help from others than males (e.g., Ciarrochi et al., 2001; Deane et al., 2001), several authors found female expatriates to be better adjusted and more successful on international assignments in comparison to their male colleagues (Haslberger, 2010; Koveshnikov et al., 2014; Selmer & Leung, 2003).

More specifically, several studies discussed differences between female and male expatriates in coping with expatriation-related challenges and stress (Tung, 1988, 2004; Wurtz, 2018). For instance, Tung (1988) noted that male expatriates prefer preserving their home country's cultural norms to integrating into the host country's culture. In contrast, female expatriates are more likely to open up and relate to the host country's culture and norms, for instance by making an effort to learn the local language (Tung, 2004). In addition, Wurtz (2018) found that female and male expatriates apply different stress reduction mechanisms so that male expatriates are more likely to turn to alcohol and drugs at higher levels of expatriation-related stress. Specifically, in the context of the UAE in the pre-COVID-19 times, research found that female expatriates face more gender and cultural stereotyping, and especially so in the nonwork domain (Hutchings et al., 2013), and lower wages and poorer employment conditions (Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015) than their male colleagues. Thus, we can expect female expatriates to be better prepared for the additional stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic as they cope with more stress than their male colleagues on daily basis in the UAE even outside the pandemic. Based on these arguments, we expect female expatriates to be better able to cope with the stress induced by family-related concerns and/or perceived workplace discrimination during the natural crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 6a. *Expatriates' gender moderates the relationship between expatriates' intra-family concerns and psychological stress, so that the relationship is stronger for male than female expatriates.*

Hypothesis 6b. *Expatriates' gender moderates the relationship between expatriates' perceived workplace discrimination and psychological stress, so that the relationship is stronger for male than female expatriates.*

4. Methodology

4.1. Research context: The United Arab Emirates

The first COVID-19 case was reported in the UAE on 29 January 2020. During spring 2020, the government imposed strict lockdowns across the seven Emirates, and while the measures were able to slow the virus from spreading rampantly, they also caused stress and anxiety amongst the country's population, including expatriates. Illustrating this, Cheikh Ismail et al. (2021) studied the effects of COVID-19 lockdowns in the UAE and found that a remarkable majority of the analyzed sample reported anxiety concerning their work, home, and financial matters.

As mentioned already, out of approx. 10 million people living in the UAE in 2020 close to 90% were expatriates that predominantly work in the private sector (GMI, 2022). More specifically, according to the UAE's Ministry of Economy's statistics, roughly 50% of the workforce in the private sector are classified as skilled labor (UAE Ministry of Economy, 2019). While Emiratization policies have continued to develop throughout the 21st century, the UAE is one of the Gulf countries that remain highly reliant on foreign workforce (e.g., Budhwar, Pereira,

Mellahi & Singh, 2019; Rees et al., 2007). However, a certain deterioration of the country's attractiveness especially for highly skilled foreign workers was recently noted (Haak-Saheem, 2020). This trend was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While no precise data has been released on how many expatriates have left or are planning to do so, there are estimates that in the course of 2021, the UAE's population was expected to shrink by 10% (Straits Times, 2020) triggering some devastating effects for the economy (Anadolu Agency, 2020). From an expatriate's point of view, the transient nature of working in the UAE became even more stressful and fragile due to the pandemic.

Moreover, workplace discrimination, stemming partly from the UAE's divided labor market (e.g. Al-Ali, 2008), has also been an issue in the UAE already for some time (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2012; Goby, 2015). One of the local informants from Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner's (2012, p. 617) study illustrates the perceptions towards expatriates as potential superiors in the UAE: "I need someone I can trust to work for, and I would prefer a national as I think they would be honest. I don't trust expatriates". Combined with rather rigid hierarchies that often result in power imbalances between host country nationals and expatriates (Alsarhan & Valax, 2020), the country is largely built on a two-tier system with different rights and responsibilities for host country nationals and foreign workforce. Further, since expatriates' visa in the UAE is tied to their employment, this has resulted in the private sector containing a considerable workforce that is willing to tolerate misconduct and low employment protection (e.g. Goby, 2015). Thus, expatriates' employment conditions in the UAE can be characterized by tensions and implicit social hierarchies stemming from Emiratization practices and lately exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2. Sample and procedure

