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# In Search of the Recognition of Expatriate Complexity: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Psychotherapy Experience

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### Abstract

Expatriates experiencing emotional distress and a call for globally oriented psychotherapy receive an increased focus in the research agendas. That one may better understand how expatriates may be helped in times of distress, the insight in their actual psychotherapy experience may serve as a valuable avenue. The aim of this qualitative study was to illuminate the lived experience of psychotherapy and the meaning that expatriates attributed to these experiences within their expatriate context. Semi-structured interviews were utilized for the data collection and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed for data analysis. The following themes emerged from the expatriates' narratives about their psychotherapy experience: "The recognition of the expatriate complexity," "Personal growth vs Dependency," "Endurance vs Change," "The globally minded therapist," and "Language makes or breaks." The overall common psychotherapy experience was expatriates' considerable need to get the recognition of their expatriate complexity in a global context. Findings are discussed in relation to the existing expatriate and multicultural counselling literature taking into account the importance of cultural aspects in mental health treatment. The current study presents a unique and important contribution in the field of expatriate mental health as it highlights the psychotherapy experience that can be valuable for professionals in various settings offering psychological support.

### Keywords

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Expatriates, Psychotherapy Experience, Emotional Distress, Global Work Experience

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# In Search of the Recognition of Expatriate Complexity: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Psychotherapy Experience

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At the beginning opening up. Not that I had the problem opening up to her. I think it was more about opening up to myself. Saying things that I sometimes had the belief or courage to fake. I actually globalized them. Concerns... Really. Terrible... Sometimes. That was quite scary. It was quite uncomfortable.  
(Sonia, 43 years)

Sonia is an expatriate. While growing up, her family moved to six countries on three different continents. She had lived in the host country for five years before she sought professional help. Her presenting problem was not directly linked to expatriation. However, her life abroad has affected her emotional well-being in a significant way.

Like Sonia, other expatriates also experience a certain amount of psychological distress. Empirical evidence has shown increased stress and emotional challenges for expatriates

(Silbiger & Pines, 2014; Truman, Sharar, & Pompe, 2012). In the attempt to overcome difficulties, some expatriates seek professional help. Psychotherapy is such a place where expatriates can hope to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with their life situations in a more successful and enjoyable way (Filipič Sterle, Vervoort, & Verhofstadt, 2018; Lazarova, McNulty, & Semeniuk, 2015). However, little is known about how expatriates actually seek help in the host country and about their psychotherapy experience. This is partly due to the fact that existing studies have been principally quantitative in nature. In general, the research using qualitative methods is primarily focused on the understanding of participants' lived experience (Richardson, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, qualitative research tends to be particularly suitable in studies where the complexity, ambiguity and lack of prior theory and research define the area of interest (Richardson, 1996). The current study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach with the aim to (a) gain a comprehensive and detailed portrayal of expatriates' experiences of psychotherapy, and (b) complement the existing research on expatriates' emotional distress with their subjective lived experience of psychotherapy. In the following sections the major features of our investigation are presented.

### **Expatriates' Emotional Distress**

With the increasing globalization, a blend of people, cultures and languages continuously encourages global work talent to learn their successful ways of functioning in a multicultural and multilingual environment. A contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members involves various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to longer-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between both groups, known as acculturation (Berry, 2005). Expatriates are individuals who left their home country in order to live and work in another country on a non-permanent basis (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). They are generally highly skilled workers with limited need to adjust to a local culture but rather maintaining a degree of flexibility and freedom in their career choice, work location and family-work balance, and they usually belong to upper-middle to upper class of the host society (Adams & van de Vijver, 2015; McNulty, 2013, 2014). Research on international work experience has documented several types of expatriates, such as corporate expatriates, who are sent to an international assignment by their company (Takeuchi, 2010), self-initiated expatriates, who take their own initiative and rely on their own finances to move abroad for work (Doherty, Richardson, & Thorn, 2013), flexpatriates (i.e., employees on brief international assignments, leaving their family and personal life behind), short-term assignees (i.e., employees on international assignments that are longer than business trips yet shorter than typical corporate expatriate assignments; usually less than one year), and international business travelers (i.e., employees on multiple short international business trips to various locations without accompanying family members; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). Emerging research points to various forms of non-traditional expatriates, such as female breadwinners, single parents, semi-retirees, lesbians and gays, split families, single expatriates, and blended families, who are also engaged in business expatriation and have distinct circumstances that standard global mobility policies typically do not address (McNulty, 2014). International work experience and accompanied lifestyle impact expatriates' identity so that they become more multicultural with a global mindset (Altweck & Marshall, 2015; Gonzalez-Loureiro, Kiessling, & Dabic, 2015; Mao & Shen, 2015). Expatriates tend to perceive their experiences as mainly beneficial, they appear competent in intercultural communication, but they lack a clear sense of belonging (Moore & Barker, 2012).

