

Personality And Expatriate Performance: The Mediating Role Of Expatriate Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the relationship between personality and job performance, and the mediating role of cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) in that relationship. Based on sample of 332 expatriates working in Malaysia, personality predicts job performance, and both the interaction and work adjustment mediates the relationship. The findings of this study contributes to the body of knowledge in the cross-cultural management field as well as practical implication to expatriating firms especially in the area of selection of international candidates.

Keywords: Big Five Personality, Cross-Cultural Adjustment, Job Performance

INTRODUCTION

Studies on personality construct have long been of central concern among Industrial/Organizational (I/O) psychologists since it is believe to be a reliable predictor of workplace behaviour and job performance in the domestic and in the international setting. Personality defined as enduring emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal and motivational style that explains individual's behaviour in different situations (McCrae & Costa, 1989). Albeit limited, the available studies have linked personality factor with various expatriate outcomes such as adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2006), health related strain (e.g., Ren, Harrison, Bhaskar-Shrinivas & Shaffer, 2006), job performance (Mol, Born, Willemsen & Van Der Molen, 2005) and premature return (e.g., Caligiuri, 2000a).

A review of the I/O psychology literature suggests that the sum of all personality characteristics can be categorize in five basic trait dimensions- extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience and neuroticism. These five trait dimensions subsequently labelled as the Big Five Personality (Hough, 1992; Digman, 1997). The Big Five personality trait remain stable over time and situation, can be generalized across cultures and languages, can be measured reliably and validly and can be used to predict human behaviour.

The first dimension, extraversion, has been related with heightened level of sociability. Individuals high in extraversion tend to like groups and gatherings, to be talkative and energetic and generally to be more active and assertive (Costa & McCrae, 1992). An extravert person is sociable and outgoing with others (Huang, Chi & Lawler, 2005). Conscientiousness described as a form of conformity to rules and standards, and linked to traits like responsibility, organization, hard work, impulse control and prudence (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hogan & Ones, 1997). Individuals high on conscientiousness is also dependable and trustworthy (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The third dimension, agreeableness has been associated with conformity with others and friendliness in the interpersonal setting (Hogan & Hogan, 1986; Digman, 1990). Individuals high on agreeableness tend to be more helpful and sympathetic towards others, as well as more trusting of the intentions of other people (Costa & McCrae, 1992). According to Laursen, Pulkkinen and Adams (2002), agreeableness trait related to higher levels of social compliance and self-control, and lower levels of aggression. The fourth dimension, openness to experience appears to be a personality trait that reflects individuals' habitual willingness to try new ideas, tolerate ambiguity and dissonance

and generally be curious and eager to learn (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Individuals high on openness to experience tend to be open minded, original in thought, intelligent, imaginative, and non-judgmental. Finally, neuroticism personality is associated with lessened emotional control and stability (Mount & Barrick, 1995). Neurotic individuals tend to have relatively negative core self-evaluations, leading to emotional distress and associated behaviours (Rusting & Larsen, 1998). Neuroticism also related to a person's general tendency to experience negative effects such as fear, sadness, embarrassment, anger, guilt, and disgust (Dalton & Wilson, 2000).

This paper is concerned with how personality factor and cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) affect the job performance of expatriates assigned to Malaysia. Job performance studied as a main dependent variable since meeting job performance is the ultimate goal of MNCs in sending their employees on the international assignments, hence achieving organizational goal (Caligiuri, 1997). Although a number of studies have been conducted on the relationship between personality and job performance (Dalton & Wilson, 2000; Caligiuri, 2000a; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006), it is still uncertain whether personality factor is the determinant of job performance. Moreover, in exception to Tahir and Ismail (2007), no study conducted in Malaysia. We believe that expatriate population in Malaysia is worth investigating, particularly because the country has become one of the preferred FDI destinations in the South East Asia region. Malaysia has to date attracted more than 5,000 foreign companies from more than 40 countries to establish their operations in the country (MIDA, 2009). This indicates that that the country will have to face a continuous increase in numbers of expatriates admitted in various sectors of employment. There were 35,583 approved expatriate postings in Malaysia in year 2007 (Malaysia, 2008). Hence, we investigate how CCA and personality related to the job performance of expatriates assigned to Malaysia. Specifically, the purposes of this study are to ascertain the nature of the relationships between personality and job performance, and to examine the mediating effects of CCA in the relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Personality Traits and Job Performance

