

After Midlife, What Next? Rethinking Future Orientations, Belonging, and Success Among Executive Expatriates in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how executive expatriates navigate post-midlife transitions by re-evaluating their sense of success, belonging, and future direction. Drawing from qualitative interviews with midlife professionals living and working abroad, the study reveals a shift in priorities from achievement-driven identities to values rooted in emotional connection, legacy, and existential meaning. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we uncover key themes such as disillusionment with career-defined success, the longing for deeper community integration, and emerging aspirations for retirement, contribution, and self-actualization. These insights reveal an urgent need for organizations and policymakers to support the aging expatriate population with holistic frameworks that address both career wind-down and psychosocial transitions.

Keywords: Executive expatriates, midlife transition, future orientation, identity, belonging, success, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The midlife stage has long been recognized as a crucial developmental period characterized by psychological re-evaluation, emotional introspection, and shifting life priorities (Sgaramella et al., 2024). For executive expatriates—highly skilled professionals living and working outside their home countries—this life phase is further complicated by layers of cultural dislocation, career demands, and fragmented social ties (Hsu et al., 2024). While considerable research has explored expatriate adjustment, mobility, and cross-cultural performance, relatively little attention has been paid to what happens as expatriates cross the threshold of midlife and begin contemplating the next chapters of their lives (Lee et al., 2021).

Post-midlife for expatriates often evokes profound questions: What does success mean now? Where do I truly belong? What legacy will I leave behind? These questions are intensified in the expatriate context where identity, home, and career are in constant flux (Olry-Louis et al., 2022). Many executive expatriates build their identities around achievement, leadership roles, and financial stability, but as they age, these traditional metrics of success begin to lose relevance. Instead, emerging concerns about emotional well-being, relational depth, retirement planning, and community integration begin to take precedence (Lewis et al., 2024).

The aim of this study is to explore how executive expatriates navigate this post-midlife terrain. Specifically, it examines how they make sense of their past achievements, how they experience belonging (or its absence), and how they imagine their future in personal, professional, and existential terms (Coelho, 2022). The study builds on psychological theories of adult development (e.g., Erikson's psychosocial stages, Levinson's life structure theory) and bridges this with literature on expatriation and global mobility. In doing so, it adds a developmental and humanistic layer to our understanding of expatriate life—moving beyond performance metrics and relocation logistics to the inner world of aging global professionals (Mello et al., 2024).

Midlife has often been stereotyped as a "crisis" period—a time of dissatisfaction or restlessness triggered by unmet goals or life transitions. However, contemporary research (Lachman, 2004; Wethington, 2000) suggests that midlife can also be a period of generativity, purpose, and psychological growth. This is especially pertinent for expatriates, who may begin to reconsider their global lifestyle and re-anchor their identities in more localized or emotionally meaningful ways. Studies by McNulty (2015) and Shaffer et al. (2012) have hinted at the challenges of long-term expatriate life—such as social isolation, family disconnection, or burnout—but few have investigated how these challenges intersect with aging and personal transformation.

Moreover, concepts such as future self-continuity (Hershfield, 2011), retirement identity (Wang & Shultz, 2010), and existential belonging (Jensen & Janes, 2021) offer valuable lenses for understanding how expatriates envision their next life stages. Do they see themselves aging in their host country or returning home? Do they pursue second careers, philanthropy, or mentoring roles? Or do they experience uncertainty, loss, or regret? (Amrith, 2022).

By using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study centers the lived experiences of executive expatriates who are actively engaging with these questions. The qualitative approach allows for a rich, nuanced exploration of meaning-making processes, illuminating not only what participants plan for the future but how they emotionally and cognitively construct their sense of direction, identity, and belonging (Open AI, 2025).

Ultimately, this research aims to shed light on a population often overlooked in both expatriation literature and midlife studies: older expatriates facing forward. As global workforces age and mobility increases, understanding how executive expatriates approach post-midlife transitions becomes vital—for organizations seeking to retain talent, for communities integrating aging professionals, and for individuals seeking coherence and fulfillment in their evolving life narratives (Prihadyanti et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how executive expatriates make sense of their lives after midlife. IPA was selected for its focus on personal meaning-making and its capacity to illuminate subjective experiences, particularly those involving complex transitions and identity redefinition.

