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The Dimensions of Expatriate Acculturation: A Review[1]

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A review of empirical studies that directly investigated the overseas adjustment of expatriate managers revealed four dimensions that were related to successful expatriate acculturation: (1) the "self-oriented" dimension; (2) the "others-oriented" dimension; (3) the "perceptual" dimension; and (4) the "cultural-toughness" dimension. The study's implications for expatriate selection and training procedures in multinational corporations are discussed.

During the past two decades personnel administrators in multinational corporations (MNCs) have been plagued by a persistent, recurring problem: significant rates of the premature return of expatriate managers (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971; Henry, 1965; Misa & Fabricatore, 1979; Tung, 1981, Zeira, 1975).

The inability of expatriate managers to adjust to the host culture's social and business environment is costly in terms of management performance, productivity in the overseas operation, client relations, and operations efficiency. It has been estimated that the expatriate failure rate from 1965 to the present has fluctuated between 25 percent and 40 percent (Henry, 1965; Misa & Fabricatore, 1979; Tung, 1981), with the average cost per failure to the parent company ranging between $55,000 and $85,000, depending on the international exchange rate and location of assignment (Misa & Fabricatore, 1979). Misa and Fabricatore note that

> The costs involved in expatriate assignments that don't work out can be staggering. Assuming a moderate early return rate of 25% and $55,000 per family, the expense amounts to more than a million dollars for 100 expatriate family units (1979, p. 42).

There are also "invisible" costs due to a manager's failure overseas: the loss of self-esteem and self-confidence in the expatriate's managerial ability and the loss of prestige among one's peers.

Despite the clear need for effective selection and training policies and programs for expatriates, personnel directors have consistently employed rigid and simplistic methods in selecting and training expatriate managers (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971; Tung, 1981; Zeira, 1975).

Problems in Expatriate Selection and Training

An ingrained practice of personnel directors when selecting potential expatriates is the use of the "domestic equals overseas performance" equation. The assumption behind this formula is that: "Managing [a] company is a scientific art. The executive accomplishing the task in New York can surely perform as adequately in Hong Kong" (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971, p. 40.). "Technical expertise" or "having a successful track record" is overwhelmingly the primary selection criterion of American MNCs (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971; Miller, 1972, 1973; Tung, 1981; Vassel, 1983).

As the result of such beliefs, most MNCs send the expatriate and his/her family abroad soon thereafter, without any acculturation training whatsoever (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971; Tung, 1981; Vassel, 1983; Zeira, 1975). When compa-

nies do administer acculturation training, it often is too general or is not followed up with an evaluation of its effectiveness (Tung, 1981; Zeira, 1975). A variety of reasons are given by personnel directors for not investing in predeparture training:

1. A feeling that such training programs are generally ineffective (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971; Schnapper, 1973; Tung, 1981; Zeira, 1975).
2. Past dissatisfaction with the training program on the part of expatriate trainees (Brislin, 1979; Schnapper, 1973; Zeira, 1975).
3. The time between selection and departure is short, and there is not enough time to expose the expatriate to in-depth acculturation training (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971; Tung, 1981).
4. The view that because the expatriate's assignment is temporary, it does not warrant training expenditures (Tung, 1981).

Also, many personnel administrators believe that the dimensions of acculturation are simply not known well enough to devise sound selection instruments and/or training programs (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971). To a large degree they are correct in holding this view. Management researchers have largely failed to study systematically the psychological, social, and behavioral concerns of managing overseas operations (Adler, 1983a, 1983b; Tung, 1981).

A clearer understanding of the key factors that constitute the expatriate acculturation process would aid personnel directors in the design of (1) selection instruments that are predictive of expatriate acculturation and (2) acculturation training programs that would address the relevant factors of acculturation and train the expatriates in the necessary skills relevant to those factors. In addition to the business world, knowledge about— and effective training based on—the key factors of expatriate acculturation also would help the military, the Foreign Service, the Peace Corps, and a large number of religious organizations that rely on expatriates to manage their overseas operations.

The field of expatriate selection and training, then, currently suffers from two basic problems: (1) an inadequate understanding of the relevant variables of expatriate acculturation and, therefore, (2) the use of inappropriate selection and training methods.

The purpose of this paper is to: (1) review the extant literature on expatriate acculturation in order to pinpoint the key factors or dimensions involved in the cross-cultural adjustment process, and (2) discuss the implications of this study's findings for the selection and training of expatriates in MNCs. The review was not limited to the management and/or organizational behavior fields. Included in this review were studies from anthropology, social psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and sociology; however, only *empirical* studies that *directly* investigated the dependent variable of expatriate acculturation or effectiveness were reviewed.