Following a positivist approach, we collected data by surveying expatriates living and working in the UAE. We collected data during the COVID-19 pandemic between May and June 2020. We used an online questionnaire in English and tailored our questions toward specific challenges posed by the pandemic which was ongoing exactly during the time of data collection. We used the following criteria to identify suitable respondents: they had to be of foreign origin, living and working in the UAE full time, and have at least an undergraduate degree. The invitation to participate was sent out via a social network platform because according to statistics 97% of the UAE's population use social networks such as Facebook or WhatsApp (GMI, 2022). In this way, our questionnaire was sent out to 4868 expatriates and we received 633 responses. The response rate was thus 13%.

We then screened our data carefully to verify that our sampling criteria have been fulfilled by all respondents. We deliberately checked that all our respondents still lived in the UAE to ensure that we do not include those who have already left the country due to the pandemic. Upon this screening, we realized that some of our respondents completed only secondary education and thus did not fulfill the criterion regarding an undergraduate degree as the minimum education level. Additionally, in line with extant literature (e.g., Cerdin & Selmer, 2014), we also decided to limit our sample with one more criterion - we selected for the analysis only those respondents who have relocated to the UAE less than 10 years ago to minimize the 'going native' effect. Based on these two considerations, we removed 252 responses and the final usable sample consisted of 381 responses. Among these, 50% of the respondents were female, the average age was 38.97 (ranging from 23 to 64), 22% had a child under 18 years old, 78% had a spouse, 43% had a relative apart. Regarding their expatriation in the UAE, 14% were company-assigned expatriates, 8% were from Africa, 39% from Asia Pacific, 28% from Central Asia, 17% from Europe (Western or Eastern) and 5% from North America. The average time spent in the UAE was 4.09 years. Industry-wise, the three biggest industries represented in our sample were education and research (20%), healthcare (16%), and tourism and hospitality (14%). Other industries included technology

and engineering (9%), banking and finance (8%), logistics and transportation (7%), sales and retail (6%), heavy industries (6%), construction (5%), food and agriculture (3%), manufacturing (3%), and fashion and design (3%).

4.3. Measures

The measures used in this study have been validated in previous studies. All items are listed in the Appendix.

Intra-family concerns. Concerns were measured using three items as they were developed for measuring potential terrorist-related concerns within expatriates' families by Bader & Berg (2013). We have rephrased the items to relate them concretely to the COVID-19 pandemic situation that we focused on. We asked our respondents on a 5-point Likert scale from '1' - 'never' to '5' - 'very often': "Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, please indicate how often have you experienced each of the following in the last three months". Sample item: "Being concerned about the safety and wellbeing of your family because of the pandemic related to the virus COVID-19". Cronbach's alpha was .75.

Workplace discrimination. Workplace discrimination was measured using six best-loading items developed and validated by James, Lovato and Cropanzano (1994) to assess racial / ethnic / cultural prejudice and discrimination in the workplace. We asked our respondents on a 5-point Likert scale from '1' - 'not at all' to '5' - 'extremely': "Given the current pandemic due to COVID-19, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements". Sample item: "At work, I feel socially isolated because of my racial / ethnic / cultural group". Cronbach's alpha was .87.

Psychological stress. We measured stress using a 14-item construct from Cohen et al. (1983, p. 385) originally developed "to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful". We asked our respondents the following: "Please assess how frequently you experienced the following feelings in the last three months". The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from '1' - 'never' to '5' - 'very often'. Sample item: "... felt that you were unable to control important things in your life?" Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Work adjustment. Work-related adjustment was measured using a six-item construct developed by Shaffer et al. (2016). The items measure both work role and work relationships adjustment on a 5-point Likert scale from '1' - 'not at all' to '5' - 'extremely'. Sample item: "I feel comfortable with my workload". Cronbach's alpha was .90.