Participants

Fifteen executive expatriates (eight women and seven men), aged between 44 and 59, currently residing in Singapore, participated in the study. All participants had lived abroad for at least ten

years and held senior leadership roles in various sectors, including law, finance, education, engineering, and consulting. The diversity in nationality, professional background, and personal circumstances allowed for rich and varied perspectives.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participants	Gender	Country	Age	Marital Status
P1	F	USA	51	Married, no kid
P2	F	Korea	49	Divorced, 2 kids
P3	M	Australia	46	Married, 1 kid
P4	M	Taiwan	59	Married, 1 kid
P5	F	India	43	Divorced, no kid
P6	M	India	46	Married, 1 kid
P7	M	Taiwan	54	Married, 2 kids
P8	M	India	53	Married, 2 kids
P9	F	Taiwan	53	Married, 2 kids
P10	F	Taiwan	48	Married, 2 kids
P11	F	Taiwan	44	Separated, no kid
P12	M	USA	50	Single, no kid
P13	M	India	49	Divorced/Remarried, 3 kids
P14	F	India	45	Married, no kid
P15	M	India	52	Married, 1 kid

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted between January and April 2024. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were held either in person or via encrypted video conferencing platforms to ensure privacy and comfort. The interview guide focused on topics such as:

- Reflections on personal and professional life after midlife
- Redefining success and identity
- Belonging and community engagement
- Aspirations and planning for the future

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical approval was secured from the host institution's research ethics committee. Participants received an information sheet outlining the study's aims, data usage, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews commenced. All names and identifiable details were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following the IPA approach as outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). The analysis proceeded through several stages:

1. **Immersive Reading:** Transcripts were read and re-read to identify patterns, emotional tones, and reflective elements.

2. **Initial Noting:** Exploratory comments (descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual) were made in the margins.
3. **Emergent Themes:** The most salient features were clustered to identify emerging themes within each transcript.
4. **Cross-Case Analysis:** Themes were compared across participants to explore convergence and divergence.
5. **Superordinate Themes:** Higher-order themes were developed that captured the shared structure of participants' experiences.

Reflexivity was maintained through journaling and peer debriefing to minimize bias and enhance analytic rigor. An audit trail of decisions was kept throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

After Midlife: The Temporal Turning Point

Midlife acted as a profound pause point where the fast-paced pursuit of promotions and international opportunities gave way to reflection. Participants like P3 and P7 highlighted how relentless climbing often came at the expense of selfhood, while P1 and P8 described corporate restructuring or stalled advancement as catalysts for re-evaluation. Rather than decline, this period was experienced as a confrontation with disillusionment and a search for authenticity, marking a shift toward what many called a "second adulthood."

Participant P3 captured this vividly:

"I never questioned my choices in my 30s or 40s. I was busy climbing. But now I stop and ask, is this it? What comes next?"

Participant P7 echoed the reckoning:

"Looking back, the choices I made were all about career, not about me as a person. I don't even know if I enjoyed most of it."

Participant P1 described the vulnerability of corporate restructuring:

"Three months ago, my company initiated a restructuring program, and my role was to be eliminated. I was surprised that my years of contribution would lead to such a sad ending of retrenchment at 50. I live through insecurity and worry, and that was my midlife crisis."

Participant P8 also reflected:

"Eighteen months ago, I felt midlife crisis because I got a new role that was smaller than my previous global role. I report to a boss I didn't learn anything from. I feel stuck."

These accounts illustrate that midlife transitions were less about decline and more about a confrontation with disillusionment and the search for authenticity.

What Next: The Uncertainty of Forward Planning

Looking forward, participants expressed uncertainty about retirement, repatriation, and purpose. P12 asked whether “home” remained home after decades abroad, while P14 reframed the unknown as an opportunity to contribute through mentoring or volunteering. P2 emphasized acceptance of change, and P4 found stability in career continuity. Overall, planning for the future was not only logistical but deeply existential, reflecting the tension between displacement and the pursuit of meaning.

Looking forward, participants encountered profound uncertainty about the shape of their future, raising questions of retirement, repatriation, and purpose.

