Can Personality Traits Influence International Experience Success and Stress Management Strategies of Organizational and Self-Initiating Expatriates?

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ABSTRACT

Research conducted on international assignments has primarily focused on the traditional or organizational expatriate (OE): those sent on assignment by the employer. While this research has provided significant insight into this population, continued research is needed on the subpopulation of the self-initiating expatriate (SIE). There has been comparatively little research to date on the SIEs despite this group’s growing prominence in the global workforce. There has also been little exploration and comparison of the intrinsic factors between these two groups. Recent research (Reynolds, 2010) has shown that there are differences in factors which can contribute to OE and SIE adjustment. It is therefore rational to theorize that personality traits and stress management/coping strategies would also differ between these two groups. This theoretical article builds on prior research on personality traits and stress management/coping strategies of expatriates and offers two models for future research.

INTRODUCTION

This article provides a theoretical review of the current literature on expatriate adjustment integrating personality factors and the stress and work strain literature to develop two models for future empirical testing. The first model will use personality factors as moderators of the relationships between work strain and expatriate adjustment, job satisfaction, and intent to leave. The second model will use personality factors as moderators between stressors (role, situational and family/personal), stress tolerance, and stress management/coping strategies exploring whether there are differences between OEs and SIEs.

DISCUSSION

Definitions and Differentiators of Expatriates

As companies and organizations continue to meet the growing demand for a global presence there has been a need to increase the expatriate workforce. This increase has included both those individuals who are sent to a foreign country by their organizations (OEs) and those individuals who have chosen to explore employment opportunities outside their home country on their own (SIEs) (Reynolds 2010). The bulk of the literature on expatriate research has explored this population, for the most part, as a monolithic population consisting almost exclusively of OEs, despite evidence that SIEs currently account for the larger proportion of the expatriate community (Bozionelos, 2009; Jokinen et al., 2008; Myers & Pringle, 2005). Within the past decade, several researchers have begun to explore potential differences between OEs and SIEs (see Reynolds 2010 for a thorough review).

Suutari and Brewster (2000) posited that OEs and SIEs can be differentiated by the following categories: initiation of the assignment, motives, individual background variables, employing organizations, types of jobs, funding, and career paths. Perhaps of all of these, the most defining distinction between SIEs and OEs is who initiates the foreign assignment (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). For OEs, the initiator is the employing organization. For the SIE, initiation is self-directed. Furthermore, this differentiation leads to a possible divergence in motivation (see Richardson, 2006; Richardson & McKenna, 2000; Richardson & McKenna, 2002; Richardson & McKenna, 2006; and Selmer & Lauring, 2010 for a thorough look at SIE motivation).
OEs and SIEs also differ with regards to individual characteristics. The main variables which show divergence are age, marital status, gender, previous international experience, and spouse-related variables. Suutari and Brewster (2000) found that, on average, SIEs are slightly younger than OEs; however, the disbursement among age groups is relatively similar. A noticeable difference between these two groups is the number of females. In Suutari and Brewster’s survey, only four percent of traditional expatriates were female; such a low percentage is echoed through the expatriate management literature (see Caligiuri et al., 1999, for a review). However, Jokinen et al. (2008) and Reynolds (2010) found a much higher percentage of females that self-initiated their expatriate experiences, from almost 30 percent to slightly over 50 percent.

Although little difference has been found between SIEs and OEs with zero to one previous international experience, multiple experiences were much more common among SIEs than OEs in both Suutari and Brewster’s (2000) and Jokinen et al.’s (2008) studies. Indeed, both of these studies report that more than double the number of SIEs had two or more international experiences. In addition, Suutari and Brewster discovered that there are considerably more single SIEs than OEs (19% versus 10%). Finally, although the percentage of spouses accompanying both groups of expatriates was approximately the same in Suutari and Brewster’s study, the number of SIE spouses who were employed in the host country was almost double that of the OE spouses. This disparity could indicate a joint decision by the SIE and the spouse to relocate outside of the home country to look for employment, rather than the phenomenon of the ‘trailing spouse’ as is so often discussed in the literature about OEs.