Gender was measured as a dummy variable standing for '1' if the respondent was female and '0' if male.

Host country withdrawal intentions. We measured intentions by three items as they were adapted by Bader et al. (2019) from Zhang et al. (2006) on a 5-point Likert scale from '1' - 'not at all' to '5' - 'extremely'. The original Zhang et al.'s (2006) construct measured the turnover intentions of employees in multinational organizations. Later, Bader et al. (2019) has adapted it to measure the host country withdrawal intentions among expatriates. Sample item: "I cannot imagine that I shall live in the UAE for a long time". Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Controls. We controlled for age and the conditions of expatriation such as expatriation type (being company-assigned vs. self-initiated expatriate), having relatives apart, the time spent in the country, cultural distance, and job position. 'Age' was measured as the continuous and chronological age of the respondent. Expatriates were characterized as 'company-assigned' if they were sent to the UAE by a company and as 'self-initiated' if they had relocated to the UAE without organizational support and had the freedom to move and choose their job in the UAE. If expatriates had their spouse and/or children apart, we coded 'having relatives apart' as '1' and '0' otherwise. 'The time spent in the country' was measured as a continuous variable measured in years. 'Cultural distance' was calculated using Kogut and Singh's index (1988), which computes the cultural distance between the home and the host country in terms of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity (Hofstede et al., 2005) as a single value. The Kogut and

Singh (1988) index is the most widely used construct to measure cultural distance in international business and management research (see Konara & Mohr, 2019). ‘Job position’ was measured using a dummy variable standing for ‘1’ if expatriate was manager (top manager or line manager), ‘0’ – otherwise.

4.4. Quality of the measurements

The reliability and convergent validity of the measures are presented in Table 1 and the descriptive statistics and discriminant validity of the constructs as well as correlations are presented in Table 2. All constructs in our study had Cronbach’s alphas superior to .70, composite reliability (CR) scores superior to .70, and AVE values superior to .50. The correlations between the constructs were lower than the AVE square root of each construct (e.g., Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, all constructs in our model exhibited adequate validity and reliability.

Our study uses self-reported data, it is therefore possible that the common method variance bias could potentially inflate the correlations between our variables. Aware of this possible risk, we used the ULMC (unmeasured latent method construct) method to evaluate the common method variance bias and verify the validity of our results (Williams & McGonagle, 2016). To do so, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) where each item was associated with both its theoretical construct and with a latent method construct. Breaking down the total amount of variance (see Williams et al., 1989), our results show that the variance associated with the latent method construct was inferior to 10%, therefore much smaller than the threshold of 25% (ibid.). Therefore, we can conclude that the common method variance bias does not represent a substantial threat for the interpretation of our results.

5. Results

To test our hypotheses, we conducted covariance-based structural equation modeling using SAS V9.2. The fit statistics showed a relatively high overall fit with the data: $\chi^2 = 2940$ (1187), $p = <.001$, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .08, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = .93 and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) = .92. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Before presenting the main results, we note that, among the control variables, being company-assigned expatriate ($b = 0.104$, $p < 0.05$) and the time spent in the host country ($b = 0.085$, $p = 0.08$) were positively and significantly associated with work adjustment. Having relatives apart was positively and marginally significantly ($b = 0.081$, $p = 0.07$) while age was negatively and significantly ($b = -0.099$, $p < 0.05$) associated with withdrawal cognition. Age was also negatively and marginally significantly associated with psychological stress ($b = -0.039$, $p = 0.09$).

In relation to the direct relationships, Hypothesis 1, which stated that the level of intra-family health concerns relates positively to the level of expatriates’ psychological stress, was confirmed ($b = .134$, $p < .01$). Hypothesis 2, stating that expatriates’ perceived workplace discrimination is positively related to their psychological stress was also confirmed ($b = .165$, $p < .01$). As expected, the level of expatriates’

Table 1
Reliability and convergent validity.