Participant P12 voiced the ambivalence starkly:

“Retirement is coming, but where? Do I go home? Is that even home anymore?”

Participant P14 reframed this uncertainty positively:

“I think about contribution now... maybe mentoring or volunteering. Not just working for money but doing something meaningful.”

Participant P2 added a practical note of resilience:

“My life philosophy is that — whatever is given, I will accept. I will accept all the changes. I welcome changes instead of worrying about them.”

Participant P4 spoke of continuity beyond corporate life:

“One learning from switching 10 years ago from a large MNC Asia head to a smaller private company is that everyone wants to come to Singapore to be expat. So, I made a conscious decision to switch... I feel very secure to stay till retirement.”

These reflections show how planning was not only logistical but also existential, tied to belonging and purpose.

Rethinking Success, Identity, and Belonging

Participant P5 summarized:

“Success now means inner peace. Not position.”

Her reflection captures the broader transition from external validation to inner fulfilment, showing how material and professional achievements lose significance compared to emotional well-being and balance.

Participant P1 highlighted the evolving sense of identity:

“In the last 20 years, my goal was early retirement. Today I realize I want to work even though I reach the financial freedom to retire. My job is my identity, and the

identity gives me energy to wake up every day and gives the the meaning of my life."

This sentiment underscores how work, even beyond financial necessity, continues to provide purpose and structure. For many expatriates, professional engagement becomes intertwined with selfhood, making success less about titles and more about sustaining meaning and vitality.

Together, these voices illustrate that for midlife expatriates, success is no longer equated with wealth or promotion but is reframed around peace, purpose, and identity continuity.

Reimagining Belonging

Participant P10 explained:

"Singapore is safe, green, comfortable... but not my home. I still miss my culture and my people."

This statement reflects a common tension: the convenience and safety of expatriate life in Singapore contrasted with a lingering sense of displacement. It highlights how physical comfort does not always translate into emotional belonging, and how cultural roots remain a powerful determinant of identity.

Participant P5, reflecting on divorce, said:

"Even if you have a spouse, there is no guarantee to be happy, and you must be happy on your own. I am learning to do things alone like going to restaurants myself and plan to travel on my own for the first time."

Her comment shows how belonging can also be self-crafted through resilience and independence. For some expatriates, especially those managing separation or divorce, midlife became a period of reclaiming self-worth by redefining companionship beyond marital ties. The emphasis shifts from relying on external validation to cultivating autonomy and self-nurturance.

Participant P4 added a spiritual anchor:

"Religion makes me feel blessed and with a purpose. Church is also a social community. I grew up in a Christian family with the right values and love, and that builds foundation for me to focus on career and give back to others."

This perspective underscores how faith and community organizations can serve as critical pillars of belonging abroad. Religion provided not only a sense of spiritual orientation but also tangible social connections, enabling expatriates to integrate emotionally into their host context while retaining continuity with their upbringing.

Together, these accounts illustrate that belonging for expatriates is layered: it may emerge from cultural heritage, self-reliance, or community engagement. It is not passively inherited but actively negotiated, often requiring intentional strategies to bridge gaps between the comforts of the host country and the pull of home.

Identity Growth

Participant P7 said:

*"I used to be a boss. Now I'm trying to be a better husband, a present father."
This marks a clear shift from professional to relational identity, where personal roles take precedence over career-driven labels.*

Participant P11 reflected:

*"My identity is still forming. Isn't that the beauty of it?"
His reflection captures the ongoing, fluid nature of identity beyond midlife, suggesting that growth and transformation remain possible well into later adulthood.*

Participant P6, wrestling with marital strain, admitted:

"Marriage is the biggest faulty institution. When you are married young, you don't even know how yourself will turn out to be. With my wife, we are just completely different people, and we cannot connect. The marriage is not working. We are unhappy

