

International Adjustment: How Self-Initiated Expatriates and Assigned Expatriates Differ From Each Other

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Abstract

Integrating three streams of literature--international adjustment, situation motivation theory and employee self-reliance, this paper creates a theoretical framework of how self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) and assigned expatriates (AEs) differ from each other with respect to adjustment of living and working abroad. A theoretical model for comparing the international adjustment outcomes between SIEs and AEs then is proposed: being intrinsic and identified motivated and assumed more self-reliant, SIEs have a higher adjustment level compared to AEs. Moreover, it also postulates motivation and self-reliance as antecedents of such differences.

Key words: Self-initiated expatriates; Assigned expatriates; International adjustment; Motivation; Self-reliance

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INTRODUCTION

Internationalized organizations and academics must take a more strategic view of global staffing in order to

maximize the use of talents to achieve organizational goals (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). One of the new key themes is the emergence of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), the group of people who themselves make the decision to spent part of their lives living and working in a foreign country, usually for a relatively long period of time (Vance, 2005). These people differ a lot from the assigned expatriates (AEs) (who are dispatched by home companies to overseas positions) in the perspective of motivation, support, career stage, and others (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007). However, despite the fact that SIEs are alleged to form a larger and more potent global labor market segment (Myers & Pringle, 2005), there is still a dearth of research both on the individual issues faced by SIEs about how to establish themselves in the new environment without company support and on the difference between AEs and SIEs on international adjustment. Therefore this research aims at filling this gap by identifying the key factors and the role they play in the process of SIEs and AEs international adjustment.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

1.1 International Adjustment of Expatriates

Most literatures agree that cultural dissimilarity will increase adjustment difficulties of expatriates. Selmer, Chiu, and Shenkar (2007) suggest that to solve this problem organizations could focus on candidates “who already have a global mindset”. One alternative available to international organization are those who have chosen to self-expatriate. It is argued that this contextual grounding can lead to internal psychological strength in a way that SIEs are characterized by an internal orientation for a globalized life and career which will inevitably give rise to certain inner motivated and self-determined behaviors (Inkson, 2006; Hall & Moss, 1998). “Like an internal lens from which to view the world”, SIEs have the nature

of personal agency as they “actively agent in their own career development and assert themselves in developing and utilizing their global competencies” (Vance, 2005).

1.2 Situation Motivation Theory

Situation motivation refers to the motivation individuals experience when they are currently engaging in an activity (in this case, being an expatriate), which can be more specified into four aspects: intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, external regulation and amotivation (no purpose of doing things). These types of motivation are posited to differ on continuum high to low levels in their self-determination, which involves a sense of feeling free in doing what one has chosen to do. Intrinsic motivation refers to performing an activity for its own sake in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction inherent in the activity, while identified regulation occurs when a behavior is valued and perceived as being chosen by oneself, yet still extrinsic because the activity is not performed for itself but as a means to an end. In contrast, external regulation occurs when behavior is regulated by outside rewards or in order to avoid negative consequences (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Last but not the least, amotivation refers to an individual’s experience of a lack of contingency between behaviors and outcomes. Being neither intrinsically nor extrinsically motivated, amotivated behaviors are the least self-determined because there is no sense of purpose and no expectations of reward or change of events.

1.3 Self-Reliance Theory

Quick, Joplin, Nelson, and Quick (1992) first define self-reliance as a “healthy, behavioral strategy which may seem paradoxical because a person appears independent while maintaining a host of supportive attachments” in their study of the military officer candidates. In other words, a self-reliant response to stress involves reaching out to others. They note that self-reliant people are characterized by confident, enthusiastic, persistent, responsive and flexible. To their longitudinal test results, military officer candidates and basic military trainees who successfully graduate from training appear to significantly more self-reliant than their non-graduating counterparts. This reflects that individual self-reliance may be a predictor of success and/or a coping mechanism. Later researches in the management field argue that self-reliance and self-management are becoming dominant requirements for the concept of international career and are especially applicable in today’s turbulent world where organizations are undergoing profound changes (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Magala, 2009; Magala, 2002; Cascio, 1998; Schein, 1996).

