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Expatriate Adjustment: Validating Multicultural Personality Trait among Self-initiated Academic Expatriates

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Abstract

This study looks at the adjustment of self-initiated academic expatriates working at one of the public universities in Malaysia. The main aim of the research is to investigate the relationship between Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) and the expatriate's personal, professional and social adjustment. The MPQ consists of five dimensions - cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. One-hundred and one questionnaires were distributed to self-initiated academic expatriates attached to various departments at the university. Results show that the MPQ predicts all three types of adjustment. Apart from the results, the discussions and limitations of the study are also presented in the paper.

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1. Introduction

A significant number of literature on expatriates appears to focus on organizational expatriates (OEs) (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Selmer & Lauring, 2011). However, as globalization takes place, expatriate assignments are no more organizational decisions but rather of personal choice and individual growth. As research on the adjustment of OEs has reached its highest point and the phenomenon is well-understood (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Myers & Pringle, 2005), another group of expatriates that is now being highlighted is the self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). This group of international employees was first being highlighted by Torrington (1994) but only in recent

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years researchers begin to shift their attention on individuals who initiate their own travel and find work in a foreign country. This group of expatriates perceives overseas experience as a means of self-development or part of other personal agenda, and their career developments do not follow the structured organizational path of the OEs. Myers and Pringle (2005) label SIEs as a form of self-managed global career. They should be separated from OEs and be seen as part of an individual's career enhancement (Inkson, Pringle, Arthur & Berry, 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). According to Myers and Pringle (2005), this career path is predominantly undertaken by the younger generation who likes to explore the world and experience new cultures.

In this era, the utilization of SIEs in the global market does not only involve business organizations as universities are also joining the global work market, searching for potential academics. This enables for more academic expatriates to travel and work around the globe since many countries have an open-door policy towards academic expatriates. For example, in Malaysia, it has been the government's policy that local universities employ foreign academics to teach in the country to enable local students to get more exposures of other cultures, especially the language, values and teaching styles. However, for some countries, the employment of academic expatriates could be attributed towards the shortages of knowledge workers in the country (Adler & Ghadar, 1990). The increase in the number of movement of academic expatriates has enabled the local universities to offer attractive contracts to suitably qualified academics from other countries. Being the SIEs, academic expatriates have often initiated their travel to foreign countries themselves (Richardson & McKenna, 2000). As compared to business organizations, universities present a whole new work environment involving different job requirements such as lectures, research projects, publications, consultation, acquiring research grants and administration (Barry, Berg & Changler, 2003). The increasing numbers of academic expatriates have also led to that more universities have an international faculty representing different national cultures (Altbach, 1996). Hence, the management of university becomes more challenging as expatriate academics present growing challenges for institutions of higher education (Richardson & McKenna, 2000) that is likely to be even more critical in the future. Questions arise in terms of what supports are available to academic expatriate, whether in their work and what is needed to ensure effective support and thus, lead to their effective adjustment to the new cultural environment. As many have discussed, in order to adjust to a new culture and work efficiently, these expatriates need to accommodate their attitudes and behaviors to the new cultural context (Huang, Chi & Lawler, 2005). Therefore, the main aim of the present research is to establish the predictive relationships of the MPQ and the expatriates' personal, social and professional adjustment. Specifically, the research investigates whether MPQ has any significant relationships with the three areas of adjustment.

1.1. Expatriate adjustment

So, what is expatriate adjustment? Scholars have come up with various definitions of expatriate adjustment. For the purpose of this research, expatriates adjustment is defined as the level at which an expatriate feels comfortable towards the new environment which consequently leads him/her to function effectively in that environment. Three areas of adjustment are identified from the literature: the psychological (personal) and sociocultural (social) adjustment (Searle & Ward, (1990), and work (professional) adjustment (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Hawes & Kealey, 1981). Psychological adjustment relates to psychological well-being and satisfaction with the various aspects of life. It focuses more on the attitude of the expatriate or sojourner. Unlike psychological adjustment, sociocultural adjustment refers to the social skills that inspire the attitudinal factors. It is one's ability to "fit in" into the new cultural environment (Searle & Ward, 1990). It concerns the way a sojourner deals with problems associated with living in a new environment, how he/she strive to perform effectively and interact meaningfully with people of the host nation (Aycan, 1997). In this research, social support is seen as the support that expatriates received from peers at work. Work adjustment simply refers to how an individual accomplishes their tasks and their attitude towards work (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) and this is marked by good performance and a positive attitude towards the new job in the new cultural environment.