His account underscores how unresolved relational challenges deeply shape one's evolving sense of self. Taken together, these reflections show that identity at midlife is not fixed but continuously negotiated. For expatriates, identity growth often involves a rebalancing: shifting from titles and external markers toward relational roles, self-acceptance, and, at times, confronting dissonance in personal relationships.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings suggest that executive expatriates experience midlife as a period of deep reflection rather than crisis. Across participants, there was a consistent movement away from external measures of success toward authenticity, peace, and meaningful belonging. Identity was described not as a static outcome but as an evolving process, shaped by career transitions, relational challenges, and the search for continuity in unfamiliar cultural contexts. The findings of this study shed light on the unique ways executive expatriates navigate post-midlife transitions. Far from a simple continuation of earlier career-driven trajectories, midlife emerged as a turning point where questions of meaning, belonging, and identity rose to prominence (Valero, 2021). Participants reflected critically on their past choices, expressed ambivalence about the future, and actively redefined success in ways that emphasize emotional well-being and relational depth. These insights resonate with broader theories of adult development but also extend them into the underexplored terrain of global mobility and expatriate life (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2024).

Midlife as a Temporal Turning Point

Consistent with Levinson's (1978) conception of the "mid-life transition," participants described their late forties and fifties as a profound checkpoint. Unlike the "midlife crisis" stereotype, their reflections did not reflect sudden upheaval but rather a gradual deceleration, accompanied by deeper introspection. For many, career accomplishments, once central to

identity, now provoked questions of personal cost and missed opportunities (Dunaeva, 2020). As one participant reflected, “Looking back, the choices I made were all about career, not about me as a person. I don’t even know if I enjoyed most of it.”

This shift also resonates with Erikson’s (1959) stage of *generativity versus stagnation*. Rather than continuing in cycles of achievement for their own sake, participants began to evaluate whether their professional sacrifices had contributed to generative outcomes such as family connection, community engagement, or legacy (Wojciechowska, 2017). What distinguishes expatriates is the added layer of geographical dislocation: choices to pursue international assignments often required trade-offs that fragmented familial stability or eroded cultural rootedness. The turning point of midlife thus held dual weight — both developmental and transnational — magnifying the emotional reckoning associated with aging abroad (Wurtz, 2022).

Future Orientation and the Ambivalence of “What Next”

A central theme was the uncertainty surrounding retirement, repatriation, and legacy. For many participants, “home” had become an ambiguous construct, neither fully located in the host country nor comfortably situated in their country of origin. This liminality reflects what Vertovec (2009) terms “transnational belonging,” where long-term expatriates occupy spaces of partial integration without deep-rooted continuity (Elo et al., 2021). As one participant asked, “Retirement is coming, but where? Do I go home? Is that even home anymore?” Such reflections highlight how expatriates’ futures are marked not only by practical concerns (pensions, healthcare, housing) but also by existential questions of identity and place (Whitehead, 2017).

At the same time, several participants framed this uncertainty not only as a loss but as an opportunity. Aspirations for mentoring, volunteering, or community involvement suggest a reorientation toward generative contributions beyond corporate roles (Yemiscigil et al., 2021). This connects to the concept of *future self-continuity* (Hershfield, 2011), which emphasizes the psychological need to envision meaningful links between present identity and imagined future selves and ultimately integrate to a true self with an authentic life. For expatriates, continuity was less about geography and more about purpose and meaning of life: ensuring that their later years would reflect values of connection, contribution, and authenticity rather than decline or isolation (Li et al., 2022).

Rethinking Success, Identity, and Belonging

Perhaps the most transformative dimension of the findings was the redefinition of success. Traditional markers — titles, wealth, promotions — were increasingly regarded as hollow. Instead, participants expressed a desire for peace, balance, and intimacy (Tan, 2000). This echoes recent critiques of global mobility research that emphasize the emotional and relational costs of boundaryless careers (Shaffer et al., 2012; McNulty, 2015).

The theme of belonging was especially complex. Participants described a “double estrangement” — not fully integrated into the host society but no longer feeling entirely at home in their country of origin either. Such accounts highlight the emotional toll of what has often been framed as the privilege of global mobility (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022). Yet participants also demonstrated agency by cultivating alternative anchors of belonging, such as

spiritual communities, peer networks, or even pets. These strategies reveal that belonging for expatriates is not inherited but constructed, and often requires deliberate investment in micro-communities of recognition and care (Barglowski & Bonfert, 2022).