Some recent qualitative studies have contributed to the understanding of the phenomenology of the expatriate experience (e.g., Lazarova et al., 2015; Siljanen & Lämsä, 2009). McNulty (2015a), in her study with non-traditional expatriates (i.e., single parents,

overseas adoption, split family and lesbian assignees), called upon further research to understand expatriate complexity and specifics of non-traditional expatriates, and also to broaden the traditional model to study expatriates. In another study, the same author (McNulty, 2015b) focused on the considerable causes and consequences of expatriate divorce including bankruptcy, homelessness, depression, psychophysiological illness, alienation from children, and suicide.

Indeed, the acculturation process involves various cultural and psychological changes that may lead to a culture conflict and acculturative stress, potentially resulting in emotional distress (Berry, 2005; Silbiger & Pines, 2014; Truman et al., 2012). Lack of successful adjustment to a new environment may result in increased stress and worsening of mental health for expatriates (Filipič Sterle, Fontaine, De Mol, Verhofstadt, 2018). Compared to domestic population expatriates seem to be at greater risk for internalizing problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, sleep issues, traumatic stress, and suicide), and externalizing problems (e.g., attention deficit, hyperactivity, and impulse control; Truman et al., 2012). More specifically, empirical evidence documented elevated psychological distress (Anderzén & Arnetz, 1999; Foyle, Beer & Watson, 1998; Silbiger & Pines, 2014), decreased mental well-being and worse subjective work environment (Anderzén & Arnetz, 1999), depression (Magdol, 2002), and increase of alcohol and substance abuse (Anderzén & Arnetz, 1997; Truman et al., 2012). Feelings of alienation, homesickness, and uprooting have also been reported (Bushong, 2013).

### **Expatriates and Psychotherapy**

When experiencing emotional distress, expatriates can turn to mental health professionals in the host country for help with the adjustment challenges associated with their work, schooling and interactions with locals (Nelson-Jones, 2002). As our world is becoming increasingly multicultural, considering cultural aspects in psychotherapy is indispensable. Both therapists and clients are part of their own cultural system to which they have attributed their own meaning (Sue & Sue, 2003). Further, it has been shown that psychotherapists' personal experiences of expatriation and / or familiarity with the specifics of expatriate way of life can greatly contribute to the effectiveness of clinical interventions (Bushong, 2013). However, these specific features, for example, the importance of the cultural and linguistic context, constant changes and adjustments, their approach to seeking help, response to frequent goodbyes, etc., may not always be visible and obvious (Bushong, 2013). Therefore, psychotherapists need to pay special attention to the emotional challenges particular to expatriates in order to provide a safe and empathic space in therapy, and to be able to show the understanding of significance of their expatriate situation (Mortimer, 2010).

Besides developing multicultural skills, knowledge and understanding of different cultural issues, psychotherapists need to take into account the nature of the expatriate experience (Qureshi & Collazos, 2011). In the multicultural counselling literature, the authors Owen, Leach, Tao, and Rodolfa (2011) introduced a distinction between a multicultural competence and a multicultural orientation of a psychotherapist. Multicultural competence is understood as the ability of a therapist to effectively implement his or her multicultural awareness and knowledge while conducting psychotherapy. Multicultural orientation, on the other hand, particularly refers to the "way of being" with the client and is associated with a psychotherapist's values about the importance of cultural factors in the lives of psychotherapists as well as clients. Clients who perceive their therapists as being oriented towards cultural issues, experience them as more credible and feel more comfortable in the therapeutic process, which confirms that psychotherapists' multicultural awareness and knowledge positively impacts the psychological well-being of clients (Owen et al., 2011). In other words, clients' trust that their therapist is attuned with and willing to focus on

multicultural issues positively impacts the working alliance and real relationship with the psychotherapist, regardless if cultural issues are explicitly brought up and discussed in the therapy or not.