1.2. *The MPQ*

The present research utilized the MPQ proposed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001). The instrument was used to measure the personality dimensions that underlie multicultural effectiveness. It has scales for cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. As suggested, the MPQ questions refer to behavior in multicultural situations, making the relation between test behavior and the aspired international position transparent to its respondents, thereby enhancing the acceptability of the instrument (Van Oudenhoven, Mol & Van der Zee, 2003).

In defining the dimensions, Hawes and Kealey (1981) defined cultural empathy as sensitivity toward the new cultural environment. It is related to one's ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of the host nationals. Arthur and Bennett (1995) argue that the concept is often cited in literature on multicultural effectiveness. The second concept, open mindedness relates to "an open and unprejudiced attitude" toward people, values and norms different than their own (Arthur & Bennet, 1995; Ronen, 1989). Meanwhile, the concept of social initiative is associated with the tendency of the sojourner or the expatriate to take initiative and approach the new social situations positively. It is suggested that the expatriate's ability to initiate contacts and associate with host nationals are crucial in ensuring successful adjustment (Hawes & Kealy, 1981; Kets de Vries & Mead, 1991). This is supported by empirical evidence which suggests the relevancy of this dimension of MPQ in expatriate adjustment. (see Abe & Wiseman, 1983). The emotional stability on the other hand is the ability of the expatriate to compose him/herself and be emotionally strong in demanding and stressful environments (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Caligiuri, 2000; Church, 1982; Tung, 1981). The last dimension, flexibility, is the concept which is being emphasized by a number of authors (see for example Arthur & Bennet, 1995; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Torbiorn, 1982). This dimension emphasizes the expatriate or the sojourner's ability to easily adapt him/herself to the new cultural environment because the new environment could be different in values and beliefs.

2. **Method**

2.1. *Participants*

The participants of this study were self-initiated academic expatriates working in various departments at a local university. They were identified as subjects of study because they operate outside the framework of the ordinary corporate expatriate assignment model (Richardson, 2006). Based on the list of academic expatriates obtained from the Center of International Affairs and Cooperation, it was identified that there were 101 expatriates currently working at the university. Since their number was small, all of them were considered as respondents for the present study.

2.2. *Instrumentations*

The questionnaire survey, specifically the self-administered questionnaire was the key part of data collection used in the study. The list of academic expatriates working in UUM was obtained from the Center of International Affairs and Cooperation. The list contained the information about the office location of these expatriates. The questionnaires were then distributed via a drop and collect method. Of the total 101 questionnaires distributed, 94 questionnaires were returned, yielded a 93 per cent returned rate. The number of missing values was less than 1 per cent, which also revealed that respondents were motivated to respond to the questionnaire.

2.3. *Measurements*

The table presented below (Table 1) summarizes the measurement of each variable being studies as well as the alpha values of each variable.

Table 1. Measures

Variables	Measures	Total Items	α
MPQ	Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001); Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (5 = completely applicable; 1 = totally not applicable)	18 items	.79
Cultural empathy		18 items	.78
Open-mindedness		17 items	.81
Social initiative		20 items	.80
Emotional stability		18 items	.77
Flexibility			
Personal adjustment	Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin (1985); Satisfaction with Life Scale (5 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree)	5 items	.81
Social adjustment	Van Sonderen (2003); Social Support List Interaction (5 = very often; 1 = never)	23 items	.84
Professional adjustment	Spector (1997); Job Satisfaction Survey (5 = totally agree; 1 = totally disagree)	36 items	.86

3. Results

Descriptive statistics was used to report the profile of respondents. Based on the analysis, 58 respondents (61.7%) aged between 41 to 45 years old, 10 of them were female (10.6%) and all of them had a PhD degree, with a majority were hired as senior lecturers (68.1%). Of these expatriates, 81 of them were married (86.1%) and 73 of them of them (77.6%) had their family with them in Malaysia. Looking at the country of origin, Indonesia dominated the expatriates' group, where eighteen respondents (19%) reported they were from Indonesia. Fifteen (15.9%) were from India, 12 (12.8%) from Nigeria, seven (7.4%) from United States, Pakistan and Yemen. Even though there were expatriates from other countries, they however, represented a small group from each respective country. More than 50% of these expatriates had been in Malaysia more than 2 years. Forty-nine of them (52.1%) had experience working in other countries before. When asked about their ability to speak the native language of the host country, 77.6% (73 respondents) reported that their knowledge was limited to very short and simple phrases only.

Using the full respondents, the means, standard deviations (SDs) and correlations of all variables were also calculated. Table 2 reports the mean distributions, SDs and correlations of all variables. Professional adjustment scored the highest mean value (\bar{x} =4.05) and flexibility scored the lowest (\bar{x} =3.26) among all variables being studied. The table also reveals that of all dimensions of MPQ, cultural empathy did not show significant relationships with emotional stability and flexibility. It also did not have any significant relationship with the psychological and social adjustment of the expatriates. Open-mindedness and social initiative also did not correlate with social adjustment. For adjustment variables, social adjustment did not correlate with professional adjustment.