Identity growth also emerged strongly, challenging the notion that selfhood stabilizes after midlife. Participants described ongoing processes of experimentation and redefinition, from shifting professional roles into relational ones (“I used to be a boss. Now I’m trying to be a better husband”) to embracing personal freedom and singlehood (Igarashi et al., 2013). Such reflections align with contemporary views of identity as fluid and evolving across the life course (McAdams, 2001). Importantly, expatriates’ accounts highlight how midlife abroad can be not only destabilizing but also creative — offering opportunities to author new narratives of self (Chan, 2014).

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings have several implications for organizations, policymakers, and communities engaging with aging expatriate populations. First, mobility programs typically emphasize early-to mid-career talent development, with limited attention to late-career or retirement transitions (NDAGI & ALI, 2022). Yet the reflections of participants suggest that psychosocial support — mentoring pathways, flexible exit planning, or community integration programs — may be just as critical as financial packages. Organizations that recognize the importance of emotional safety and future continuity will be better equipped to retain loyalty and ease transitions for senior expatriates (Xie, 2020).

Second, community and governmental stakeholders should consider the unique needs of long-term expatriates who may age in host countries without strong family or cultural anchors (Rohman et al., 2023). Social infrastructure — from expatriate associations to intercultural community initiatives — can play a vital role in addressing issues of loneliness, belonging, and purpose. Without such support, expatriates risk facing later adulthood with diminished continuity, caught between fragmented attachments (Ehsan et al., 2020).

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of narrative and reflection in supporting expatriates through midlife. Coaching, counseling, or reflective programs could provide structured spaces for expatriates to reconcile past sacrifices, envision meaningful futures, and redefine success on their own terms. Such initiatives would not only enhance well-being but also foster resilience and adaptability in this population (Jin et al., 2024).

Positioning within Literature

This study contributes uniquely to the literature by foregrounding reflection as the central mechanism in post-midlife expatriate life. While previous research has examined expatriate adjustment, burnout, and family dynamics, little attention has been paid to the developmental trajectories of expatriates as they age (Ndagi & Ali, 2022). By highlighting temporal turning points, ambivalent futures, and redefinitions of success, this research adds a humanistic and developmental lens to the study of global mobility. It challenges the field to move beyond performance metrics and to recognize the existential and emotional dimensions of expatriate experience (Coelho, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth exploration of how executive expatriates in Singapore navigate the complex terrain of post-midlife transitions. By centering their lived experiences, it reveals the dual weight of developmental and transnational challenges that shape identity, belonging, and future orientations (Hsu L, 2025). First, midlife was experienced as a temporal checkpoint. Participants such as P3 and P7 highlighted the stark realization that decades of career pursuit had often come at the expense of personal fulfillment. Others, like P1 and P8, shared the distress of corporate restructuring and stalled advancement, which catalyzed a reckoning about the role of work in providing identity and purpose. These findings suggest that the so-called “midlife crisis” is more productively viewed as an adaptive transition that fosters self-reflection and renewal.

Second, the uncertainty of the future loomed large. Voices such as P12’s — “Do I go home? Is that even home anymore?” — reveal the existential displacement of long-term expatriation. Yet others, like P14 and P2, demonstrated resilience by reframing uncertainty as opportunity for contribution, mentoring, or personal growth. This underscores the centrality of purpose and continuity in shaping expatriates’ later life decisions.

Third, the study illuminated profound shifts in how success, belonging, and identity are understood. Participant P5 captured the new orientation succinctly: “Success now means inner peace. Not position.” Belonging was renegotiated through family, friendships, spirituality, and micro-communities, even as participants like P10 acknowledged lingering estrangement. Identity, once tethered to corporate achievement, was increasingly reconstructed in relational and existential terms — being a better spouse, parent, or simply continuing to evolve (P7, P11). Ultimately, this research highlights the creative potential of midlife among expatriates. Rather than decline, this life stage opened space for redefinition, reflection, and renewed purpose. Organizations and policymakers must expand their frameworks beyond career mobility to support holistic aging abroad, incorporating psychosocial support, retirement planning, and community integration.

By recognizing the lived complexities of expatriates, we can move toward a more humane and comprehensive understanding of global mobility. Midlife for executive expatriates is not an ending but a pivotal chapter of reflection and transformation — one that holds the promise of authenticity, connection, and legacy across borders.

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