Putting together the empirical evidence on expatriate experience (e.g., Lazarova et al., 2015; McNulty, 2015a; Siljanen & Lämsä, 2009), on the existence and nature of expatriates' emotional distress (e.g., Silbiger & Pines, 2014; Truman et al., 2012), and studies focusing on factors contributing to successful interventions with expatriates (e.g., a psychotherapist's multicultural orientation, cultural dimensions of psychotherapy, and psychotherapists' personal experience of expatriation; Bushong, 2013; Mortimer, 2010; Owen et al., 2011; Qureshi & Collazos, 2011), our study aimed to explore the lived psychotherapy experience as reported by expatriate clients. In this way the current study brings the perspective of subjective experience of expatriate clients to the existing knowledge of expatriate well-being, with the particular aim to better understand their expatriate context and how they can be best helped when emotionally distressed. To the best of our knowledge, the actual psychotherapy experience of expatriates in the host country has not yet been investigated.

## **The Researchers**

Mojca F. Sterle is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist with extensive experience in working with expatriates. She is also an expatriate, having lived in Belgium for more than 10 years. As a clinician, she has been observing the specifics of the complexity of expatriation. However, the possibilities of sharing the knowledge and experience coming from the clinical practice, are very limited. With the intentions to explore further the insights and knowledge gained in her clinical work to other mental health professionals and scholars, and to give the recognition to these rich observations, she also works as a researcher. Her research focuses on challenges that expatriates and their families experience while adjusting to a new environment, and on resources, such as psychotherapy, that can help them overcome crises. Looking for a collaboration with an established academic colleague, she connected to Jan De Mol, who also has rich experience working as a psychotherapist. As university professor and researcher, he is interested in the examination of people's experiences, particularly minorities, and groups that don't have a real voice in the society. He is expert in qualitative research and particularly in the method interpretative phenomenological analysis. Pam Bell is a psychotherapist with a considerable experience of working with expatriates. Lesley Verhofstadt is a couple therapist and a university professor of family psychology. She has collaborated in different research projects on expatriate adjustment. Her research mainly focuses on how couples and families deal with minor and major stressors.

## **Method**

### **Research Design and Sampling**

We employed the qualitative research method Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) for the data collection and the data analysis. The key concepts of IPA are based on phenomenology, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, and ideography (Smith et al., 2009). As a phenomenological approach, IPA focusses on the exploration of experience in its own terms rather than attempting to reduce it to predefined or overly abstract categories (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is an interpretative method and it is strongly influenced by symbolic interactionism and the hermeneutic tradition, acknowledging that direct access to the other people's world can be reached through a cautious process of interpretation in which the researcher's own views, and personal background are necessarily

implicated (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It employs double hermeneutics where a researcher tries to make sense of a participant trying to make sense of his or her experiences (Smith et al., 2009). When a researcher is interpreting the data, he or she also considers the socio-cultural context of the participant (and of course also his or her own lifeworld). The in-depth interpretation of the participants' lived experiences is therefore made through the contextualization of these lived experiences in their socio-cultural context. In its idiographic nature, IPA is concerned with the particular, with revealing particular experiential phenomena of each of the individuals involved, and how this phenomenon has been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). This study was inductive as the aim of the study was not to test a previously established hypothesis, and interrogative in its nature as it aims to contribute to the existing research (Smith, 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as experiential approach seemed particularly appropriate to explore the phenomenon of a lived psychotherapy experience of expatriate clients as it is designed to gain rich understandings of topics with little theoretical and empirical evidence to contribute to a given knowledge ground (Moustakas, 1994). This method has been found to be a useful method in previous clinical psychology research (e.g., Rizq, 2012; Williams, McManus, Muse, & Williams, 2011). Further, IPA is well suited for the current study, as it presupposes the active role of participants in the construction and meaningfulness of experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, the type of the research problem in our study was best suited for this method because of the importance to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The following phenomenon explored in our study was identified: How did expatriates experience psychotherapy? Further, what did this experience mean to them? It has to be noted that the context-specific setting of the research study was expatriation.