2. PROPOSITION

2.1 The Impact of Intrinsic Motivation on International Adjustment

International adjustment involves psychological comfort associated with various non-work factors, or in other words, adaptation to living in the host culture environment. According to situational motivation theory, individuals driven by intrinsic motivation are expected to engage in seeking new things and conquering challenges. As an international assignment is generally considered evolving with general living conditions filled with novelty and challenge (Abueva, 2000), individuals who are intrinsically motivated will be more open to new and diverse general living experiences. They are self-efficacious in adapting to different living environments (Anderson, 2004).

Compared with external motivation represented typically by financial rewards of international assignments, intrinsic motivations are much related to the enjoyment or satisfaction inherent in the assignment itself (Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002). Intrinsic motivations are deemed important in an international context where performance is not only task-specific but also entails dealing effectively with the larger cultural environment (Silverman, 2006). Highly intrinsic-motivated expatriates are more likely to be psychologically prepared to adjust to the new work demands expected in the new cultural setting. In turn, they are more likely to adjust themselves to overcome challenges arising during the foreign assignments and achieve their assignment goals. For example, they are easy to get accustomed to different work hours and adopting different work styles.

Interacting adjustment involves the comfort associated with interacting with host country nationals both inside and outside of work. Individuals with high intrinsic motivation for expatriation will adjust better in their interactions with those from different cultural backgrounds because of their curiosity and enthusiasm in nature for different cultures. Through interacting and communicating with local people and actively seeking to develop relationships with them, expatriates get to know the host culture on a time-to-time basis. Thus, they should experience a high level of comfort interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Proposition 1a: Expatriates intrinsic motivation for an international assignment will be positively related to their general adjustment.

Proposition 1b: Expatriates intrinsic motivation for an international assignment will be positively related to their work adjustment.

Proposition 1c: Expatriates intrinsic motivation for an international assignment will be positively related to their interacting adjustment.

2.2 The Impact of Identified Regulation on International Adjustment

As composed to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation which contains identified regulation and external motivation pertains to a wide variety of behaviors which are engaged in as a means to an end and not for their own sake (Deci, 1985). With identified regulation, the expatriates remain internalizing the reasons for their decisions. However, while internal to the expatriates and perceived as chosen by themselves, this form of internalization is not truly self-determined since it is limited to the internalization of past external contingencies, or the international assignment becomes valued and judged important as extrinsic motives become regulated through identification.

Though identified regulation belongs to extrinsic motivation, expatriates with this kind of motivation still value the international assignments as important for self-development and career-building from an internal angle. They are likely to cohere well with the international environment and are easier to overcome culture conflicts.

Proposition 2a: Expatriates identified regulation for an international assignment will be positively related to their interacting adjustment.

Proposition 2b: Expatriates identified regulation for an international assignment will be positively related to their working adjustment.

Proposition 2c: Expatriates identified regulation for an international assignment will be positively related to their interacting adjustment.

2.3 The Impact of External Regulation and Amotivation on International Adjustment

External regulation and amotivation are considered to be controlling forms of motivation. Ordered along a self-determination continuum, external regulation is less self-determined than intrinsic motivation and identified regulation but more self-determined than amotivation. When external regulated, one's behavior is regulated through external means such as rewards and constraints. For instance, an expatriate accepts the international assignment because of the anxiety of losing their jobs or family reasons (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Besides intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, amotivation refers to the situation when individuals do not perceive contingencies between outcomes and their own actions. When amotivated, individuals are neither intrinsically nor extrinsically motivated, experiencing feelings of incompetence and expectancies of uncontrollability (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Many researches have showed that positive outcomes should result from intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, whereas negative outcomes should result from less self-determined forms of motivation (Millward, 2005). In contrast, external regulation and amotivation are negatively related or unrelated to these outcomes. For external regulated expatriates, they are likely to perceive

the action of going abroad as caused by forces out of their own control. This kind of people may feel undecieved and eventually unwilling to participate in interacting activities with locals. Pelletier, Tuson, Greene-Demers, Noels, and Beaton(1995) found that intrinsic motivation was positively related to self-reported effort and intentions to continue the same activity in the future, and negatively related to distractions in persisting. The inverse pattern of relationships was observed with amotivation. Therefore, the following propositions are given:

Proposition 3a: Expatriates external regulation for an international assignment will be negatively related to their general adjustment.

Proposition 3b: Expatriates external regulation for an international assignment will be negatively related to their working adjustment.

Proposition 3c: Expatriates external regulation for an international assignment will be negatively related to their interacting adjustment.