From the review of the literature, four dimensions emerged as components of the expatriate adjustment process. These are: (1) the "self-oriented" dimension; (2) the "others-oriented" dimension; (3) the "perceptual" dimension; and (4) the "cultural-toughness" dimension.

The Self-Oriented Dimension

This dimension includes activities and attributes that serve to strengthen the expatriate's self-esteem, self-confidence, and mental hygiene. This dimension is composed of three subfactors: (1) "reinforcement substitution," (2) "stress reduction," and (3) "technical competence."

Reinforcement Substitution

Reinforcement substitution involves replacing activities that bring pleasure and happiness in the home culture with similar—yet different— activities that exist in the host culture (David, 1976). For example, virtually all cultures value the general categories of art, sports, cuisine, music, dance, architecture, history, the family, and so on. However, all cultures' manifestations of those activities are not the same—the American expatriate may value baseball, steak and potatoes, and jazz; the new culture he/she is assigned to may value soccer, traditional folk music, or raw fish.

The expatriate who is able to find parallel substitutes for his/her interests and activities in the new culture is more likely to be successful in adjusting to that new culture. Culinary adaptability, for example, was found by Mumford (1975) to be an important aspect of expatriate acculturation.

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Brein and David noted that the most striking feature of their sample of well-adjusted expatriates was that:

> They succeed in expanding and enriching their repertoire of reinforcing activities, drawing freely from the Brazilian culture to substitute for these typically North American sources of personal gratification which are unavailable or inappropriate in Brazil (1973, p. 1-2).

Thus learning to enjoy, for example, soccer and rugby as a player or a spectator instead of baseball and football, or learning to value raw fish and yakisoba rather than hamburgers and french-fries, or appreciating traditional folk music rather than jazz or country and western music is important to the expatriate acculturation process.

Stress Reduction

Cross-cultural theorists have long believed that the entrance into an unfamiliar culture produces stress within the expatriate (Byrnes, 1966; Oberg, 1960). Recent studies do indicate that the ability to deal with stress is important to expatriate adjustment (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Bardo & Bardo, 1980; Graham, 1983; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978; Hautaluoma & Kaman, 1975; Hawes & Kealey, 1981; Ratiu, 1983).

Hautaluoma and Kaman (1975) reported that well-adjusted expatriates in Afghanistan were better able to cope with the stress of ambiguous interpersonal relations and were more impervious to depression and loneliness than were poorly adjusted expatriates. Japanese adapting to the U.S. culture were found to be more successful if they were effective in dealing with psychological stress (Abe & Wiseman, 1983). Also, Hawes and Kealey (1981) found that the ability to cope successfully with "day-to-day life overseas" emerged as an important variable in the acculturation process. This "coping" involved social adaptation to other expatriates and adapting to the new physical environment, including limitations in housing, services, entertainment, climate, or other conditions that might cause stress.

Ratiu (1983) reported that well-adjusted expatriates seem to have "stability zones" to which they can retreat when conditions in the host culture become overly stressful to them. Examples of such "stability zones" are meditation, writing in diaries, engaging in favorite pastimes, and religious worship. Such temporary withdrawals,

Ratiu notes, "produce a rhythm of engagement and withdrawal in the manager's involvement with unfamiliar environments" (1983, p. 144). Such withdrawals, then, allow the expatriate to acculturate gradually to the host culture by utilizing a familiar psychological support system to assuage the initial effect of culture shock.

Technical Competence

All expatriates are assigned overseas to accomplish some kind of task—whether it be building a dam, running a business, converting others to one's religion, or teaching English. Confidence in one's ability to accomplish the purpose of the overseas assignment—and possessing the necessary technical expertise to do so-seems to be an important part of expatriate adjustment (Hays, 1971; Tung, 1981).

Hawes and Kealey (1981) surveyed 160 technical advisors and 90 spouses in 26 projects in 6 countries. A factor analysis performed on the resulting data revealed "technical expertise" to be a significant dimension in acculturation. Hautaluoma and Kaman (1975) and Harris (1973) reported similar findings in Afghanistan and Tonga, respectively. Bardo and Bardo (1980) also found that well-adjusted expatriates consistently reported more feelings of expertise in their jobs than did poorly adjusted expatriates.