Purposive sampling with a small number of participants was used to explore the phenomenon of psychotherapy experience, particularly focusing on the distinct narratives of the individual while attempting to balance them with what was shared across a particular group (Smith, 2003). Participants were expatriates who came to Brussels because of work. They were recruited in a psychotherapeutic centre that offers psychotherapy to expatriates in different languages. Every client who saw the therapist for the first intake session during the time of the data collection, regardless of their gender, and who met the inclusion criteria, was invited to take part in the study. The inclusion criteria were: being an expatriate (working or studying), adult age (18+), good enough knowledge of English to be able to be interviewed in English. Based on meeting these criteria, nine clients were invited to take part in the study during their first intake session. Five clients agreed to participate, all women, and there were no drop outs. All five clients completed at least 12 sessions of psychotherapy and were interviewed about their experience of psychotherapy. Within the sample, the diversity of the cultural origin of the participants is indicated, so the homogeneity of our sample regards the expatriate-cultural-context. Participants were all coming from European countries, they all had expatriated for work or study, and their decision for expatriation had been made voluntarily. Some characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. The average age of participants was 33 years. Participants had been living in the host country for an average of seven years. In line with the guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies (Elliot, Fisher, & Rennie, 1999), some relevant information about the participants for understanding the expatriate context of the study is described, however, personal information of the participants is not revealed, and de-identification was used to report the results. Prior to the first psychotherapy session, clients were informed about the aims of the study and signed informed consent forms. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the Faculty of psychology and educational

sciences of Ghent university, Belgium and the National medical ethics committee of the Republic of Slovenia.

Table 1

*Characteristics of Participants*

Number of participants	5
Age	Range 19-41 years. Mean 33 years.
Duration of stay	Range 1-12 years. Mean 7 years.
Sex	female (all)

## Data Collection

**The interviews.** To construct the interview protocol, we first conducted a pilot study with one expatriate client using the two broad questions that served as stepping stones. More specific questions were added during this pilot interview. Prompts and probes such as validation of the therapeutic relationship and the therapist, being understood, and evaluation of specific moments in therapy were developed for funnelling in the future interviews. Mojca F Sterle developed the interview questions. Pam Bell conducted semi-structured interviews with study participants after they had completed 12 session of psychotherapy to collect the data about their experiences of psychotherapy. Participants were asked the following two broad questions: “What have you experienced during psychotherapy?” “What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience of psychotherapy?” During the five interviews, the two broad questions were always the same, so were the above-mentioned prompts and probes, however, some more specific prompts and probes continued to develop during each interview with the aim to gain more in-depth understanding of clients’ experiences. Gathering the data evolved into structural description of the experiences with the ultimate goal to provide the common lived experiences of psychotherapy of all expatriate participants. The interviews were conducted in English. The average duration of the interviews was one hour, and they were audio-recorded. A Transcriber AG software was used to make verbatim transcriptions of all five interviews.

## Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the researchers are involved and play an active role within the research (Golafshani, 2003). Moreover, the credibility of qualitative research depends on the ability and effort of the researcher (Golafshani, 2003). Therefore, we conducted the auto-analysis to evaluate the meaning of psychotherapy and our own expatriation context.

Following the IPA protocol, Mojca F Sterle first analysed the interviews case by case (Smith et al., 2009). For each interview, we applied—in a rigorous way—the following steps of analysis of the data. First, we read and re-read the transcripts several times. Next, we gave initial codes to the data. In the following step, we identified and developed the emergent themes based on the data coding. In order to identify the emergent themes, we interpreted parts of the text in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to parts. The next step involved searching for connections across the emergent themes. We identified the patterns between the emergent themes to construct the master themes. Further, we evaluated and re-evaluated the emerging master themes, until the final master themes were found. We then conducted the analysis of all the remaining four transcripts, and thus repeated the whole process of the analysis. During the next stage we aimed to search for the patterns across the cases, and to interpret them. In line with the hermeneutic stance of IPA we took a double hermeneutic position by interpreting the sense the participants gave to their experiences of psychotherapy.

Researcher triangulation was employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study and thus improve the reliability and validity of the research findings (Golafshani, 2003). Mojca F Sterle, who did the first analysis, discussed the themes with the other researchers. This was done in attempt to increase researchers' truthfulness of a proposition of a given phenomenon. Finally, Lesley Verhofstadt discussed the analysis with the other authors in order to clarify the themes and the interpretations.

## Results

The findings of this study describe the common experiences of all participants. Specifically, the prevalent psychotherapy experience—as reported by the interviewed clients—was the difficulty to take the decision to seek help. It challenged the part of their identity that was strong, independent and, in their particular sense, perceived as stable. However, the feeling of being accepted in their expatriate complexity enabled them to take to the path of personal growth which involved exploring potential change. The importance of receiving the recognition of expatriate complexity was the main meaningful common experience of all interviewed expatriate clients. Specifically, five themes emerged from the data which were reorganized in two master themes: “*The ambivalent nature of safeness of therapeutic space,*” and “*The actuality of global context.*” The themes are presented in Table 2. The related subordinate themes are described under the master themes and illustrated by excerpts from the interviews.