	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Intra-family concerns	0.75	0.84	0.64
Workplace discrimination	0.87	0.90	0.60
Psychological stress	0.88	0.90	0.50
Work adjustment	0.90	0.93	0.67
Host country withdrawal intentions	0.88	0.93	0.80

psychological stress was found positively and significantly associated with expatriates’ intentions to leave the host country ($b = .217$, $p < .001$). Thus Hypothesis 3 was confirmed. Regarding the mediating effects, our results show that the relationship between the level of intra-family health concerns and expatriates’ intentions to leave the host country was mediated by the level of expatriates’ psychological stress with a positive and significant indirect effect ($b = .032$, $p < .05$). In addition, the relationship between perceived workplace discrimination and expatriates’ intentions to leave the host country was mediated by the level of expatriates’ psychological stress with a positive and significant indirect effect ($b = .035$, $p < .05$). In other words, psychological stress appears as a complementary mediator (Zhao et al., 2010), reinforcing the role that intra-family health concerns and workplace discrimination play in the expatriates’ host country withdrawal intentions. Thus, Hypotheses 4a and 4b were confirmed.

In relation to the moderation effects, our analysis shows that work-related adjustment moderated positively and significantly the relationship between intra-family health concerns and psychological stress ($b = .117$, $p < .05$). Contrary to our expectations, our results suggest that the relationship between intra-family health concerns and psychological stress is stronger among expatriates with higher levels of work-related adjustment. Thus, Hypothesis 5a was rejected. Hypothesis 5b which stated that expatriates’ work-related adjustment moderates the relationship between expatriates’ perceived workplace discrimination and psychological stress was rejected ($b = .005$, $p = .93$).

Finally, no moderation effects were found in relation to gender and the relationship between intra-family health concerns and psychological stress ($b = -.069$, $p = .19$) or workplace discrimination and psychological stress ($b = -.034$, $p = .50$). Therefore, Hypotheses 6a and 6b were rejected. We now turn to discussing these results in more detail below.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical advances

In this study, we used the currently ongoing natural crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic as a relevant context to examine how the stress-inducing factors affect the psychological wellbeing of expatriates during crisis situations and through that influence their intentions to leave the host country. More concretely, we investigated whether and how intra-family health concerns and perceived workplace discrimination affect the psychological wellbeing of expatriates and through that influence their intentions to leave the host country in the high-stress context of the ongoing natural crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We further examined whether the stress-inducing effects are moderated by expatriates’ gender and the level of work adjustment.

We find that, as we theorized and expected, during the COVID-19 pandemic, both intra-family concerns and perceived workplace discrimination emerge as powerful stressors for expatriates affecting their psychological wellbeing. Feeling stressed in the new circumstances then increases expatriates’ intentions to withdraw from the host country. At the same time, the extent to which intra-family concerns induce stress in expatriates is influenced by these expatriates’ work-related adjustment but not gender. Our findings suggest that those expatriates who are better adjusted to their work feel more stressed by intra-family health concerns in comparison to those who have lower levels of work adjustment. Furthermore, we found no moderation effects of gender or work adjustment in the case of workplace discrimination.

With these results, the study makes two key contributions. First, it adds to our currently limited knowledge of expatriation in high-stress environments due to ongoing natural crises (Bader et al., 2019; Faeth & Kittler, 2020; McNulty et al., 2019) by developing a model that explains how stress induced by family-related health concerns and perceived workplace discrimination influence expatriates’ psychological wellbeing ultimately increasing their intentions to leave the country

Table 2
Descriptive statistics, correlations and discriminant validity.

