

WORK AND NON-WORK ADJUSTMENTS OF
PUBLIC SECTOR EXPATRIATES

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ABSTRACT

Research on public sector expatriates is not very common, despite their increasing numbers. This is lamentable, since our much more advanced knowledge about private sector expatriates may be less applicable to their public sector counterparts. To rectify this deficiency, U.S. Department of Defense administrators assigned to U.S. embassies worldwide were targeted for this study. Results indicated that, in contrast to recent studies of private sector expatriates, stress experienced by the respondents outside work may only have a limited cross-domain effect on the level of stress in the work place. Interaction adjustment had a positive association with work adjustment but general adjustment had no relationship with the adjustment to work. Additionally, the extent of self-efficacy of the public sector expatriates was not associated with work adjustment, neither directly or indirectly. Implications of these findings are discussed in detail.

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Nations with a colonial past have long historic traditions of dispatching personnel to foreign lands for administrative and military purposes (*cf.* Stening, 1994). Currently, there is reason to believe, that given the current geopolitical situation and frequent regional/local conflicts, public sector (PS) expatriates could become more and more common in the future. Nevertheless, studies on private sector expatriates totally dominate the literature (*cf.* Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003). As a result, little is known about PS expatriates and their situation since research on them is very sparse (Anderson, 2001; Harris & Holden, 2001). Unfortunately, the burgeoning research on private sector expatriates may not help much, since circumstances may be different in many ways for PS expatriates than for private sector expatriates. Hence, more research is needed to detect and explore such potential differences and their consequences.

The purpose of this study is to explore cross-domain effects between non-work and work adjustment of PS expatriates. That means, we are examining to what extent stress experienced in one domain of life (outside work) may have an impact on the level of stress in another life domain (work). This is an important study for several reasons. Firstly, the potential unique situation of PS expatriates, as compared to their private sector counterparts, is an obvious and important issue to consider. Generally, the public sector may be characterized by centralization, tight financial control and politically determined access to resources (Bach & Della Rocca, 2000) and many public sector organizations could be described as bureaucratic, hierarchical, and dominated by rule enforcement (Parker & Bradley, 2000). Such conditions may constitute a unique major influence on PS expatriates (Harris & Holden, 2001). Secondly, even for private sector expatriates, research on cross-domain effects between non-work and work domains is less than abundant (*cf.* Bhaskar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005; Shaffer *et al.*, 2001; Takeuchi, Yun & Tesluk, 2002). In the case of PS expatriates, studies on such cross-domain effects are virtually non-existent. Thirdly, considering the increasing trend of globalization, the occurrence of PS expatriates most probably is also rising, although no studies are known to have assessed such a development. It is therefore both relevant and important to investigate this increasing group of international assignees and try to understand to what extent life outside work at the foreign

location may affect their situation within the workplace.

CONCEPUALIZATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Cross-Domain Effects

Role stress theory (cf. Kahn et al., 1964) presumes that stress experienced in one life domain (e.g. non-work) may spill over to another life domain (e.g. work). In other words, a relationship between independent and dependent variables intersects different life domains. In the context of international assignments, it has been argued that expatriates' boundaries between life domains are more permeable than for those with comparable domestic assignments. The usual demarcation lines do not readily exist on international assignments as there are not as clear shelter in one domain from the stress experienced in another domain (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005). Although Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) in their pioneering major theoretical contribution to international adjustment of expatriates allowed for several cross-domain effects, they mainly predicted that influences from outside of work will have an impact on work.

Sociocultural Adjustment

The theoretical concept of sociocultural adjustment has been proposed and defined in the literature on international adjustment (cf. Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Searle, 1991). Sociocultural adjustment relates to the ability to “fit in” or effectively interact with members of the host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1996). Sociocultural adjustment has been associated with variables that promote and facilitate culture learning and acquisition of social skills in the host culture (Cross, 1995; Searle & Ward, 1990). The sociocultural notion of adjustment is based on cultural learning theory and highlights social behaviour and practical social skills underlying attitudinal factors (cf. Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Furnham, 1993; Klineberg, 1982).

Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) argued that the degree of cross-cultural adjustment should be treated as a multidimensional concept, rather than a unitary phenomenon as was the previous

dominating view (*cf.* Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1962; Oberg, 1960). In their proposed model for international adjustment, Black, Mendenhall & Oddou (1991) made a distinction between three dimensions of in-country adjustment: (1) adjustment to work; (2) adjustment to interacting with host nationals and (3) adjustment to the general non-work environment. This theoretical framework of international adjustment covers sociocultural aspects of adjustment and it has been supported by a series of empirical studies of U.S. expatriates and their spouses (Black & Gregersen, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Black & Stephens, 1989). McEvoy & Parker (1995) also found support for the three dimensions of expatriate adjustment. Accordingly, interaction adjustment and general adjustment can be categorized as belonging to the non-work life domain for expatriates while work adjustment obviously is situated in the expatriate work domain.

Self-Efficacy

The personal characteristic of self-efficacy can be conceptualized as the beliefs in one's own ability to execute plans of action (Bandura, 1977). Generally, increased self-efficacy may have a number of effects relevant to the expatriate situation. It may affect individuals' level of interest (Lenox & Subich, 1994), contribution to their teams' effectiveness (Kozlowski, *et al.*, 1999), setting of higher goals, and ultimately through higher performance (*cf.* Locke *et al.*, 1984; Phillips & Gully, 1997; Wood & Bandura, 1989a; 1989b). Similarly, high levels of self-efficacy has been theorized to lead to positive choices (e.g. welcoming the challenge of a new task), motivational effort (e.g. people will try harder), and perseverance (e.g. be resilient when meeting problems and even failure) (Luthans, 2002).

Hypotheses

Since there is a distinct lack of research on PS expatriates, especially regarding survey-based hypotheses-testing studies, the more abundant empirical and theoretical literature on private sector expatriates will be referred to in justifying the hypotheses. That may also serve as an implicit platform to test for potential discrepancies between PS and private sector expatriates.

The stressful experience of expatriates who find it difficult to adjust to the general environment may spill over to the work context. For example, living quarters may be perceived as inadequate

since they cannot provide for the needs of the family in terms of security and comfort. Feelings of frustration may be targeted at the host country in general for not providing reasonable living standards. This sentiment of frustration and anger may carry over to work and negatively influence expatriates work adjustment. On the other hand, when expatriates are comfortable with their general surroundings, more positive feelings toward the host country could be promoted and hence toward the work situation (Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk (2002). Recent research on private sector expatriates supports the presumption that there may be some spill-over between general adjustment and work adjustment. A meta-analytic investigation covering 66 studies and almost 8,500 private sector expatriates found significant positive cross-domain influences within the areas of general adjustment and work adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk (2002), investigating a sample of Japanese business expatriates in the U.S., also identified significant cross-domain effects between general adjustment and work adjustment domains. The anticipation that this presumed positive relationship will also hold for PS expatriates is explored in Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive association between general adjustment and work adjustment of PS expatriates.

Expatriates' adjustment to a new work role may involve a socialization process (Black, 1992; Takeuchi, Wang & Marinova, 2005). Socialization is a process by which an individual acquires the task skills, social knowledge, and behaviors needed for an organizational member (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Consequently, expatriate socialization processes could necessitate considerable interaction with local employees. However, if an expatriate feels uncomfortable interacting with host nationals, he or she may also develop a negative attitude toward work. In other words, if difficulties interacting with locals in general create stress and frustrations, such feelings may easily spill over to the work situation. Reversely, if expatriates experience little difficulties in interacting with local nationals in general, they may also have an easier time adjusting to work. Empirical research on private sector expatriates indicates that there may be cross-domain influences between interaction adjustment and work adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005). The presumption that this is also the case for PS expatriates is examined by Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive association between interaction adjustment and work adjustment of PS expatriates.

Self-efficacy may aid all forms of expatriate adjustment (Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991). Building on Bandura's (1977) conceptualization of self-efficacy above, Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) argued that expatriates with high overall self-efficacy persist in displaying newly learned behaviours, despite negative feedback, and they use the resulting learning to improve their adjustment. Subsequent large-scale meta-analyses of empirical research on private sector expatriates have supported this theoretical argument (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003). More specifically, research evidence suggests that self-efficacy may affect positive thought patterns (e.g. efficacy judgements may influence self-talks: "I know I can figure out how to do this") and resistance to stress (e.g. those with high self-efficacy meet potentially stressful situations with confidence and assurance which make them able to resist stressful reactions) (Luthans, 2002). Accordingly, self-efficacy could positively moderate the influence of both general adjustment and interaction adjustment on work adjustment. The supposition that this is also true for PS expatriates is explored in hypotheses 3 and 4.