Table 2  
*Summary of Themes*

Master themes	Subordinate themes
The ambivalent nature of therapeutic space	The recognition of expatriate complexity Personal growth vs Dependency Endurance vs Change
The actuality of global context	The globally-minded therapist Language makes or breaks

### **The Ambivalent Nature of Safeness of Therapeutic Space**

This master theme emerged as a result of clients' overall experience of psychotherapy, from the beginning of seeking help and throughout the whole psychotherapy process. The overall feeling of safeness was related to their more particular experiences, and it functioned as a reflection of clients' sensitivity to the therapeutic frame, including the therapeutic relationship, feelings and sensations that emerged during psychotherapy, the physical setting of a therapeutic place, practical agreements, and ethical practice. However, there was also an associated feeling of ambivalence. This master theme consists of three subordinate themes: “*The recognition of expatriate complexity,*” “*Personal growth vs Dependency,*” and “*Endurance vs Change.*”

**The recognition of expatriate complexity.** The interviewed clients experienced psychotherapy as a space where they could show their own weakness and just be who they were, without being judged. In the whole process of self-evaluation during the psychotherapy processes, clients expressed the need to receive the recognition of their situation, embracing the wholeness of their expatriate life. In other words, they appreciated that the therapist understood them in their current situation in the expatriate context, and that the therapist valued their efforts to do well in the new country.

My therapist often said that she really admired me and the way that I managed to fit into this new life here. And that even if I still have problems, I did a *really* good job. And that I shouldn't worry. That everything would sort itself out. I really liked that somebody said this to me. So I guess it is that that I am proud of. What I have done and how I have lived my life here. I think that was something that really stayed with me.  
(Participant 3, age 19)

This illustrates how important it was for the expatriates to receive the support from the therapist within the context of their expatriate complexity. Being told that they were doing well helped the clients to accept their own situation, which gave them more trust that they can overcome their current problems. The phenomenon of being recognized in their life situation facilitated the process of acceptance of clients' own insights. It gave them the feeling that they could go back to the feeling of being "normal."

Clients also talked about having ambivalent feelings when contemplating psychotherapy. As an expatriate, one is given an opportunity to have a good life and an international career. One shouldn't complain nor feel weak or have problems (Lazarova et al., 2015).

Just the fact that I had somehow to admit to myself and people around me that I needed therapy was a bit hard. I think there is a bit of stigma attached to it. It was comforting and stressed at the same time. It was not something that I found easy to do. It took me a long time to look for help and to admit that I needed help. In Europe people associate that with the fact that there is something wrong with you so yeah, it was a big thing for me to go to therapy.  
(Participant 2, age 30)

Accepting the fact that they needed professional help meant the recognition of their limitations, vulnerability and imperfection. Overcoming the subjective feeling of stigma was therefore experienced as an additional challenge for expatriate clients in their process of seeking the recognition of expatriate complexity.

**Personal growth vs dependency.** The interviewed clients spoke about their innermost process that they experienced during psychotherapy which was somehow linked to their perception of how their expatriate life should look like. Similar to the previous subordinate theme, they reported ambivalent feelings about going to therapy and actually doing it.

I can't emphasize how hard it was to actually. Especially when I was shopping around to see the therapists. It was like opening a Pandora's box. Each time. It was horrible. But I think I proved that I needed to do it.  
(Participant 2, age 30)

This illustrates that the process to overcome this ambivalence was not always straightforward for the interviewed clients. Before committing to a personal growth within psychotherapy this client reports that she had to gather enough trust and courage to start this journey. However, the outcome was positive, as throughout the therapy, she realized that she needed this kind of help.

Besides, it was essential for the clients to have a feeling of uniqueness—that some things could be expressed and understood only in the actual therapeutic setting. That itself,

however, in their view could potentially lead to dependency. Their narratives revealed those ambivalent feelings both in relation to experiencing the therapist and the therapeutic setting. For example, secrecy and confidentiality were important for the clients because they assured their feelings of privacy and safeness during psychotherapy sessions.

I liked the fact that it was a calm room. The double doors are helpful in the sense that—it is silly—but if there is somebody outside that door they won't be listening to what you are saying. It's just what mattered then.  
(Participant 2, age 30)

This theme informs us about the dynamics between being willing to make oneself vulnerable and to commit to psychotherapy and therefore experience personal growth, and, on the other hand experiencing the feeling of dependency emerging in the process of psychotherapy.