The Others-Oriented Dimension

This dimension encompasses activities and attributes that enhance the expatriate's ability to interact effectively with host-nationals. It consists of two subfactors: (1) "relationship development" and (2) "willingness to communicate."

Relationship Development

The ability to develop long-lasting friendships with host-nationals emerged as an important factor in successful overseas adjustment (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Brein & David, 1971; 1973; Hammer et al., 1978; Harris, 1973; Hawes & Kealey, 1981; Ratiu, 1983), accounting for large portions of the variance in the factor analytic studies studying adjustment (Hammer et al., 1978; Harris, 1973). Establishing close relationships with host-nationals has the same effect on the expatriate that a mentor has on a new employee; that is, the experienced person guides the neophyte through

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the intricacies and complexity of the new organization or culture, protecting him/her against faux pas and helping him/her enact appropriate behaviors. Brein and David noted that expatriates in Brazil with host-national mentors were able to overcome their "problems by relying on their interpersonal relationships with Brazilian friends" (1973, p. 3).

A trusted mentor can provide helpful feedback that can aid immensely in understanding worker expectations and attitudes in the new culture. The mentor also can provide information and support that aids the expatriate in adjusting to the culture outside of the workplace as well. Hammer et al. reported:

> Sojourners who are able to establish meaningful relationships with people from the host culture are more likely, it would appear, to integrate themselves into the social fabric of the host culture and to more effectively satisfy their own basic needs and concerns of friendship, intimacy, and social interaction (1978 p. 388).

Willingness to Communicate

Two recent factor analytic studies (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Hammer et al., 1978) found that the ability to communicate with host nationals is important to cross-cultural adjustment (for a review see Barrett and Bass, 1976). Major (1965) reported that the expatriate's confidence and willingness to use the host culture's language had a greater influence on successful adjustment than did actual level of fluency in the foreign language.

Brein and David (1973) found that well-adjusted Peace Corps volunteers in Brazil learned Portuguese in order to "get to know" and become more familiar and intimate with their Brazilian hosts. These expatriates "collected" what Brein and David term "conversational currency"—anecdotes, jokes, poems, proverbs, movie and sports stars' histories and statistics, and so on. These "conversational coins" were then used during conversation with host-nationals—they were injected into the conversation in order to promote camaraderie and to show their hosts that they were "one-of-the-guys" even though they were Americans.

Abe and Wiseman (1983) found similar results with American and Japanese expatriates. In Ratiu's research well-adjusted expatriates reported a willingness to engage in "considerable observation

and listening, experimentation and risk-taking, and, above all, active involvement with others" (1983, p. 141).

If facility in a foreign language is viewed as a necessary tool to be used to get host-national subordinates to do what one wants them to do, then adjustment may be minimal; however, if language skills are viewed as a means to create and foster interpersonal relationships or as a means to understand the dynamics of a new culture, then language skill is a useful help toward expatriate adjustment. Communication skills, then, as they relate to adjustment, seem to be related to an expatriate's: (1) willingness to use the host-nationals' language; (2) confidence in interacting with people; (3) use of conversational currency; and (4) desire to understand and relate with host-nationals.

The Perceptual Dimension

The ability to understand why foreigners behave the way they do is important in adjusting to an unfamiliar cultural environment. The ability to make correct attributions about the reasons or causes of host-nationals' behavior allows the expatriate to predict how they will behave toward him/her in the future, thus reducing uncertainty in interpersonal and intercultural relations. However, research shows that people from different cultures often misinterpret each other's behavior because of learned cultural differences in their perceptions and evaluations of social behaviors (Everett & Stening, 1980; Triandis, Vassilou, & Nassiakou, 1968). For reviews see Benson (1978); Brein and David (1971); Oddou and Mendenhall (1984); Triandis, Malpass, and Davidson (1973); and Stening (1979).

Other researchers studying expatriate adjustment have found results in congruence with the above conclusions (Arensburg & Niehoff, 1971; Hammer et al., 1978; Ratiu, 1983). Ruben and Kealey (1979) studied the relationship between interpersonal and social behaviors and patterns of success and failure in expatriate adjustment. Technical advisors and their spouses in Kenya were posttested a year after receiving training in interpersonal skills. Well-adjusted expatriates were nonjudgmental and nonevaluative when interpreting the behavior of host-nationals. This

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nonjudgmental approach in the cognitive evaluation of host-nationals led to clearer information transmission between the expatriates and host-nationals and in better interpersonal relationships with them as well.