Hypothesis 3: The association between general adjustment and work adjustment of PS expatriates is moderated by the extent of self-efficacy. For PS expatriates with a higher extent of self-efficacy, there will be a stronger positive association between general adjustment and work adjustment than for those with a lower extent of self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 4: Association between interaction adjustment and work adjustment of PS expatriates is moderated by the extent of self-efficacy. For PS expatriates with a higher extent of self-efficacy, there will be a stronger positive association between interaction adjustment and work adjustment than for those with a lower extent of self-efficacy.

METHOD

Sample

Data for the current study were taken from a more extensive investigation. The target population of PS expatriates for this larger study consisted of United States Department of Defense (DoD) administrators assigned to U.S. embassies worldwide. DoD administrators are U.S. military personnel. They are all commissioned officers or very senior non-commissioned officers from the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, and the Navy (Army Regulation 611-60). Hence, the target group of DoD administrators make up a relevant group representing expatriates working for public sector organizations. Of the 314 surveys sent out, respondents returned 174 usable surveys for a return rate of 55 percent.

The average respondent had served totally 56.25 months as a DoD administrator ($SD=52.25$) of which 19.47 months ($SD=12.36$) had been served at the current assignment. Accordingly, the total experience of the DoD administrators varied greatly. The average DoD administrator's age was 40 years ($SD=0.71$) and the average educational level was almost a Bachelor's degree.

Instrument

Background variables of the respondents were assessed by single direct questions. The questionnaire ended with an open question encouraging respondents to provide additional comments.

Respondents also completed Black's (1988) scale to assess sociocultural adjustment. This scale is designed to measure three dimensions: *General adjustment* (sample item: 'How adjusted are you to generally living in your host country?'), *interaction adjustment* (sample item: 'How adjusted are you to interacting with the local nationals in general?'), and *work adjustment* (sample item: 'How adjusted are you to your job and responsibilities?'). The respondents indicated how well adjusted they were to their host country on a scale ranging from 1 = very

unadjusted to 7 = completely adjusted. All subscales had acceptable alpha coefficients ranging from .69 to .88 (Table 1).

Self-efficacy was assessed by the Chen, Gully & Eden (2001) eight-item scale. It consists of a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree, sample item: “Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well”. The reliability of this scale was acceptable ($\alpha = .88$).

Time on current location was applied as a control variable since adjustment may be regarded as a process over time following a learning curve (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). This variable was assessed by a direct single question to the respondents: “How long have you served at your current location?”.

RESULTS

Sample means, standard deviations and zero-order Pearson correlations of all variables are provided in Table 1. Additionally, alpha coefficients for the multi-item variables are displayed in parentheses along the diagonal. The significant association between time in current location and all three sociocultural adjustment variables confirms the need to use time in current location as a control variable.

Insert Table 1 about here

The hypotheses were formally tested by way of hierarchical multiple regression (Table 2). The control variable, time in current location, was entered in Step 1. As seen in Table 2, the control variable had a positive relationship with work adjustment ($\beta = .19, p < .001$). Time in current location explained 17 percent of the variance in the criterion variable. In Step 2, the two predictor variables were entered producing one significant effect on the criterion variable explaining 35 percent of work adjustment. Interaction adjustment had a positive relationship

with work adjustment ($\beta=1.70, p<.05$). The moderating variable, self-efficacy, was entered in Step 3 but it had no direct significant effect on work adjustment. In Step 4, the two interaction terms were entered, but neither produced any significant impact on the criterion variable. These findings provide support for H2, while H1, H3 and H4 were not supported. The overall F value for work adjustment was statistically significant, indicating a proper fit between the regression model and the data. Although some of the inter-correlations displayed in Table 1 seem to be on the high side, collinearity statistics did not indicate any serious problem in the regression analysis.

Insert Table 2 about here

DISCUSSION

Main Findings

Surprisingly, the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that general adjustment had no association with work adjustment. On the other hand, as hypothesized, interaction adjustment had a significant positive relationship with work adjustment suggesting a positive cross-domain effect between interaction adjustment and work adjustment. However, no relationship was found between self-efficacy and work adjustment, neither as a direct effect nor as an interactive effect. This implies that self-efficacy was not a moderating variable as hypothesized.