**Endurance vs change.** Clients expressed the need to be reassured that their decision for expatriation was the right one. Further, they reported feeling accepted in their resistance to change a great deal regarding their expatriate situation and that they were able to discuss this complexity during psychotherapy and explore their vulnerabilities. However, it was important for them to be able to share their disagreements and their complaints about their demanding and sometimes boring jobs, weather conditions, occasionally very stressful life, feelings of alienation and uprooting, financial problems, etc., despite well paid jobs and interesting international career.

There were days when I was really very down, and I went to therapy and I could continue my day afterwards. Because there were moments when I was really so depressed. We talked a lot and for me it was very comforting to just to talk about it and to understand and analyse all the changes and how to cope with them. This is what we did.... Not big things but very important.  
(Participant 5, age 40)

This illustrates how important it was for them that the therapist understood and accepted this complexity. This means that they could take the time in therapy to embrace what they have experienced as expatriates without feeling pressured that any big changes were needed to be done regarding their current life situation.

### **The Actuality of Global Context**

The multicultural and multilinguistic aspects of identity are very important components in expatriates' lives. This was reflected also in the narratives of the participants. Clients talked about getting the recognition of complexity in the international, global context—in the context of foreigner / expatriate talking to another foreigner / expatriate (i.e., the psychotherapist) in the host country—in the common international, global work experience. Further, sharing and mutually valuing the global work experience enabled clients to openly discuss and to accept some key components of expatriate life (e.g., the need of command of different languages and successfully managing cultural differences in the process of acculturation). Within this theme, two main aspects of global complexity are discussed that have been organized in two subordinate themes: “*The globally minded therapist,*” and “*Language makes or breaks.*”

**The globally minded therapist.** The interviewed clients were all well acquainted with the multicultural environment as they worked in and belonged to the international environment. In that respect, clients felt that the cultural context of the therapist and themselves did not have such a significance as the overall, global international context.

And that I can do it with a foreigner. You know people ask me is it not strange that you do this with a foreigner? No! So this was actually a nice experience for me.

(Participant 5, age 40)

The felt sense that the therapist was aware of and felt comfortable with the complexity of global context, had, in the perception of clients, a positive effect on the therapeutic relationship. It gave the clients the feeling of belonging and connection. Particularly, they felt proud that they could connect and even do therapy with a foreigner. These parts of their expatriate complexity were reflected in the way how they made meaning about the impact of cultural background during their psychotherapy experience. Therapist's multicultural competencies rooted in global work experience were greatly acknowledged in clients' narratives.

**Language makes or breaks.** The most commonly used language in expatriates' working and social life in the host country is English. For the interviewed clients, it was very important that their therapist understood the language dimension of their expatriate complexity. Knowing the local language can hugely foster expatriate interactions with locals, or, on the other hand, leave them feel even more alienated.

I have lived here for 7 years but I still don't feel very familiar with the city. There are language barriers. So all the information about what is happening around the city, movies, festivals ... it doesn't flush into me like in my country.

(Participant 1, age 35)

Speaking foreign languages is very important for expatriates who work in the international environment; in fact, it may be the factor which decides whether they will succeed or fail. The language dimension was perceived as an important factor that can influence to what extent expatriate feel "at home" with the local environment. The client is talking about the language barriers—if an expatriate is not able to linguistically grasp what is going on in his or her environment, it is difficult to entirely adjust to the new environment.

On the other hand, being able to communicate in foreign languages, and even do psychotherapy in one of them, can be a source of feeling pride, success, advancement, feeling closer to the local environment.

A lot of friends asked me if I didn't feel awkward to do therapy in English. I must say I didn't at all. Of course sometimes I need to think a little bit more, maybe searching for words to really describe what I want to say. So English felt fine.

(Participant 5, age 40)

The participant is talking about being able to do therapy in English which is obviously not her mother tongue, and the proud that she is taking from it. In the international nature of the global world, language can open a lot of doors or act like a hindrance to advance in the expatriate way of life.

## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore the psychotherapy experiences of expatriate clients and the meaning that they attributed to their experiences. Moreover, and in line with the IPA method, the authors made an attempt to make meaning of clients' experiences and interpret the analysed data. The interviewed clients were expatriates with global work experience.