Major studies that have dealt with the relationship between personality and job performance include, but are not limited to those of Sinangil and Ones (1998), Ones and Viswesvaran (1999), Dalton & Wilson (2000), Caligiuri (2000a), Mol et al. (2005), and Shaffer et al. (2006). Unfortunately, these results show a mixed finding on the relationship between dimensions of the Big Five personality and job performance. For instance, while Ones and Viswesvaran (1999) found conscientiousness was perceived to be the most important personality trait for expatriate job performance, Sinangil and Ones (1998), on the other hand, found that dependability (conscientiousness) is a poor predictor of expatriate job performance. In a recent study, Mol et al. (2005) found that there is no support for the relationship between openness to experience and expatriate job performance whereas many researchers have hypothesized it to be predictive for this criterion (e.g., Deller, 1997; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997; Shaffer et al., 2006).

Despite this findings, others have argued that high performing international assignees tend to share certain personality traits (e.g., Black, 1990; Caligiuri, 2000a; Dalton & Wilson, 2000; Mol et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006). A meta-analysis conducted by Mol et al. (2005) found that extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were reliable predictor of expatriate performance. Hence, for this reason researchers like Borman, White, Pulakos, and Oppler (1991) support the importance of using personality beyond ability in prediction of performance in the international setting.

Drawing from the evolutionary personality psychology theory (Buss, 1991), the Big Five personality characteristics has been linked with universal adaptive mechanisms that allow individuals to adapt with and meet the demands of physical, social and cultural environments. These adaptive mechanisms include humans' ability to learn hierarchies in society (Extraversion), "their willingness to cooperate (Agreeableness), their capacity for reliable work and enduring commitment (Conscientiousness), their ability to handle stress (Emotional Stability), and their propensity for innovation or astuteness in solving problems (Openness, Intellect)" (Buss, 1991, cited in Caligiuri, 2000a, p.71). Hence, individuals who possess the appropriate personality trait for a given role in a given environment will perform better in their job compared with who do not possess the appropriate personality characteristics for that same role (Caligiuri, 2000a). Broadly, it can be conclude that the Big Five personality is a

valid predictor of expatriate job performance. In order to establish the mediating role of CCA on the relationship between personality and job performance, we have decided to test the presumed relationship as follows:

H1: Personality is related to job performance.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment as Mediator of the Relationship between Personality and Job Performance

We hypothesise that cross-cultural adjustment mediate the effects of personality on job performance. Cross-cultural adjustment conceptualized as the degree of psychological comfort an expatriate has with the various aspects of a host culture (Black & Stephens, 1989). Three specific areas of CCA distinguished in the literature (Black & Stephens, 1989): adjustment to (1) general environment (degree of comfort with general living conditions, such as climate, health facilities and food); (2) interaction with host country nationals; and (3) work (performance standards, job and supervisory responsibilities). Cross-cultural adjustment suggested as a key determinant of expatriate success in the international assignments. Past research indicated that CCA is a temporal and primary outcome in expatriate's assignment that would influence the development of secondary or more distal expatriate adjustment. Outcomes such as strain (e.g., Hechanova et al., 2003), job satisfaction (e.g., Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002), organizational commitment (e.g., Shaffer & Harrison, 1998), performance (e.g., Shay & Baack, 2006; Kim & Slocum, 2008), and premature return intention (e.g., Black & Stephens, 1989; Hechanova et al., 2003) have been associated with CCA.