These findings suggest a partly different picture for PS expatriates than for private sector expatriates since a recent large-scale meta-analytic investigation of private sector expatriates found cross-domain effects between both general adjustment and interaction adjustment on the one hand and work adjustment on the other (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005). However, for the PS expatriates, the suggestion that if interactions with host country nationals outside work are going well, their adjustment to work could also improve, may be fundamental. Interaction

adjustment may be perceived as a prerequisite for the other modes of adjustment and, at the same time, interacting with host country nationals could be the most difficult type of adjustment to achieve (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992). On the other hand, in the office, besides the written communication in English, the DoD administrators usually interact with host nationals in English and not in the native language of the locals. This may however not be enough to safeguard an efficient communication process required to adjust well to the work situation at a foreign location. Communication in English, even between fluent speakers, could be very deceptive as it may obscure cultural differences. Although conversations may be conducted in English, the host nationals certainly think in their own language according to their own cultural norms, which may not be fully realized and understood. Instead of being an efficient vehicle of communication, the “common” language of English becomes an obstacle for true understanding (cf. Liu, 1995; Scheu-Lottgen & Hernandez-Campoy, 1998). All communication is situated in and influenced by the premises of its culture. Therefore, more insights into and practice on how to interact properly with host nationals in the local language, including speaking practices, may promote all modes of sociocultural adjustment of expatriates, not only by improving their direct communication with host nationals in their local language outside work, but also by making their interactions in English more effective (Selmer, 2006). Nevertheless, in many foreign locations, interactions with parties external to the place of work may have to be conducted in the local language. Although it may be possible to employ external resources such as translators and interpreters to overcome the language barrier, it is fraught with inherent difficulties. These services could be very expensive and difficult to provide efficiently by an “outsider”. Besides taking into account the sensitive work of many PS expatriates, including DoD administrators, there is a loss of rhetorical power when communications occur through a third party (Feely & Harzing, 2003).

The need for greater language capabilities is also reflected in the comments from the DoD administrators. One respondent in Oman made the comment that “I wish I had learned Arabic before arriving. It would have made the job much easier”. Another DoD administrator in China explained why language skills may make the job easier:

“I highly recommend that all staff members receive a basic language course prior to coming to Beijing. Administrators will not have enough time to pick up necessary language skills on station. Even administrative tasks, local procurement, hotel reservations for visitors, planning functions, and supervising local nationals can be better accomplished by someone with language skills.”

The non-significant result on the hypothesized positive relationship between general adjustment and work adjustment may, at least partly, be due to the situation of DoD administrators at work. In addition to that written and oral communication usually is in English in the workplace, local nationals working at the embassy are also expected to conform to American cultural norms and not vice versa. Hence, the place of work may be regarded as a “little America”, a microcosm of the U.S. cultural context. Despite the need for DoD administrators to be able to communicate both internally and externally, a better general adjustment to the general cultural context outside of their work may hence have limited impact on DoD administrators’ work adjustment as the findings indicate.

Limitations

Firstly, although DoD administrators may be appropriate representatives of PS expatriates, they are all middle managers. Obviously, this does not exhaust the category of PS expatriates. Hence, the validity of the findings of this investigation may be restricted to PS expatriates at middle manager positions and the findings may not be applicable to other groups of PS expatriates.

Secondly, although a tendency to apply parent cultural control of foreign subsidiaries of MNCs in the private sector have been reported (Selmer & de Leon, 2002), it is not known to what extent the work situation of the DoD administrators may be typical of other PS expatriates. Written and spoken English communication at work and the presumption that local nationals adjust to American cultural values and norms within the workplace as noted above, may not be typical for PS expatriates in general. To the extent that this should not be the case, the findings of the study may be restricted to PS expatriates at similar places of work.

Since all data were self-reported, single method variance could have affected the results of the investigation. Although the general condemnations of self-report methods have been found exaggerated (Crampton & Wagner, 1994), the potential for single-method bias was checked. This type of bias could lead to a compressed response range (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986), but no such tendency was detected by a manual inspection of the data set.