Well-adjusted expatriates make "looser" or less rigid evaluations about why others behave as they do (Detweiler, 1975), and they are more willing to update their perceptions and beliefs as new data arise. They also tend to seek out such informative data more than do maladjusted expatriates (Ratiu, 1983).

To date, little is known of the cognitive dynamics that lead to correct versus incorrect attributional or evaluative processing in cross-cultural settings (Oddou & Mendenhall, 1984). Some models have been proposed (Detweiler, 1978; Jones & McGillis, 1976; Kelley, 1973; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1984), but the extent to which they account for—and predict—attribution/evaluation processes in cross-cultural settings has yet to be empirically validated. However, the implications of the above research for expatriate adjustment are self-evident, and some training programs have included the evelution of perceptions as an important component of their design (Brislin, 1979; Fiedler, Mitchell, & Triandis, 1971; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1982).

The Cultural-Toughness Dimension

The cultures of some countries seem to be more difficult to adapt to than do the cultures of other countries (Jones & Popper, 1972; Pinfield, 1973; Torbiorn, 1982; Tucker & Schiller, 1975). Torbiorn (1982) found that expatriates expressed high levels of dissatisfaction in their overseas assignment for India/Pakistan, Southeast Asia, the Middle-East, North Africa, East Africa, and Liberia in the areas of job satisfaction, levels of stress and pressure, health care, housing standards, entertainment, food, and skill of co-workers. Also, greater cultural barriers were reported for Southeast Asia, Japan, Africa, and the Middle East than for other world regions. Tucker and Schiller (1975) found similar results with U.S. Navy personnel. Instances of early return among Navy personnel assigned overseas were more frequent at some overseas bases than at others.

Graham (1983) reported that of the racial/cultural groups he studied (Japanese, Chinese, Maori,

Samoan, Tongan, and Caucasian), the Samoans had a more difficult time in adjusting to the Hawaiian lifestyle than did the rest of his sample. He noted that the gap between Fa'a Samoa (the Samoa Way) and the host culture was greater than the gaps between the home cultures of the rest of sample and the host culture. Thus, how well the expatriate adjusts to his/her overseas experience seems to be in part related to the country of assignment.

The above four dimensions of expatriate adjustment seem to hold generally for female as well as for male expatriates. Torbiorn (1982) reported that for the most part there were no differences across sexes in his study of Swedish expatriates; he did, however, find one difference in the area of "perceived isolation."

Perceived isolation refers to the emotional impact of having one's social needs go unsatisfied over an extended period. Torbiorn (1982) reported that 13 percent of female expatriates (wives of male expatriate managers) in his study indicated a marked sense of isolation, and a total of 50 percent expressed some degree of perceived isolation. His male respondents did not indicate significant levels of perceived isolation.

Torbiorn suggests that this discrepancy is not due to innate sex differences in the adjustment process but to "the role and habits of life in the host country which apply particularly to women" (1982, p. 38). Useem's (1966) findings support Torbiorn's view. Useem found that the role expectations for males in the expatriates' home culture and those for males in the Indian culture were more congruent than were role expectations for females. It appears that some cultures may be extra "culturally-tough" for women to adapt to because of an inherent "male-dominated" value system within those cultures.

Discussion

Two major propositions can be derived from this study's findings; one regarding the future direction for expatriate selection and the other regarding future directions for expatriate acculturation training.

Proposition 1. Expatriate acculturation is a multidimensional process rather than a one-dimensional phenomenon; thus, *selection procedures of MNCs should be changed from their present one-dimensional focus on "technical competence" as being*

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the primary criterion toward a "multidimensional make-up" and should focus on criteria relating to the self-oriented, others-oriented, perceptual, and cultural-toughness dimensions.

Proposition 2. Proposition 2 is a natural outgrowth from Proposition 1. For comprehensive preparation of expatriates for living and working abroad, *acculturation training programs should orient expatriates in each of the four dimensions outlined in Proposition 1.*

In order to carry out the above propositions, the following action proposals should be considered by personnel directors.

Proposals for Enhancing the Expatriate Selection Process

The expatriate selection process should focus on the evaluation of the applicant's existing strengths and weaknesses in the dimensions of expatriate acculturation outlined above.