Considerable research has indicated a relationship between personality factor and cross-cultural adjustment (e.g., Ali, Van der Zee & Sanders, 2003; Ward, Leong & Low, 2004; Huang et al., 2005; Swagler & Jome, 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006). In general, these result shows that certain personality trait positively related to CCA. Emotional stability positively related to psychological adjustment (Ali et al., 2003) and both the interaction and work adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2006). Openness to experience predicted work adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2006) and, for expatriate spouses, related to psychological and socio-cultural adjustment (Ali et al., 2003). Extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness also positively relate to CCA (Searle & Ward, 1990; Shaffer et al., 2006), although do not always contribute to the same domains of CCA. For example, agreeableness predicted interaction adjustment, whereas extraversion and conscientiousness were more relevant to general adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2006).

According to Church (1982), cross-culturally adjusted expatriates "... represent a more integrative approach to a new culture, (they) are open to the host culture, but integrate new behavior, norms and roles into the foundation provided by (their) home cultures" (p. 542). Again viewing from evolutionary personality psychology theory (Buss, 1991), being a universal adaptive mechanism (Buss, 1991) including to new cultural environment, individual with appropriate personality trait expected to adjust effectively to new cultural contexts abroad (Caligiuri, 2000a). Further, Leiba-O'Sullivan (1999) indicated that as a stable disposition, personality is a vital intercultural competency to facilitate individual adaptation to new cultural setting. Additionally, based on stress management theories of psychological stress perspective, since intercultural interactions involves a series of stress-provoking life changes that draw on adjustive resources and require coping responses; CCA, therefore, is conceptualized by successfully coping with change. Certain personality traits such as emotional stability, agreeableness and extraversion helps to negate psychological stress, thus leads to higher level of CCA (Black, 1990; Aryee et al., 1996; Wan, Hui & Tiang, 2003).

The relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and job performance has been studied by many researchers in the past (e.g., Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Caligiuri, 1997; Kraimer et al., 2001; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Shay & Baack, 2006; Kim & Slocum, 2008). The results of the studies reveals that CCA is positively related to job performance implying that the greater the CCA level, greater the job performance level. According to stress literature (Cohen, 1988), inability to cope with the stress associated with adjusting to an overseas assignment may result in personal and professional withdrawal behaviors (e.g., depression, absence) and that these behaviours may inhibit job performance (Kraimer et al., 2001). This is because stress experienced due to inability to adjust to new cultural environment will create cognitive fatigue and rob the energy and effort required for successful implementation of work, hence job performance is affected (Kraimer et al., 2001).

The function of a mediator variable is to explain the relationship between a predictor and a criterion; mediators should explain why such an effect might occur (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In this paper, we hypothesise that CCA function as mediator in the relationship between personality and job performance. Past research has indicated that there are significant relationships between CCA and both personality and job performance. Given the pattern of relationships, we strongly believe that the relationship of personality to job performance mediated by CCA. Previous research has suggested that CCA might mediate the relationship between various individual differences and diverse expatriate assignment effectiveness (Kim, Kirkman, & Chen, 2006; Kraimer et al., 2001; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Few researchers indeed have provided the empirical evidence for the mediating role of CCA on the relationship between individual differences and job performance of expatriates (Shaffer et al., 2006; Kim & Slocum, 2008; Wang & Takeuchi, 2007). Despite this development, the mediating role of CCA on the relationship between personality and job performance has been limited to those of Shaffer et al. (2006) and Kim and Slocum (2008), hence triggers the need for more research to understand the phenomenon. Viewing from the work-role transition hypothesis (Nicholson, 1984), individual with a higher level of certain personality trait expected to perform in their job through a successful work transition to new international assignments because they tend to adapt effectively to a new cultural context. Drawing from above argument, we hypothesise that:

H2: The relationship between personality and job performance is mediate by cross-cultural adjustment.

Figure 1 depicts the mediation model of cross-cultural adjustment on the relationship between personality and job performance. The linkages in Figure 1 show that the independent variable (personality) related to the mediator (CCA) which in turn, related to the dependent variable (job performance).