Despite the conventional wisdom that expatriate adjustment is considered to be a process over time (cf. Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986), the method employed here only used measures of the average level of sociocultural adjustment for the investigated group of DoD administrators at a certain point in time. However, time in current location was used as a control variable in the regression analysis. It is therefore doubtful whether a longitudinal approach may have produced a more adequate data source. Besides, longitudinal studies pose other serious methodological challenges (cf. Menard, 1991).

Implications

There are straightforward implications of the findings. In addition to other benefits of a certain degree of proficiency in the host country language (cf. Feely & Harzing, 2003; Selmer, 2006), results of this study indicate that it may promote work adjustment through a spill-over mechanism. Previous research has shown that in the case of private sector expatriates, proficiency in the host country language is positively and directly related with work adjustment (Selmer, 2006). Therefore, organizations assigning PS expatriates abroad may want to offer language training to their expatriate candidates. However, it may not be necessary to master the foreign language to perfection, as demonstrating even very basic skills (survival language), as well as elementary speaking practices, may connote the message to the locals that the expatriate really cares to make an effort (cf. Brislin, 1994; Zimmermann, Holman & Sparrow, 2003). Unfortunately, language training, which should be a part of cross-cultural training and preparations for expatriate assignments is identified in the literature both as being essential for successful adjustment as well as being badly neglected by international business firms (cf. Aryee, 1997; Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Brewster, 1995). The findings of this study underscore the emerging literature on corporate language training as part of expatriate preparations as well as

other human resource management responses by multinationals (cf. Bloch, 1995; Hayet, 2000; Hong, 1996; Lein & Sisco; 1999; Panella, 1998). However, the difficulty of achieving high levels of proficiency, especially in non-European languages should not be underestimated (Bloch, 1995). Parent organizations of PS expatriates may take the position that training high-level employees in a foreign language does not make much sense since it is a large investment with high front-end costs. Therefore, although the results of this study support language training in general, the necessity of expensive, tiring and time consuming language training for PS expatriates is a decision for the specific assigning organization to make.

Obviously, an alternative to language training is to hire people already possessing the required language ability (Lester, 1994). Proficiency in the host country language could be used as one of the selection criteria for PS expatriates. However, such selective recruitment may not be a very realistic option. Language ability and other cross-cultural skills are traditionally not highly valued when selecting private sector expatriates (cf. Franke & Nicholson, 2002) and there may not be enough PS expatriates available with the required language skills.

The investigation can both be replicated and extended. Firstly, to gauge the validity of these findings, future research may replicate this study by using other samples of PS expatriates. Secondly, also other dependent variables such as work performance may be included among the dependent variables studied. After all, the ultimate purpose of the parent organization is that their PS expatriates discharge their work tasks in a successful way.

Conclusions

This study intended to explore cross-domain effects between non-work and work adjustment of PS expatriates. In contrast to recent studies of private sector expatriates, we found that stress experienced by PS expatriates outside work may only have a limited impact on the level of stress in the work place. While interaction adjustment may have an effect on work adjustment, general adjustment may not. Additionally, the extent of self-efficacy of PS expatriates was not associated with work adjustment, neither directly or indirectly. These findings are consistent with the view that the situation of PS expatriates may be different than that of private sector expatriates.

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TABLE 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among the Variables¹

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Work Adjustment	6.25	.80	(.69)			
2. General Adjustment	5.78	.87	.60***	(.88)		
3. Interaction Adjustment	5.73	1.02	.71***	.77***	(.80)	
4. Self-Efficacy	4.33	.47	.22**	.11	.07	(.88)
5. Time in Current Location (months) (Control)	19.47	12.37	.41***	.36***	.34***	.08

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (2-tailed)

¹ 169 < n < 174 due to missing answers

Alpha coefficients within parentheses

TABLE 2: Results of Hierarchical Regression for Cross-Domain Effects
between Nonwork and Work Factors ^a

	Work Adjustment		
	β	ΔR^2	ΔF
Step 1 (Control)		.17	34.89***
Time in Current Location (months)	.19***		
Step 2 (Main Effect)		.35	60.21***
General Adjustment	-.81		
Interaction Adjustment	1.70*		
Step 3 (Moderator)		.03	9.24**
Self-Efficacy	.21		
Step 4 (Interaction)		.01	1.35
Self-Efficacy x General Adjustment	1.22		
Self-Efficacy x Interaction Adjustment	-1.45		
R^2	.56		
F	33.67***		

^a All standardized regression coefficients are from the final step in the analysis.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; two-tailed