	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Intra-family concerns	3.83	0.95	(0.75)										
2. Workplace discrimination	2.53	0.91	0.17	(0.87)									
3. Psychological stress	2.85	0.59	0.22	0.32	(0.88)								
4. Work adjustment	3.90	0.76	-0.09	-0.48	-0.34	(0.90)							
5. Host country withdrawal intentions	2.96	1.07	0.15	0.42	0.33	-0.35	(0.88)						
6. Age	38.97	8.95	-0.14	-0.12	-0.22	0.13	-0.17	-					
7. Gender (female = 1)	0.50	0.50	0.20	0.10	0.15	-0.05	-0.08	-0.09	-				
8. Company-assigned expatriate (yes = 1)	0.15	0.35	0.06	-0.09	-0.06	0.11	-0.01	0.03	-0.08	-			
9. Time spent in UAE (years)	4.09	2.85	0.02	-0.05	-0.07	0.10	0.02	0.05	0.01	0.08	-		
10. Having relatives apart (yes = 1)	0.46	0.50	0.13	0.12	0.08	-0.04	0.14	0.07	-0.07	0.04	-0.11	-	
11. Cultural distance	2.69	1.65	-0.24	0.04	-0.09	0.02	-0.06	0.29	0.08	-0.03	0.05	-0.10	-
12. Job position (manager = 1)	0.26	0.44	-0.12	-0.14	0.03	0.00	-0.05	0.18	-0.08	0.04	0.07	-0.02	0.03

Notes. N = 381. Coefficients larger than 0.08 are significant at p < 0.05 level. Cronbach's alphas in brackets.

Table 3
SEM estimates.

	Est	P value	R-square
Psychological stress			0.210
<i>Direct effects</i>			
Intra-family concerns -> Psychological stress	0.134	0.004	
Discrimination -> Psychological stress	0.165	0.005	
Gender -> Psychological stress	0.074	0.122	
Work-related adjustment -> Psychological stress	-0.257	<0.001	
<i>Moderating effects</i>			
Work-related adjustment x Intra-family concerns -> Psychological stress	0.117	0.031	
Work-related adjustment x Discrimination -> Psychological stress	0.005	0.926	
Gender x Intra-family concerns -> Psychological stress	-0.069	0.185	
Gender x Discrimination -> Psychological stress	-0.034	0.504	
Country Withdrawal Cognition			0.256
<i>Direct effects</i>			
Intra-family concerns -> Withdrawal cognition	0.056	0.269	
Discrimination -> Withdrawal cognition	0.338	<0.001	
Psychological stress -> Withdrawal cognition	0.217	<0.001	
<i>Mediating effects</i>			
Intra-family concerns -> Psychological stress -> Withdrawal cognition	0.032	0.036	
Discrimination -> Psychological stress -> Withdrawal cognition	0.035	0.021	
<i>Total effects</i>			
Intra-family concerns -> Withdrawal cognition	0.090	0.083	
Discrimination -> Withdrawal cognition	0.374	<0.001	

in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dill, 2020). In this way, it is one of the first studies on expatriates to focus on the psychological consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that comprise concerns about the wellbeing of one's family members as well as feelings of being discriminated at one's workplace that together act as push factors for expatriates to consider leaving the host country. By so doing, it addresses the gap recently highlighted in extant research that there is "no evidence yet on how different forms of danger... are perceived differently by expatriates and influence their fears and stress levels and eventually have consequences for their well-being" (Faeth & Kittler, 2017, p. 392).

As for the role of intra-family concerns, our results underscore the limitation of treating expatriates as sole actors and decision makers in the expatriation process and ignoring the importance and influence of their family members (cf. Lazarova et al., 2010; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). Our findings suggest that when analyzing expatriates' decisions and experiences in relation to the expatriation process, and especially in those situations where expatriates and/or their family members face an external threat, research needs to consider expatriates as a constitutive

part of a wider family system, where all family members, including expatriates themselves, are interdependent and influence each other by sharing fears, concerns and information that oftentimes emerge as a reaction to external events or threats. Indeed, "the role of spouses and family members" (Bader et al., 2015, p. 850) and "family effects" (Bader et al., 2019, p. 2824) should not be overlooked. Our analysis shows that such intra-family concerns make expatriates stressed and negatively affect their psychological wellbeing. Consequently, such stress and not feeling too well psychologically increases their inclination to leave the host country.

Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, our study is among the first to examine and highlight the psychological effects of workplace discrimination among expatriates, a phenomenon that is widely spread yet relatively underexplored (e.g., Bader et al., 2018; Hutchings et al., 2013). Our analysis shows that workplace discrimination is a notable stressor for expatriates and feelings of being discriminated affect the psychological wellbeing of expatriates. Ultimately, discrimination increases expatriates' intentions to withdraw from the host country. Interestingly, the role of social support from different organizational actors such as coworkers and supervisors has been noted as instrumental for a range of positive expatriation outcomes such as job satisfaction, cross-cultural adjustment, and performance (e.g., Van der Laken, Van Engen, Van Veldhoven & Pauwe, 2019). Yet, with our study, we shed light on the other side of this phenomenon: being discriminated by colleagues, supervisor(s), or the organization as a whole, e.g., through selective application of specific HR policies and practices, induces stress in expatriates. Such stress then becomes an important factor forcing expatriates to consider leaving the host country in natural crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, whereas in many countries foreign employees enjoy certain benefits such as reduced taxation, in some other countries that benefit from foreign labor, workplace discrimination is institutionalized in the form of different practices and policies being applied to local vs. foreign employees. As mentioned previously, the UAE has been pursuing the explicit strategy of Emiratisation for a couple of decades now (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Haak-Saheem, 2020). In essence, nationalization policies such as Emiratisation consist of, among other things, employment policies designed to give a preferential treatment to host country nationals at the expense of foreign employees. Our results indicate that such institutionalized discrimination can be a crucial additional stressor for expatriates in natural crisis situations increasing their intentions to leave the host country.

As for the second contribution, our study sheds light on the question of whether expatriates' gender and the level of work adjustment moderate the relationships between the focal stress-inducing antecedents and psychological stress. The role of gender has been previously examined in expatriation literature from several angles (e.g., Haslberger, 2010; Koveshnikov et al., 2014), yet, as we argued above, possible gender differences among expatriates in experiencing and reacting to stress-inducing expatriation challenges in natural crisis

situations received little attention. Our analysis indicates that both female and male expatriates cope with intra-family concerns about health and safety as well as with workplace discrimination in the times of COVID-19 pandemic in the same way and there are no significant differences between the two groups. This finding goes against our initial expectation based on several extant sources suggesting that females are in general better able to adapt to stressful situations and subsequently feel less stressed (Deane et al., 2001; Wurtz, 2018) than males. It appears that in the context of COVID-19 stress-inducing intra-family concerns and workplace discrimination affect both male and female expatriates similarly.

Moreover, although the critical and central role of cross-cultural adjustment in the expatriation process has been acknowledged previously (e.g., Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Zhu et al., 2016), up to now, we knew little about whether the levels of expatriates' work adjustment moderate expatriates' experience and reaction to various sources of stress during expatriation. In this study, we argued that the context of the currently ongoing COVID-19 pandemic offers a suitable setting to shed light on this important issue. Our results in this respect are intriguing. On the one hand, we found no significant moderation by work adjustment of the relationship between workplace discrimination and psychological stress, thus indicating that workplace discrimination is experienced by expatriates as stress-inducing irrespective of their work adjustment levels. On the other hand, our analysis points toward a curious moderation effect of work-related adjustment on the relationship between expatriates' intra-family concerns and psychological stress. We found that being well-adjusted at one's workplace aggravates the negative effects of the concerns on expatriates' wellbeing. In fact, this finding goes against the positive spillover effect argument (Takeuchi et al., 2005) as well as those studies that found no spillover between work and life domains (e.g., Selmer & Fenner, 2009). Our results suggest a negative spillover effect. It might be that the intra-family concerns due to the pandemic are experienced especially sensitively by those expatriates who are well-adjusted to their work roles and work relationships. The prospect of losing the workplace to which they are well adjusted due to the pandemic and the concerns that it induces makes such expatriates feel especially vulnerable and prone to stress.