Two master themes and five sub-ordinate themes were found as a result of this qualitative study; "*The ambivalent nature of safeness of therapeutic space*" and "*The actuality of global context*." Findings are discussed generally across the themes, starting with the overall common experience shared by all interviewed clients. Clients reported feeling safe during psychotherapy, as a reflection of the insights that clients received in psychotherapy and of the psychotherapist's understanding of the complexity of their expatriate situation, which confirmed previous research on counselling expatriate clients (Mortimer, 2010). This feeling was enhanced by the overall awareness that the therapist was also an expatriate and therefore shared the similar, global context linked to expatriate work and life. The therapist's own experience with expatriation facilitated clients' feelings of being understood and accepted.

As such, high significance of receiving the recognition of expatriate complexity and valuating global context in psychotherapy can be observed as a surprising finding. Due to the non-existing literature on expatriate experience of psychotherapy, this finding cannot be directly compared to other findings of expatriate studies, however, the phenomenon of similarity between therapist and client has been observed in previous research. For example, Herman (1998) showed that modality similarity between therapists and clients has a positive effect on the effectiveness of psychotherapy outcomes. Owen and colleagues (2011) showed that clients' perception of their psychotherapists as being more oriented toward cultural issues, may result in seeing the therapist as more credible and in gaining a sense of comfort in the therapeutic process.

On the other hand, it has been shown that struggling with complexity in the world can lead to depressed affect, rumination, and multiple other negative psychological and physical health outcomes (Andrews & Thompson, 2009). Increased stress and deteriorated emotional well-being have also been noted (e.g., Silbiger & Pines, 2014; Truman et al., 2012), therefore one could argue that these complaints would also be reflected in the psychotherapy experience and linked to the attempts to diminish emotional suffering. However, clients did not report on their experience about how they experienced dealing with their problems in psychotherapy, but rather about how they *felt* in therapy which was closely linked to their expatriate identity. As expatriates become more globally minded (Gonzalez-Loureiro et al., 2015; Mao & Shen, 2015), they may undergo self-assessment and self-questioning about their changing identity (Bushong, 2013).

A certain degree of ambivalence was reported by clients which was disclosed also in contemplating their decision to start psychotherapy. Ambivalence in psychotherapy is known from the general psychotherapy literature (Engle & Arkowitz, 2006). Expatriates usually take on an independent approach to their global work and life experience. According to the literature, people in individualistic cultures (similar to the cultures that our participants belonged to) tend to function independently of others and are more self-sufficient (Owusu-Bempah, 2001). Starting psychotherapy may thus have provoked mixed feelings of safeness and dangerousness of a therapeutic space. As much as psychotherapy was a helpful experience due to the recognition of insights, it could at times have been perceived as a dangerous place because it was the *only* place where these insights could be explored. The findings of our study complement the literature on counselling the globally mobile, arguing that expatriates need to

make constant effort to overcome challenges of expatriate life, struggle with their identity and make their life more enjoyable (Bushong, 2013).

As discussed in the sub-ordinate theme “*endurance vs change*,” the need to make important changes in their life has not been expressed in clients' narratives. Deciding on an international work experience might have been a challenging choice for them. Therefore, it was even more important for them to receive the recognition that they were doing well within their expatriate complexity, or, more specifically, in the context of cultural diversity and an international environment. Clients did not choose psychotherapy in order to make big changes in life regarding their expatriate experience, but rather to retain the life that they have had. This is not surprising as changing the wholeness of expatriate context after a long-term global work experience would be a challenging endeavor. For example, the particular feeling of not belonging entirely nor to their home country culture, nor to the host country culture, can only be entirely understood within the expatriate or global context (Bushong, 2013). Feelings of identity are compromised and as much as international experience may be interesting and valuable for expatriates, the feeling of being uprooted seems to persist throughout their life (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

Indeed, the second master theme “*the actuality of global context*” corroborated the importance of the international, global dimension of expatriate life (Altweck & Marshall, 2015). Overall, the findings of the current study confirmed the existence of specific characteristics of the expatriate complexity, a multicultural framework of functioning, and a global mind set of expatriate clients (Gonzalez-Loureiro et al., 2015). Participants also reported on cultural issues, such as language components, stigma associated with the particular geographic area (cf. stigma attached to seeking psychological help in Europe, as mentioned by one of the participants), or expatriates' attitude to choosing people or saying goodbyes (Bushong, 2013). Similarly, Bushong (2013) also discusses the expatriates' attempts to diminish their disturbing feelings, such as sadness, disappointment over constant changes and relocations, and frequent goodbyes as a reflection of high fluctuation of expatriates. More specifically, expatriates may avert saying goodbyes and deepening the relationships in order to save themselves from recurrent pain of loss and disconnection. Struggling to achieve to be what and who they were supposed to be (i.e., an expatriate with a growing career and exciting life with many international connections and opportunities, and coping with everything in a successful manner; Lazarova et al., 2015) could lead to a discrepancy between the real and the ideal image of their own functioning as expatriates.