The organizations which employ SIEs and OEs also differ in several ways. First, Suutari and Brewster (2000) found that while OEs are most often employed by a multi-national enterprise (MNE) based in their home country, SIEs are more likely to be directly hired by a foreign organization. This finding is also substantiated in the demographic data as reported by Jokinen et al. (2008): their study shows that while over 75% of OEs studied were employed by a Finnish organization or subsidiary of one, over 80% of SIEs surveyed were employed by either a foreign or international (i.e., non-Finnish) organization. Furthermore, by classifying employer organizations into levels of internationalization, Suutari and Brewster found that “[OEs] are more likely than [SIEs] to operate in ‘very international’ companies” (p. 425). In other words, SIEs are more likely hired by organizations with much less of a global focus and/or reach; often, they are hired because their talents and skills cannot be supplied by the local workforce in the foreign country. Jokinen et al.’s study echoes this finding. Concerning job types, traditional expatriates were more likely employed at the managerial level (a finding substantiated in Hechanova et al., 2003), whereas SIEs more often described to Suutari and Brewster their role as ‘expert’, and were more commonly found at a lower hierarchical level. Although more SIEs are found in managerial levels in Jokinen et al.’s study, still the majority of them self-reported in the expert/technical category.

Finally, SIEs and OEs differ on their career paths. While OEs take an international assignment for the purposes of building their organizational careers, SIEs could be more accurately described as following a boundary-less career path (Inkson et al., 1997). For example, traditional expatriates expect company support, both for career planning (in terms of the advantages international experience will bring inside the organization), and for logistical repatriation assistance at the end of the assignment. SIEs, on the other hand, are left largely to their own devices in terms of career planning, in that their employer in the host country is unlikely to provide any career development assistance or training outside its organizational bounds. In addition, once SIEs finish their employment contract in the foreign country, they are more likely to be in the uncertain situation of planning the logistics of their own repatriation.

Although there is solid evidence that OEs and SIEs are differentiated on several aspects, Peltokorpi and Froese (2009) point out that while prior studies may have included SIEs in their overall expatriate populations, past conceptual models have not distinguished between the two expatriate populations. This argument, coupled with the evidence of differentiation, particularly in terms of individual characteristics and employing organizations, leads to the reasonable assumption that there may be differences in personality traits and methods for stress management between OEs and SIEs.
Stress

In early work, Lazarus (1966) defined stress from an outcome perspective. In this definition, individuals perceive external demands greater than their ability to cope with the situation. Later, other researchers (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983) explored stress from a work perspective. They described work-related stress as a cognitive experience brought on by demands, constraints or opportunities which require an employee to deviate from their normal function. There is a plethora of research in the academic literature examining the ill effects of stress and stressors on individuals. These studies include examining negative health effects (Manning, Jackson, & Fusiler, 1996), individual job performance (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986), organizational performance (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983), and work/family relationships (Parayitam & Kalra, 2008).

Seyle (1946, 1956) is noted for his seminal work in physiological stress and adaptation. He described the process by which the body will respond and adapt to stressors as the general adaptation syndrome (GAS). In this model, stress is seen as a response to an environmental demand. Seyle’s work has served as the foundational theory for research in the health consequences of chronic stress. However, researchers (Cooper, Dewe, & O’Driscoll, 2001) have criticized work on stress which focuses on a very specific physiological process to a single stressor as opposed to a cumulative response to multiple stressors over time. The latter, researchers argue, is a more holistic framework for understanding chronic stress response.

One group of researchers, (Sikora, Beaty, & Forward, 2004) proposed an asynchronous multiple overlapping change (AMOC) model for workplace stress. In their theoretical article they argue that any study of workplace stress, in the current fast-paced work environment, must assume more complexity. The researchers offer three additions to traditional theory: first, that employees experience multiple not singular stressors in their work environments; second, that changes and stressors in today’s work environment occur simultaneously and not necessarily sequentially; and third, the pace of change in today’s workplace is accelerating. They argue, therefore, it is necessary to develop models that take this complexity into consideration when attempting to study stressors in today’s work environments.

While a great deal of the expatriate literature has addressed stress/stressors on some level, most of these studies have focused on either work related stressors (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Black et al., 1991; Kraimer & Wayne, 2004), or family stressors (Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001) exclusively. Given what we know about stress (Sikora et al., 2004) there is a need to examine this construct holistically. Indeed, expatriates experience multiple stressors both in their work and personal environments; these stressors occur simultaneously and not sequentially; and expatriates are clearly in the midst of the rapidly changing work world. Therefore, there is support to use more comprehensive models to research their workplace stress.

Stress Tolerance/Management

The transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazurus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) has been used in many studies as the foundation for understanding how individuals cope with and manage or tolerate stress in their environments. This theory suggests that individuals scan their environment for potential threats to their well being. Within this process the individual will determine potential coping strategies to address these threats. Employees have multiple possible strategies including those which tend to be more positive (requesting assistance from management) to more negative in nature (counterproductive behaviors or dysfunctional turnover).

Researchers (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007) studying stress tolerance and management have also found that an individual’s choice of coping strategies may differ based on personality. Other researchers (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010) have determined that several personality traits moderate the relationship between work stressors and counterproductive work behaviors.