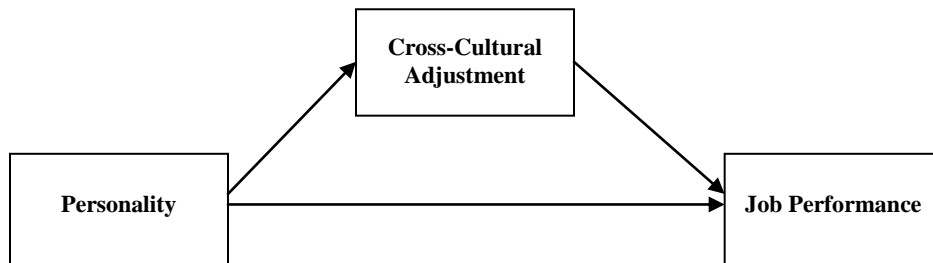


Figure 1: Mediation model of cross-cultural adjustment on the relationship between personality and job performance

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The participants in the study were expatriates currently working and residing in Malaysia. A total of 500 mail and 500 online questionnaires were distributed. Of these, 339 questionnaires replied. The initial response rate was 34%, which is consistent with other typical response rates (20-30%) in most expatriate studies (e.g., Harrison & Shaffer, 2005). Out of 339, 7 were unusable responses, resulting in final sample of 332, representing a 33% return rate. The sample included 252 (75.9%) men and 80 (24.1%) women. Participants age included 122 (36.7%) between 42-52 and 103 (31.0%) between 31-41 years old. Participants marital status included 251 (75.6%) married and 54 (16.3%) unmarried. In terms of prior overseas experience, 251 (75.6) has previous international experience and 81 (24.4%) has no experience. Participants job status included 169 (50.9%) in managerial position and 163 (49.1%) in non-managerial position. Participants education status included 119 (35.8%) with degree and 85 (25.6%) with masters degree. Distribution of sample by industry sector included 112 (33.7%) working in service sector, 109 (32.8%) in other sector and 84 (25.3%) in manufacturing. Participants length of stay in Malaysia ranged from 2 to 24 years (*M*=4.80, *SD*=3.40). Tenure with present organization ranged from 2 to 25 years (*M*=7.25, *SD*=4.45). The participants are come from various countries with majority 51 (15.4%) are from India, 39 (11.7%) from UK, 32 (9.6%) from Australia, and 200 (63.3%) from some other 42 countries.

Instrumentation

Four background variables (gender, prior overseas experience, length of stay in Malaysia and language proficiency) identified as correlates of expatriate attitudes and behaviours controlled for in this study (Hechanova et al., 2003; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998; Takeuchi, Tesluk, et al., 2005). This is to avoid our findings from be spuriously attributed to various background characteristics.

The main predictor, personality measured with the 44-item, self-reported Big Five Inventory (BFI) adopted from John and Srivastava (1999). Sample items include “I see myself as someone who has an assertive personality” for extraversion trait. Respondents were asked to use a seven-point Likert-type scale range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) to indicate the extent to which each item describes their characteristic. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.83 (John & Srivastava, 1999). Seventeen items measured the dependent variable, job performance. Of these, five items were adapted from work of Black and Porter (1991) and ten items from work of Caligiuri (1997). Sample item include “your effectiveness at completing tasks on time”. Respondents were asked to rate their perceived ability in each of the job performance items in comparison to their peers in similar positions on seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (much worse than most) to 7 (much better than most) for each items. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.86 (Shay & Baack, 2006).