In relation to the cultural and language dimension of expatriate experience, it has to be noted that the psychotherapist, the interviewer and the clients all belonged to the international environment, they were all members of the expatriate community in the host country. It is perhaps not surprising then that the sub-ordinate theme “*Language makes or breaks*” appeared in clients' narratives as thoughts about cultural and language differences and people from various backgrounds frequently engage expatriates' minds (Christodoulidi, 2010). The multicultural orientation of the therapist and his or her acknowledgement of the complexity of expatriate experience was notably valued by the clients, thus documenting the distinction between multicultural orientation and multicultural competence (Owen et al., 2011). More specifically, they perceived their psychotherapist as being knowledgeable and open to cultural differences between them and their psychotherapist, valuing multilingualism and respecting language and previous cultural experiences. Moreover, and in line with previous research, participants in our study greatly appreciated the ability of the psychotherapist to understand client's culture and the impact of culture on client's identity together with having specific knowledge of a client's culture and possessing skills in dealing with cultural dynamics (Chang & Berk, 2009; Moleiro, Freire, & Tomsic, 2013).

Overall, the findings of our study contribute to the understanding of the meaning that expatriates with a global mind-set attribute to their psychotherapy experience. Expatriates tend to feel equally alienated from their home and host culture. Receiving the recognition of the up-rootedness and lack of sense of belonging as parts of their expatriate complexity, addressed their confusion about where they felt at home. Therefore, the finding documenting their need to be recognized in their expatriate complexity and the connection to a therapist with a global mind-set can be used to outline clinical interventions for expatriates. Furthermore, in a way this finding also supports the advantage of the previous expatriate experience of a therapist, who also needs to respect the multicultural and multilingual dimension of expatriate life, so closely linked to their identity (Bushong, 2013). In other words, the clients can only learn and take to the path of personal growth with someone who has taken this path before. Only a globally minded therapist with rich experience can give the recognition of expatriate complexity to clients with international work experience.

Our study focused on the lived psychotherapy experience of expatriate clients with the aim to understand better how they can be helped. The adequate counselling for the globally mobile remains a challenge for many mental health professionals. Although the presenting problems of expatriates may be similar to domestic population (e.g., depression, anxiety, personality problems, etc.), work with expatriate clients requires a deeper understanding and a lot of trust to offer the safe place where they can explore their changed identity and expatriation.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The current study has a number of strengths. First, our study aimed to shed light on specific emotional challenges accompanied with expatriate experience. Recent literature has shown the importance to identify these challenges (e.g., McNulty, 2013), however, our study has expanded the understanding of the actual experience of treatment of emotional distress. Second, our study used a sample of expatriates who stay in the host country on a longer term basis, and therefore attempted to contribute to the knowledge of non-traditional and less studied expatriates. Third, this is the first study that explored the nature of expatriate experience of psychotherapy. Seeking psychotherapy to a certain extent still persists as a stigma, or a sign of weakness. Therefore, pointing to the importance of diminishing this stigma is another contribution of our study. This study represents a unique and valuable contribution by reporting on the lived psychotherapy experiences of expatriate clients and the meanings that they attributed to their experience. These findings can be extrapolated to similar situations, such as multicultural and multilingual counselling to immigrants, international students and other people with global work experience, and of course for the expatriate clients in different parts of the world.

Aside from the strengths, some limitations of the study need to be mentioned. First, the participants were all women. It would be interesting to learn about psychotherapy experience with a mixed-gender sample. Also, the current research could benefit from studying the psychotherapy experience with different types of expatriates. Second, in our study we did not focus on particular therapeutic relationships in a particular psychotherapy in relation to cultural and linguistic background. Future research then could benefit from studies that would look into the actual process of how the real relationship and working alliance are formed in the context of a particular culture. In particular, it would be of great interest to study stigma attached to seeking treatment in the context of different cultures and expatriate experience.

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