Proposition 4a: Expatriates amotivation for an international assignment will be negatively related to their general adjustment.

Proposition 4b: Expatriates amotivation for an international assignment will be negatively related to their working adjustment.

Proposition 4c: Expatriates amotivation for an international assignment will be negatively related to their interacting adjustment.

2.4 Comparing SIEs With AEs on International Adjustment With Respect to Motivations

The key distinction between SIEs and AEs is the initiation for the expatriation. For SIEs, the initiation for leaving the home country comes from the individual rather than from employer (Richardson & Mallon, 2005). The decision to work abroad is deliberate and free from organizational pressure or obligations towards the company. In addition, SIEs can decide for themselves where to apply and which job offer in which country to accept in order to promote their careers (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Moreover, SIEs pursue individual career plans and design their own career goals. They tend to see their overseas experience as a means of self-development. Consequently, achieving specific organizational goals is not a primary motivational force for them to work internationally.

By contrast, though personal interests in international experience may be perceived by some of the AEs, they are more likely to be motivated to go abroad due to the related financial benefits, increased opportunities for career progression, etc. (Minbaeva & Michailova, 2004). They also accept the international assignment partly due to "push factors" in the company. For instance, a study among German managers on expatriate assignment found that 69 per cent of respondents considered that they could not refuse an international assignment more than once without it negatively affecting their future career with that

company (Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002). Thus motivation for these AEs is quite different from SIEs, let along those who are deliberately to take the overseas assignment due to only external regulation and amotivation factors. Combining the above lines of argumentation, we give the following proposition:

Proposition 5a: SIEs are more likely to have a stronger intrinsic motivation and identified regulation towards working in other countries while AEs are more likely to have external regulations and amotivations.

Proposition 5b: SIEs are more likely to have better international adjustment results than AEs with concern to motivations.

2.5 The Impact of Self-Reliance on SIEs and AEs General Adjustment

Adjustment to several general aspects of the host country is also likely to vary among the two groups of expatriates from the self-reliance perspective. A limited number of studies argue that since SIEs do not have company support, they are less adjusted to general environment than AEs. A survey by the Tokyo Metropolitan Office shows SIEs are often discriminated against when seeking to rent local private apartments partly because many apartment owners are afraid of different customs, language problems, and additional people living in and sub-lending issues (Morley & Heraty, 2004). In contrast, AEs receive assistance and financial support from their companies so as to maintain the same standard of living abroad as at home. Inkson and Myers (2003) carry out interviews with SIEs in New Zealand and find that SIEs gain increased self-confidence and self-reliance when working abroad.

Proposition 6a: SIEs are more likely to have better general adjustment results than AEs with concern to self-reliance.

2.6 The Impact of Self-Reliance on SIEs and AEs Work Adjustment

Firstly, AEs often receive a package of parent organization support including incremental salary, compensation, family settle down arrangements and cross-cultural training, etc. In contrary, as the international career is not initiated by an international operating company, SIEs are hired as locals in the foreign country and have to rely on their own, which brings them the self-reliance in nature.

Secondly, while remaining an employee of the home-country organization, AEs are normally sent to a related unit in a foreign country to accomplish a specific job or organization-related goal and will go back to the parent company thereafter. However, without company constraints, SIEs consequently do not follow the

structured career path of AEs. In most cases, they leave the home organization eternally without expectation of return after working abroad.

Thirdly, when AEs decide to work abroad, the sacrifice of leaving is relatively higher. Though remaining in the same organization and being able to keep up contact with home colleagues, they are no longer part of the business networks in the home country (Suutari, 2003). However, SIEs are more willing to accept changes, and the sacrifice of breaking the old links are comparatively lower.

Proposition 6b: SIEs are more likely to have better work adjustment results than AEs with concern to self-reliance.

2.7 The Impact of Self-Reliance on SIEs and AEs Interaction Adjustment

Since AEs are only on a temporary assignment in the host company abroad, and the parent company is fundamentally responsible for the administration of the process, AEs may be socialized in both the host and parent companies. In other words, AEs need to develop a dual understanding of the values, expected behaviors, and social knowledge that are essential for interacting as a member in both the parent organization and host organization, which at sometimes could trigger the conflicts of two different cultures. SIEs, on the contrary, do not have to keep a close relationship with the parent company. Being tightly related to the host company, they are less liable to obey the parent company's value system and behavior styles.