Work Strain

Strain has been viewed as the psychological reaction to stressors (Beehr, 1995). Karasek (1990) developed a demands-control-support model to help explain and explore work strain. Researchers have used Karasek’s model to examine work strain among several types of workers and numerous job types. Hechanova et al (2003) integrated the construct of work strain in their meta-analytic review of the expatriate adjustment literature. While the findings related
to work strain and other outcome variables was weak at best, this may be due to a singular focus on work strain as opposed to overall stress factors. Takeuchi, et al. (2005) also focused on workplace strain. They found that family characteristics (absence/presence of spouse and children) interact to affect the level of expatriate workplace strain. While their premise was to examine workplace strain directly they did recommend future research studies to expand on Kraimer & Wayne’s (2004) work which focused on three role and four situational stressors.

There is a need to holistically explore the relationships between stressors (role, situation, and personal/family), work strain, job satisfaction, and intent to leave using personality traits as a moderator. The following conceptual framework provides a visual of the propositions in the first model:

P1: There is a positive relationship between role stressors and work strain with both OEs and SIEs.
P2: There is a positive relationship between situational stressors and work strain with both OEs and SIEs.
P3: There is a positive relationship between personal/family stressors and work strain with both OEs and SIEs.
P4: There is a negative relationship between work strain and adjustment on all levels with both OEs and SIEs.
P5: There is a negative relationship between work strain and job satisfaction with both OEs and SIEs.
P6: There is a positive relationship between work strain and intent to leave with both OEs and SIEs.

Expatriate Adjustment and Acculturation

Several models of expatriate adjustment have been proposed and tested over the past several decades with the most accepted being the Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991) framework for international adjustment (FIA) (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). Findings from these studies have resulted in useful models of expatriate adjustment and acculturation (e.g. Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999), although Reynolds (2005, 2010) has pointed out that it is still unclear as to how useful they are in explaining adjustment among expatriate subpopulations other than OEs. Black (1988) defined cross-cultural adjustment as the degree to which the expatriate is psychologically comfortable in their new surroundings and become familiar with the various aspects of the overseas environment. Interestingly, scholars studying adjustment and acculturation have found similar factors. The expatriate adjustment literature (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al, 2005; Black, 1988; Black et al. 1991) has identified three factors significant to overall adjustment including, general environment adjustment (also known as cultural adjustment), work adjustment and adjustment to the interaction with host country nationals. The acculturation literature (Searle & Ward, 1990) has found three interrelated factors as prominent to overall acculturation: work adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment, and psychological adjustment.

Researchers (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001) have explored several sources of support in facilitating expatriate adjustment and ultimate performance. These support factors include the expatriate’s perception of parent company, foreign facility, spousal support, and leader-member exchange (LMX). Both studies indicated some level of support for perceived organizational support (POS) in expatriate adjustment and performance.
While this may be helpful in addressing OEs adjustment, these findings may not be adequate to determine SIE adjustment due to the differences in organizational relationships.

Strubler, Park and Agarwal (2011) revisited the Black et al (1991) framework to propose a more prescriptive approach. Their proposed model adds factors of “accurate perceptions of self and situation” (p.112) as key components of expatriates ultimate in-country adjustment. These researchers suggest an anticipatory process which involves in-depth testing of potential expatriate candidates to allow for more accurate self perceptions.

While the Strubler et al. (2011) argument is well supported there appears to be a need to first determine what individual personality traits are best suited for successful expatriate experiences. Testing alone would not provide needed information without understanding the psychological traits and stress management/tolerance factors needed for successful expatriates. Researchers have examined expatriate personality traits, generally through the use of the big five characteristics (extroversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness or intellect) (Digman, 1990). Many of these studies have explored the relationship between personality traits and job performance (Caliguri, 2000a; Dalton & Wilson, 2000; Mol, Born, Willemsen & Van Deer Moyen, 2005; Ones & Viswesraran, 1997; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black & Ferdandi, 2006). These studies, using personality traits as a predictor variable, have garnered mixed results.

Caligiuri (2000a) explored the big five personality characteristics to determine whether they might predict intent to leave an assignment as well as in-country job performance. Results of her study suggested that three characteristics, emotional stability, extroversion and agreeableness were negatively related to intent to leave and conscientiousness was positively related to performance. The trait of openness/intellect was not supported in that study. Caligiuri also proposed that the personality trait of emotional stability closely aligns with past expatriate research (Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Church, 1982; Dinges, 1983; Hammer, Gudykunst & Wiseman, 1978; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). All of these prior studies argued that individual traits such as a tolerant personality (Church, 1982; Dinges, 1983), the ability to deal with psychological stress (Hammer et al., 1978), flexibility and adaptability (Arthur & Bennett, 1995), the self confidence to reduce stress (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985), are significant to expatriate adjustment and success.