Table 2. Means, SDs and Correlations of all variables

Variables	M	SDs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Cultural Empathy	3.46	.39								
Open-Mindedness	3.58	.36	.67**							
Social Initiative	3.51	.36	.31**	.58**						
Emotional Stability	3.44	.34	.19	.40**	.49**					
Flexibility	3.26	.32	.18	.41**	.42**	.47**				
Personal Adjust.	3.83	.54	.13	.12	.16	.21*	.23*			
Social Adjust.	3.70	.69	.06	.12	.19***	.23*	.28**	.38**		
Professional Adjust.	4.05	.44	.32**	.34**	.34**	.39**	.39**	.15	.04	-

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In discussing the relationship between MPQ dimensions and expatriate adjustment, the results are presented based on the hierarchical regression analyses performed on the variables. In each regression analysis, personal adjustment, social adjustment and professional adjustment were regressed against the five dimensions of MPQ - cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. Of all the MPQ variables, emotional stability and flexibility were found to be correlated to all three types of adjustment – personal, social and professional. Cultural empathy and open-mindedness showed significant relationships only with professional adjustment. Meanwhile, social initiative revealed significant relationships with social adjustment and professional adjustment.

4. Discussions and conclusions

As discussed, the main purpose of the study was to identify the relationships between dimensions of MPQ and expatriates' personal, social and professional adjustment. The study offers a much deeper investigation at how personal adjustment (satisfaction with life), social adjustment (support by peers) and professional adjustment (job satisfaction) are related to MPQ. As the results revealed, emotional stability and flexibility had shown significant positive relationships with the expatriates' overall adjustment. This was anticipated because past research has consistently found that this variable has great influence on expatriate adjustment (see for example Black, 1990; Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Shaffer, Gregersen, Harrison, Black & Ferzandi, 2006; Van Oudenhoven, Mol & Van der Zee, 2003). Being mentally strong to face the challenges pose by the new environment and flexible in adapting to the this environment help expatriate to successfully adjust themselves, either at the personal, social or professional level. As the new culture poses a number of challenges to the newcomer, one has to be strong mentally to face these challenges and adjust him or herself to the new culture. Those who are strong and flexible can easily accept the differences in the new cultural environment and adjust themselves to the situation. Sensitivity toward culture differences and the ability to be more open towards these differences can help expatriates to adjust themselves to the new working environment, where they have to deal with people of a diverse culture background. The ability of the expatriates to approach the new situations in a positive way and take initiatives to socialize and communicate with the locals can help facilitate their social and professional adjustment as these are the situations where they frequently have to deal with host nationals.

Most of the results of the relationship between the MPQ dimensions and expatriate adjustment seem to support earlier research by Van Oudenhoven et al. (2003). The findings can help create awareness among those who work with expatriates that it is not only the expatriates who have to work hard toward their adjustment but those who work and deal with expatriates are also responsible in assisting with their adjustment (i.e. help ease work life, easy to talk with, reliable and willingness to listen). The perception that they create towards the amount of support they receive from the local peers will consequently help them to perform better at work.

Taking into account expatriate personality traits and contextual factors related to work and non-work adjustment in Malaysia, the present study contributes toward cross-cultural literature in a number of ways. First, the study contributes toward the existing literature on SIEs and expatriate academics. Second, the present work on SIEs is more extensive as it looks at variables other than what had been studied, especially the effects on personality characteristics on adjustment. The utilization of MPQ in self-initiated academic expatriate adjustment is an effort toward further understanding of expatriate adjustment as it was normally used to study organizational expatriates (OEs). Finally, this study contributes toward expatriate adjustment studies in Malaysia as to date, research in this area are still very limited.

Despite its contributions, the present research also has its limitations such as the reliance on a single respondent for the dependent and independent variables, which might have contributed towards the common method variance. Another limitation with regard to this is the sample size itself. It is acknowledged that the response rates within groups are particularly important for all multivariate analysis. In the present study, the number of respondents was rather small for the analysis and this could lead to some problems when estimating regression weights in relation to hypothesis testing. But due to the small population of SIEs currently attached to the university, the number was

considered appropriate. Taking that into consideration, future research could be conducted within a bigger group of SIEs working with universities in Malaysia. A bigger sample size and a wider representation of expatriates from different countries could contribute towards a greater generalizability of research findings.

In sum, although research on expatriation management has been numerous, the findings from the present research take us to the next level of understanding the SIEs' pattern of adjustment and the factors that contribute towards their overall adjustment to the new cultural environment.

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