The Self-Oriented Dimension. It is likely that personnel administrators in MNCs already have effective means of evaluating the technical expertise of potential expatriates; historically, this has been their prime focus in the selection process. Another option for evaluating this dimension is the use of psychological tests and evaluation devices. Numerous instruments that are designed to measure stress levels in people are available to personnel staffs; indeed, many MNCs likely have in-house stress reduction programs already in place. These existing programs can be utilized for evaluating potential expatriates' ability to handle stress.

The Perceptual Dimension. A variety of psychological tests are available that measure the rigidity and flexibility of an individual's perceptual and evaluative tendencies (Howard, 1974). Among them are the cognitive rigidity test, the F-test, the Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament survey, and the Allport-Vernon Study of Values. Presently, few personnel administrators in MNCs make use of psychological instruments in their selection process (Baker & Ivancevich, 1971; Tung, 1981); however, the results of such tests, in conjunction with data from other sources, provide a more comprehensive view of each expatriate's potential for successful acculturation.

The Others-Oriented Dimension. In order to gauge potential expatriates' degree of others-orientation, in-depth evaluations from the applicant's superiors, subordinates, friends, and ac-

quaintances can be collected and analyzed. In addition, it would be useful to utilize professional evaluations of an applicant's interpersonal skills from a psychiatrist and/or clinical/counseling psychologist. Professional evaluations have been used by the Peace Corps to aid in its selection process (Henry, 1965).

Another way to evaluate potential expatriates' self-oriented, others-oriented, and perceptual dimensions is to adapt existing selection technology to the overseas selection process. For example, assessment centers can be designed specifically to test participants' intercultural, perceptual, and interpersonal aptitude. Assessment centers have not, to this point, been widely used for expatriate selection; their use in this regard, however, seems to be potentially fruitful in terms of collecting behavioral data to coincide with that collected from psychological tests and evaluations from others.

The Cultural-Toughness Dimension. In concert with the above methods, the personnel staff should take into account the "toughness" of the culture of the country to which the future expatriate will be assigned. Data gathered on the host country's political, legal, socioeconomic, business, and cultural systems should be compared to those systems as they exist currently in the United States. For an assignment in a country that is "culturally tough" the personnel director should be satisfied that the applicant scored high enough on the battery of evaluation devices to handle the assignments. For assignments to cultures similar to those of the United States (e.g., United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand) the personnel director may not feel the need to demand significantly higher scores from an applicant before recommending him/her for the job.

A training program that specifically deals with the subfactors of the dimensions of expatriate acculturation is crucial to the preparation of the expatriate. Very few of the training programs currently in use by personnel staffs of MNCs and by external consultants offer comprehensive coverage of all the dimensions and their subfactors (Brislin, 1979). These training programs, however, can be combined or "integrated" with each other to provide the necessary coverage. Gudykunst, Hammer, and Wiseman (1977) combined six different training approaches and compared the subsequent acculturation levels of trainees who

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received the integrated training with those of trainees who received one-dimensional training. They found that the integrated training produced greater levels of expatriate acculturation than did the one-dimensional training. Thus, when designing expatriate acculturation training programs, the personnel staff of MNCs should create integrated training programs that cover all of the important dimensions of acculturation.

In order to implement these selection and training considerations, the personnel staffs of MNCs must be supported institutionally. MNCs would be well advised to support more effective selection and training in their overseas staffing by adopting the following organizational guidelines.

1. As in any major OD effort, it is vital that top management support both institutionally and politically an emphasis on rigor and depth in the selection and training of expatriates.

2. The length of time budgeted for the selection and training processes must be increased. In order for this to happen, the personnel director must have accurate forecasts of human resource needs in foreign subsidiaries. Too often expatriates are selected hurriedly because of an unforeseen staffing crisis in an overseas operation.

3. The selection and training process must include the spouse of the expatriate. The findings of this study showed that the dimensions of acculturation are the same for men and that women, in male-dominated foreign cultures and women may have more challenges to overcome than men. This state of affairs argues strongly for the inclusion of the spouse in the MNC's selection process. Comprehensive acculturation training should be required of all expatriates and their spouses. Any school-age children should be included in the predeparture training programs as well—their adjustment will be no less of a challenge than will that of their parents.

4. Finally, expatriate selection and preparation for overseas assignments should begin early in a manager's career. In order to provide for future overseas staffing needs, corporate recruiters should have a clear mandate from top management to hire "internationally-oriented" MBA graduates. Once hired, the career paths of these individuals should be carefully planned to prepare them for future service abroad. As overseas staffing positions arise, then, there will be a larger pool of internationally oriented and interculturally prepared managers from which to select than is presently the case within MNCs.

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