Subsequent researchers (Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater, & Klein, 2003) examined personality antecedents’ adjustment by testing expatriate’s social ties and their core self-evaluations (CSEs). These CSEs refer to four individual dispositional traits including; emotional stability, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and locus of control (Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000). While not related to expatriates, several studies (Judge, Bono, & Locke, 2000; Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997; Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998) have found support for the use of these individual traits in research on job and life satisfaction. Johnson et al. (2003) found support for CSEs being positively related to the number of expatriate social ties. The researchers argued that expatriate adjustment is facilitated by a greater number and deeper relationships between expatriates, other expatriates, and host country nationals (HCNs). The authors did suggest further research in this area is needed due to the fact that the expatriate community is transitory and not enough is known about these issues from a longitudinal perspective.

Interestingly, this very dynamic may be a factor in increased stress for expatriates. The continual need to develop relationships may tend to negatively impact their ongoing adjustment over time. There appears to be a need to explore how individual personality traits might moderate these factors. Several studies recommended continued study of individual personality traits (Caligiuri, 2000a; Caligiuri, 2000b; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003; Johnson et al., 2003; Takeuchi, Wang, & Marinova, 2005).

**Personality Traits as a Moderator**

The current model #1 proposes that personality traits may moderate the relationship between work strain and job satisfaction, adjustment, and intent to leave. Model #2 (see page 6) proposes that personality traits moderate the relationship between role, situational, and family/personal stressors and stress tolerance, and stress management/coping strategies. The literature does support the exploration of personality factors as moderators. Caligiuri (2000b) tested the relationships between contact with host country nationals (interaction adjustment, Black et al., 1991 model) and cross-cultural adjustment using openness and sociability as moderators. She found that openness did moderate the relationship suggesting that not all expatriates benefit from more interaction with host country nationals.
This is important as the current article suggests that there may be differences in personality traits between OEs and SIEs. Study is needed to discern whether there are differences between these two expatriate groups and if so if these differences are found in the construct of personality traits and ability to cope with complex stressors in their lives. While some of the moderating variables in the following propositions have been supported by prior works (see Arthur & Bennett, 1995; Caliguiri, 2000a; Caliguiri, 2000b; Ronen, 1989), others have yet to be explored.

The purpose of this current article is to propose the need to study all five personality traits as moderators exploring whether there are differences between OEs and SIEs. The following propositions are offered for future testing (see Model #1, above).

P7: The relationship between work strain and adjustment is moderated by each of the personality traits of emotional stability, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion with both OEs and SIEs.

P8: The relationship between work strain and job satisfaction moderated by each of the personality traits of emotional stability, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion with both OEs and SIEs.

P9: The relationship between work strain and intent to leave moderated by each of the personality traits of emotional stability, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion with both OEs and SIEs.

Differentiators Between OEs and SIEs

As stated earlier, there are several differences between the traditional expatriate (OE) and the self-initiated expatriate (SIE). Research has found that SIEs are less organizationally dependent, more self directed in terms of initiation of assignment, and perhaps different from OEs in motivation to expatriate. Studies have also confirmed some significant differences in terms of several demographic factors including age, marital status and gender between OEs and SIEs. Given these findings, it is logical to hypothesize that there may be other intrinsic differences between OEs and SIEs, including differences in personality traits, stress tolerance, and stress management/coping strategies. Since researchers have yet to explore these potential differences, the second model proposes the following:

Model #2

P10: There will be differences in personality traits between OEs and SIEs.

P11: Based on differences in personality traits there will be a difference in stress tolerance between OEs and SIEs.

P12: Based on differences in personality traits there will be a difference in selected stress management and coping strategies between OEs and SIEs.

P13: The relationship between all stressors (role, situational, and personal/family) and stress tolerance is moderated by each of the personality traits of emotional stability, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion with both OEs and SIEs.
P14: The relationship between all stressors (role, situational, and personal/family) and stress management/coping strategies is moderated by each of the personality traits of emotional stability, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion with both OEs and SIEs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While prior research on expatriate adjustment and performance has provided a solid theoretical and practical foundation, there continues to be a need for more in-depth research on the individual personality traits and stress tolerance and management/coping strategies of expatriates. This is particularly important as the research distinction between OEs and SIEs has taken on new prominence in the literature.

This could be explored with studies examining personality traits, stress adaptation, and differences in these factors between OEs and SIEs. Data from such studies would provide further clarification for potential expatriates regarding decision making to accept overseas assignments from their employers or for interested individuals to explore career opportunities as an SIE.

REFERENCES


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