The mediator, cross-cultural adjustment measured with 14-item, self-reported Expatriate Adjustment Scale adopted from Black and Stephens (1989). Seven items assessed general adjustment (e.g. housing, food, and shopping); four items assessed interactions adjustment (e.g. socializing with people from the host culture); and three items assessed work adjustment (e.g. job responsibilities and performance standards/expectations). Respondents asked to use a seven-point Likert-type scale to indicate the extent to which each item indicates their adjustment to various living and working conditions in the new environment abroad. Response choice alternatives ranged from 1 (very unadjusted) to 7 (completely adjusted). Cronbach’s alphas for general adjustment, interactions adjustment, and work adjustment were 0.91, 0.82, and 0.86 respectively (Black & Stephens, 1989).

Data Analyses

After standardizing all of the control variables, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses. Support for the mediation hypothesis required the following conditions: the independent variable must significantly impact the mediating variable in the first step; the independent variable must significantly impact the dependent (criterion) variable in the second step; and in the third step, the mediator variable must impact the dependent (criterion) variable; and at the same time the impact of the independent variable on the dependent must either become insignificant (total mediation) or become significant but the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable would be reduced in size (partial mediation) (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Thus, H2 supported by an initially significant personality effect on job performance that became non-significant when CCA entered the equation in third step. The Sobel (1982) z test conducted to test whether the mediator carries the influence of the independent variable to dependent variable.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations among the study variables. Support for H1 required a significant relationship between personality and job performance. This hypothesis was accepted, as the results indicated that personality was positively related to job performance before and after control ($r = 0.28, p < 0.01$ and $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.01$).

H2 predicted that cross-cultural adjustment would mediate the relationship between personality and job performance. Three equations estimated for each dimensions of CCA (general, interaction and work adjustment). The estimators of the parameters involving mediator variable of general adjustment derived from equation 1A, 1B and 1C. Meanwhile equation 2A, 2B and 2C estimated for analysis involving interaction adjustment as the mediating variable. Finally, equation 3A, 3B and 3C involves work adjustment as the mediating variable.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients and correlations (N=332)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	0.76	0.43	-								
2. Experience	0.76	0.43	0.12*	-							
3. Length	4.80	3.40	0.03	-0.03	-						
4. Language	3.57	0.70	-0.16**	0.21**	0.16**	-					
5. Personality	4.92	0.33	-0.08	0.20**	-0.04	0.11*	(0.71)				
6. GA	5.71	0.70	-0.05	0.02	0.21**	0.31**	0.24**	(0.83)			
7. IA	5.66	0.76	0.00	-0.03	0.28**	0.32**	0.17**	0.55**	(0.86)		
8. WA	5.98	0.80	0.15**	0.08	0.16**	0.06	0.22**	0.24**	0.29**	(0.90)	
9. Performance	5.58	0.56	0.19**	0.01	0.14*	0.04	0.28**	0.10	0.28**	0.34**	(0.911)

Notes: Coefficient alphas are presented along the diagonal * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$
 GA=general adjustment; IA=interaction adjustment; WA=work adjustment

Consistent with Baron and Kenny’s (1986) procedure for testing mediating effect, interaction adjustment ($\beta=0.21, p < 0.05$) and work adjustment ($\beta=0.24, p < 0.05$) are significantly related to job performance in step three (see Table 2). The predictor variable (personality) in step three is significant and the beta value has reduced in size when the mediating variables (interaction and work adjustment) entered in the equation (see model 2c and 3c). This indicates that both the interaction and work adjustment partially mediates the relationship between personality and job performance. The Sobel (1982) z test (not shown) conducted to test whether the mediator (interaction and work adjustment) carries the influence of the personality to job performance shows the results are all significant, $p < 0.05$. Hence, it is fair to conclude that H2 partially supported.