Proposition 6c: SIEs are more likely to have better interaction adjustment results than AEs with concern to self-reliance.

3. THE INTEGRATING MODEL

A complete theoretical model needs to be constructed in order to summarize the basic assumptions and framework of this comparative study. Based on the research questions, previous literature review and propositions given, the theoretical model is showed in Figure 1. Expatriate's intrinsic and identified motivation of working abroad, as well as his/her self-reliance of being an international employee will have positive effects on the individuals adjustment, while those who are external motivated and have the mindset of amotivation are negatively related to international adjustment. Thus, SIEs will adjust better to the international environment compared to AEs. Besides, several other factors, like age, gender, the ability to speak the local language, previous overseas experience, as well as whether or not the expatriate has received cross-cultural training can all play a roll on the actual outcomes of adjustment, thus must be considered as control variables.

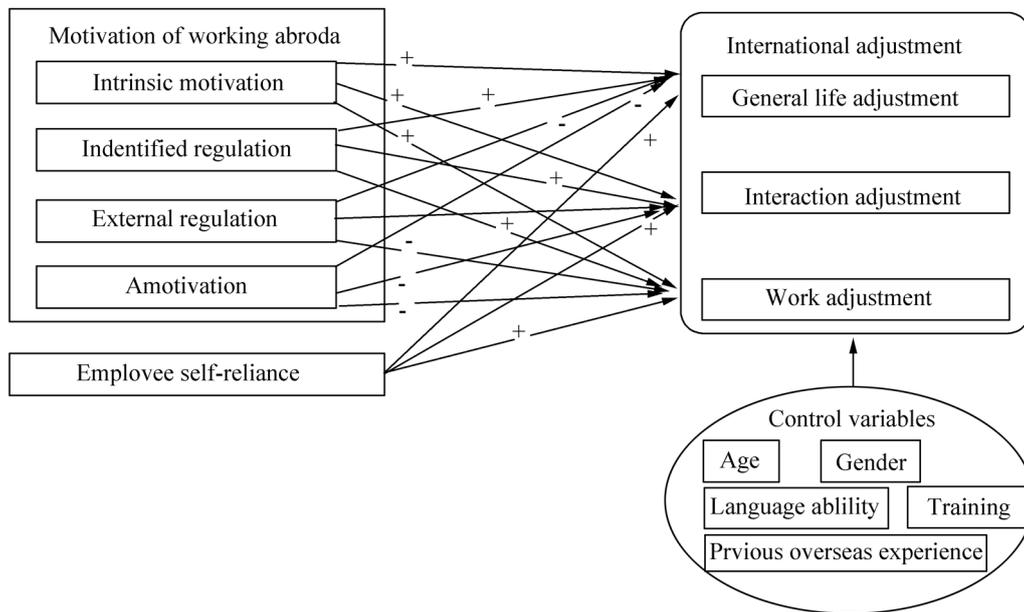


Figure 1
The “Motivation—Self-Reliance” Model

DISCUSSION

This paper expands the study on SIEs by providing a theoretical framework of how SIEs differ from AEs on their international adjustment outcomes. Moreover, it explores the antecedents of such kind of differences. In the process it addresses the following facets:

- The two models of international adjustment;
- The difference between SIEs and AEs on international adjustment;
- The relationship between motivation of working abroad and international adjustment; and
- The relationship between employee self-reliance and international adjustment.

In the future, empirical testing is required to assess the effectiveness of this model. More specified, future research should address empirically the following questions:

- Are there any other moderating factors that play a role in SIE’s adjustment?
- How do expatriates construct their working abroad experiences?

CONCLUSION

To get helpful insights about the investigated issue, both quantitative and qualitative research are needed to explore the experience of SIEs and AEs. First, quantitative data is necessary for the evaluation of both groups’ adaptation abilities to international environment, as well as to what extent do situational motivation and employee self-reliance have an effect on international adjustment in different areas. Besides, in-depth interviews are useful in finding other factors that lie behind those adjustment

differences since they offer better understanding of under-researched phenomena, and help to explain some of the relationships within the analysis of the survey data. Qualitative study goes some way towards de-trivializing expatriate experience by digging up and interpreting tales told by expatriates, thus helps to find other factors lying behind the rich texture of adventure stories in exotic locations.

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