
The Effect of Cultural Empathy on Expatriate Job Satisfaction Assigned in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper aims to present a conceptual model for a cultural empathy on expatriates' job satisfaction mediated by cross-cultural adjustment. The author develops a conceptual model and propositions, grounded in previous study on international human resource, international business management, cross-cultural management and intercultural management. Cultural empathy is one of the multicultural personality dimensions. There are five dimensions of multicultural personality (MPQ), i.e., cultural empathy, open mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility. Moreover, according to previous management scholars, job satisfaction has relatively scant attention in the literature on intercultural management (IM). The proposed model is expected to offer a guideline to the international human resource for selecting the expatriates working outside from their home countries in order for the expatriate's effectiveness during overseas assignment.

Keywords Job satisfaction, Cultural empathy, Expatriate.

Paper type: Conceptual Paper

1. Introduction

In a dynamic and expanding the borderless world economy, an important component of international human resource management in multinational companies (MNCs) is the expatriation of employees in foreign countries. According to Dabic, González-Loureiro, and Harvey (2013), research on expatriates may be framed into two different but complementary research topics such as human resource management (HRM) and practices and international business management (IBM). These scholars reviewed after four decades of empirical research starting from the 1970s until the year 2012, it seems to be required to provide a foundation for building a theory of expatriate management. From the previous research on expatriate management are aware that individual-level factors such as personality trait, ability, skill, gender, marital status, prior international experience, and local language fluency are important predictors of expatriate effectiveness (e.g., Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA), job performance, completion of assignment) during their international assignment (Ramalu, Rose, & Wei, 2011).

An expatriate can represent as an employee who is sent by a multinational parent company doing a work assignment to a foreign nation (Lee & Liu, 2006). The expatriates are expected to offer new knowledge for the locals to adopt thus the local Malaysians have high respect towards them at the workplace (Malek & Budhwar, 2013; Tahir & Ismail, 2007). In the public sector, the expatriate mainly hold diplomatic posts in foreign embassies or as consultants for government agencies. Tahir and Ismail (2007) stated that Malaysia still needs this foreign expertise for 10 to 20 years comes. Malaysia recognizes the value and contribution of foreign skilled (expatriate) talent to the country's economic development and understands the need for a robust workforce with the necessary to thrive in today's fast-moving economic landscape (Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad, 2011). Expatriate managers are mostly positioned in the Multinational Corporation (MNC) that runs their business operation here in the private sector. As there is an increase in foreign investments and industrialization efforts in Malaysia, this may result in the increase of expatriates working in the public or private sectors.

Moreover, Malaysia aimed to achieve Vision 2020 for several years to come, is among those countries that open its market to free trade and foreign investments. As a result, at present there are many international organizations that have expanded their business along with

establishing their reputation in this country. In this era of globalization and Malaysian efforts to be an industrialized nation, there is a need to acknowledge various new advancements in technology (Tahir, 2001). Since that most of the skills and knowledge of new technologies comes from the well-developed nations. Malaysia requires the human expertise in various fields in order to achieve the objective of becoming highly competitive along with other developed nations.

Hiring expatriates from abroad is one of the ways to expose the Malaysian workforce towards foreign expertise. Malaysian government launches different programs like capturing 5000 knowledge workers every year until 2020 responding to the increasing need of expatriates (Rostamzadeh, Anantharaman, & Tong, 2012). As a result, the total number of expatriates in Malaysia was 43,548 in 2005, slightly decrease about 32,609 in 2006 and back to rise in 35,583 in 2007 (Kanapathy, 2008). A report by (Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) (2014)), the numbers of expatriates in 1980s were about 80,000, and in 2013 there were 44,938 expatriates working in Malaysia. Thus, it showed that the decrease number of expatriates in Malaysia.

Taking into account the fact that the use of expatriate managers can be an expensive practice, multinational organizations continue to experience the expatriate's manager premature return due to their inability to adapt the culture of the host country. According to Bashir (2012), as cited in Shanonhouse (1996), this is a major problem for organisations because costs that related to expatriate failure have reportedly risen to nearly \$1 million per failure. As globalization continues to grow, expatriates continue to play important roles in MNCs. However, culture and the inability to adjust to the host country's culture were yet another reason identified for expatriation failure (Ralston, Terpstra, Cunniff, & Gustafson, 2005; Thoo & Kaliannan, 2013). In addition, the decision to move from their home country to work in another country with a different culture will create countless number of issues for expatriates. Furthermore, according to Joseph (2013) from his interviewing expatriate stated that there are cross-cultural management challenges from the early coming in Malaysia.