6.2. Practical implications

Given the serious negative impact that expatriates' exodus might cause to economies dependent on foreign labor and talent, our study has several important practical implications for organizations and policy makers in such economies. First, it follows that during natural crises, if interested in retaining expatriates, organizations need to understand expatriates' family situation and what kind of support they and their family members might require. Organizations and, to some extent, countries need to ensure that expatriates' family members feel secure and safe during natural crises. Often, it means that organizations might get far by creating different forums and support mechanisms for expatriates' family members, e.g., spouses and partners, to express their concerns and exchange experiences with other spouses and partners. Organizations could create social forums for such discussions that might prove very effective also in other less challenging times given that oftentimes expatriates' spouses and partners are left to themselves and have to fulfill the roles of homemakers and child caretakers. In any case, organizations need to make sure that expatriates are not overstressed due to family-related concerns. It is crucial to remember that family is important for expatriates and needs to be taken into account especially in difficult and challenging moments and situations. If left unattended, family-induced stress can have very serious and diverse consequences for expatriates and ultimately organizations.

Second, it can be argued that in certain conditions foreign employees can tolerate and accept some degree of discrimination based on the idea that they are working in a foreign country and should be willing to comply with their foreign / outsider status for financial and/or career-

related reasons. For instance, research shows that self-initiated expatriates tend to accept lower levels positions and are reluctant to conflict with their local employers when their host organization does not fulfill its original promises (e.g., Andresen et al., 2015; Zhang & Rienties, 2017). Yet, it appears that in natural crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic the tolerance threshold is much lower and workplace discrimination emerges as an important stressor for expatriates that ultimately makes them consider leaving the host country. If interested to retain foreign employees, host organizations need to pay attention to how organizational practices are applied to and how supervisors treat foreign employees to ensure that no prejudiced attitudes and behaviors toward them take place.

Third, organizations need to realize that once stressed expatriates might reevaluate their attitudes to their work and the host country. Even if they have been well adjusted before, expatriates' perceptions might change radically as a result of an unexpected external threat such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, organizations would benefit from constantly listening to expatriates to better gauge their stress level. This could be done via several HR practices such as short and frequent pulse surveys, more thorough development and target discussions, or performance appraisals. During these discussions, broader issues beyond actual work tasks should also be discussed. Different types of support from the organization itself but also from expatriates' supervisors and colleagues, especially emotional and informational support, should be offered to expatriates (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004).

6.3. Limitations and future research

Our study has several limitations that also suggest potential avenues for future research. First, our analysis is based on single-source data. To alleviate potential risks of the common method variance bias, we conducted statistical tests that indicated that the risks are not serious for the interpretation of our results. Moreover, the common method variance bias cannot explain the significant moderation effect found in our study (Siemsen et al., 2010). Second, our sample consisted of expatriates with different profiles. We controlled for whether the respondents were company-assigned / self-initiated or manager / non-manager expatriates and found the differences to be insignificant for our focal relationships. However, future research might delve deeper into differences between the antecedents and consequences of the host country withdrawal intentions among different types of expatriates. Third, we did not differentiate in our analysis between intra-family concerns and fears in relation to close / proximal versus more distant family members. Future research can look closer into various possible spillover effects between fears and concerns experienced by expatriates and their spouses / partners. More generally, our results need to be verified and explored in more detail using qualitative research inquiries.

Fourth, we analyzed expatriates in one host country only. Other host countries should be examined and compared in future studies. Future research should look into the issue of how perceived cultural distance might moderate the relationships that we examined in our study. Fifth, given that we used social media to collect our data, there might be a certain selection bias among our respondents. Yet, statistics for the UAE indicates that close to 97% of people living and working in the UAE use various social networks (GMI, 2022), thus suggesting that the actual selection bias might not be big per se. Nonetheless, it might be good if future research would complement and verify our research findings with findings based on data collected by other means and via other channels.