Table 2: Results of mediated regression analyses for personality on job performance (N=332)

Independent variables	GA (Model 1A)	Step 1 IA (Model 2A)	WA (Model 3A)	Step 2 JP (Model 1B, 2B & 3B)	JP (Model 1C)	Step 3 JP (Model 2C)	JP (Model 3C)
<i>Controls</i>							
Gender	0.16	0.07	0.17**	0.22***	0.22***	0.21***	0.18**
Experience	-0.08	-0.13*	0.01	-0.08	-0.08	-0.05	-0.08
Length	0.18**	0.24***	0.16**	0.14**	0.14**	0.09	0.10
Language	0.28***	0.30***	0.04	0.03	0.04	-0.03	0.03
<i>Predictor</i>							
Personality	0.23***	0.18**	0.23***	0.32***	0.32***	0.28***	0.26***
<i>Mediator</i>							
GA					-0.01		
IA						0.21***	
WA							0.24***
R ²	0.18***	0.20***	0.10***	0.15***	0.15***	0.19***	0.20***
ΔR ²	0.05***	0.03**	0.05***	0.10***	0.00***	0.04***	0.05***
F	14.119	16.180	7.418	11.457	9.523	12.312	13.801

Notes: * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$
 GA=general adjustment; IA=interaction adjustment; WA=work adjustment; JP=job performance

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to enhance our knowledge of the individual determinants of job performance for expatriates assigned to Malaysia. We examine how personality influences job performance both directly and indirectly. In this study, both the interaction and work adjustment found to partially mediates the relationship between personality and job performance. This means the variance in job performance attributable to personality is partly a direct effect, and partly an indirect effect mediated through interaction and work adjustment. Therefore, it can be concluded that in addition to the direct effect, personality (independent variable) predicts CCA (mediator variable), and CCA in turn predicts job performance (dependent variable) among expatriates in Malaysia. The results of the study are generally congruent with the findings of studies examining the mediating effect of CCA in the western context (Shaffer et al., 2006; Wang & Takeuchi, 2007; Kim & Slocum, 2008).

The results of this study appears to be in line with stress theories (Cohen, 1988) contention that individual differences (e.g., knowledge, skill, ability, personality) helps to negate psychological stress experienced in the new cultural environment. The ability to cope with stress associated with uncertainty and ambiguity in new cultural environment will result in better CCA. The spill- over effects suggest that this successful transition to new cultural environment helps individuals to perform in their job as more energy and focus can be given in accomplishing the task. Hence, the fit achieved between individual differences and CCA is necessary in order for the expatriates to perform in their job.

Given these results, there are few implications for organizations and individuals considering international assignments. The interrelationships among personality, CCA and job performance suggest that both the personality and CCA are important in enhancing job performance. Those high in extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experience found to adjust better to new cultural environment (Caligiuri, 2000a; Huang et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2006) and more likely to perform in their job. Expatriating firms can consider the use of selection methods that include testing for personality trait. Past studies have indicated that each of the Big Five personality characteristics relate to international assignee success in a unique way and should be included in a selection system for international assignees for different reasons (Caligiuri, Tarique, & Jacobs, 2009). The evidence found on the mediating role of CCA on the relationship between personality and job performance suggests that organizations need to take necessary action to improve the CCA so that a higher level of job performance achieved. Organizational social support (e.g., host country manager support) and logistical help (e.g., housing, schooling and spousal employment) will help expatriates to overcome the stress and uncertainty experienced during their CCA process to a new cultural environment (Shaffer et al., 1999; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

This study has certain limitations that provide venues for future research. First, job performance is not the only criterion for expatriate effectiveness. Other criterion such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention should be included in the future study. Second, we acknowledge that some concerns might exist in that self-reported measures have social desirability and common method bias problem. Therefore, future research should include assessment from multiple sources including peers, subordinates, and superiors. Third, a cross-sectional study design restricts the ability to prove a cause-effect relationship. Future research should considering longitudinal study if replication of this study is to establish the predictive functions of personality trait over time and space. Third, this study did not consider the possible moderating effects of the contextual factors on the predictor-outcome relationships. Potential moderators such as cultural distance (i.e. home vs. host country), assignment type (e.g., managerial vs. non-managerial), assignment tenure and prior overseas experience may help to further enhance our understanding on the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, since this study uses the perceptual measures of personality on various effectiveness criteria, conducting a qualitative study using interview or observation may provide broader understanding of how personality trait affects these outcomes.

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