Finally, despite of the fact that our model explained 25% of the variance in expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions, other factors also contribute to such intentions and need to be identified and explored in future research. For instance, concerns about possible job losses and pay cuts or perceived and more objective differences between host and home countries in terms of the severity and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other factors, are all possible predictors of expatriates' host country withdrawal intentions that need to be

examined in future studies. Further, the moderation effects of gender and job adjustment on the relationship between expatriates' psychological stress and intentions to leave the host country may also be tested.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the psychological influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the intentions to leave the host country among 381 expatriates working and living in the UAE. We found that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic both intra-family concerns and perceived workplace discrimination emerge as powerful stressors for expatriates affecting their psychological wellbeing. Feeling stressed in the new circumstances then increases expatriates' intentions to leave the host country. We also found that those expatriates who are better adjusted to their work feel more stressed by intra-family health concerns in comparison to those who have lower levels of work adjustment.

Our study is among the first ones to shed light on the psychological and stress-inducing consequences of natural crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic among expatriates. It appears that the COVID-19 pandemic amplifies some of the conventional challenges and risks that expatriates take on when deciding to relocate abroad. It causes stress by decreasing the expatriates' tolerance level when it comes to workplace discrimination and by amplifying expatriates' fears and concerns for their family members. Those host organizations and economies that have traditionally relied and are dependent on foreign workforce need to understand these influences well and take them seriously. Otherwise, expatriates' potential exodus due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic might have significant and long-lasting economic and social implications for these organizations and economies.

Appendix. The measures

Intra-family concerns (Bader & Berg, 2013)

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, please indicate how often have you experienced each of the following in the last three months (1 – never; 5 – very often):

1. Being concerned about the safety and wellbeing of your family because of the pandemic related to the virus COVID-19
2. You and your spouse/partner discussing safety and health-related issues more than you did before
3. Perceiving that safety and health-related issues afflict your family relationships

Workplace discrimination (James et al., 1994)

Given the current pandemic due to COVID-19, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement (1 – not at all; 5 – extremely):

1. Where I work all employees are treated the same, regardless of their racial / ethnic / cultural group (R)
2. At work I feel socially isolated because of my racial / ethnic / cultural group
3. At work minority employees receive fewer opportunities
4. At work people are intolerant of others from different racial / ethnic / cultural groups
5. Supervisors scrutinize the work of members of my group more than that of members of other racial / ethnic / cultural groups
6. There is discrimination where I work

Psychological stress (Cohen et al., 1983)

Please indicate how often have you experienced each of the following in the last three months (1 – never; 5 – very often):

1. ... been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
2. ... felt that you were unable to control important things in your life?
3. ... felt nervous and "stressed"?
4. ... dealt successfully with irritating life hassles?
5. ... felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life?
6. ... felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
7. ... felt that things were going your way?
8. ... found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
9. ... been able to control irritations in your life?
10. ... felt that you were on top of things?
11. ... been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?
12. ... found yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish?
13. ... been able to control the way you spend your time?
14. ... felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Work adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2016)

Please indicate the extent to which you feel comfortable with each aspect of your employment in the UAE (1 – not at all; 5 – extremely):

1. I feel comfortable with my specific job responsibilities.
2. I feel comfortable with my activities or tasks at work.
3. I feel comfortable with my workload.
4. I feel comfortable with the communication among my colleagues (e. g., co-workers, direct reports).
5. I feel comfortable with the collegiality among colleagues.
6. I feel comfortable with the teamwork among my colleagues.

Country withdrawal intentions (adapted by Bader et al., 2019 from Zhang et al., 2006)

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement (1 – not at all; 5 – extremely):

1. I often think about leaving the UAE
2. I will probably look for a new place to relocate soon
3. I cannot imagine that I shall live in the UAE for a long time

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