Thus, a predictor of expatriate effectiveness in the international setting similar to what has been found in domestic research is reliable personality trait (Ramalu, Shamsudin, & Subramaniam, 2012). An individual who possesses the appropriate personality trait for a given

role in a given environment will perform better in their job than those who do not possess the appropriate personality characteristics for some roles.

In the research realm, individual differences of personality traits appear to gain considerable attention. Personality trait is believed to be a trustworthy predictor of workplace behaviour in the international setting similar to what has been found in domestic research (Ramalu, Rose, Uli, & Samy, 2010). This paper aims to contribute to this study in how personality trait such as cultural empathy will effects the expatriate job satisfaction who assigned in Malaysia as well as cross-cultural adjustment. A growing trend in the number of expatriates and international assignments in Malaysia has intensified the need for research to understand how expatriates adapt and perform during their assignments in Malaysia.

This paper at the beginning gives a brief conceptualization on the definition of expatriates, cultural empathy, job satisfaction and cross-cultural management. This section is followed by the proposed conceptual model in the current study. To support the proposed model, the following sections afterwards will be discussing on the relationship between the variables. Proposed empirical testing, conclusion and future direction of the research will follow consecutively.

2. Definition of expatriate

In Malaysia, expatriation does not constitute a new phenomenon. According to Tahir and Ismail (2007), the country has gone through three waves of phases of incoming expatriates. Knowing the definition of expatriates is also important. There are numerous definitions to describe ‘*expatriate*.’ An expatriate can represent as an employee who is sent by a multinational parent company doing a work assignment to a foreign nation (Lee & Liu, 2006). In wider scope, there is another key factor for competitiveness that may assist in expatriates is innovation and entrepreneurship (Dabic et al., 2013). From the point of view of the scholar above mentioned, expatriate is an employee who is working with the Multinational Corporation (MNCs) that different from their country in terms of culture, working style, attitude, and a way of life to carry out a particular task in the host country for specific time.

3. A conceptual definition of the variables in the study

In this section will explain the conceptual and operationalized definition of the variables in the current study.

3.1 Cultural empathy

In this study, cultural empathy is an independent variable. According to Przytuła, Rozkwitalska, Chmielecki, Sułkowski, and Basinska (2015), cultural empathy is one of the key importance in achieving success during foreign assignments in the literature on expatriation. Cultural empathy known as cultural sensitivity Hawes and Kealy (1981) that refers to expatriates ability and sensitivity to read the feelings and thought of people from other cultural backgrounds Peltokorpi and Froese (2012) and the capacity to clearly project an interest in others as well to obtain and reflect a reasonably complete and accurate sense of another's thoughts, feelings and/or experience (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001). Furthermore, cultural empathy is probably the most frequently mentioned dimension of cultural effectiveness (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001). Expatriate in this type of personality tends to be an empathetic to other culture are more accepting of cultural differences rather than seeing them as good or bad, right or wrong from the behaviour perspective. Thus, expatriates high in this dimension easily to understand the rules of cultures that are unknown to them (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2013). The operationalised of cultural empathy in this study is known as cultural sensitivity that refers to expatriate ability and sensitivity to read the feelings and thought of people from other cultural backgrounds.

3.2 Job satisfaction

Job Satisfaction is a dependent variable in this study. Job satisfaction is a positive emotional that there are formed through interactions within this environment resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences, places an emphasis on the task environment where an employee performs his or her duties and the attitudes (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011). Besides, according to Liu and Lee (2008), job satisfaction is part of the topics of broad interest to both people who work in organizations and people who study them. Meanwhile, according to Downes, Thomas, and Singley (2002), there are a variety of factors on expatriate satisfaction which has been found to affect other expatriate success outcome such as organizational

commitment, and expatriate and repatriate cross-cultural adjustment. Another definition from Bonache (2005) explains that from an economic perspective, job satisfaction is a unitary concept that tends to be explained in purely monetary terms. Thus, Rozkwitalska and Basinska (2015) addressed that the research on job satisfaction should be included due to the fact that expatriates operate in multicultural environments by the very nature of their overseas assignments.

In order to determine how satisfied employees, the facet model of job satisfaction examines job facets for each of them. There are Minnesota Satisfaction determined the facets such as ability utilization, achievement, activity, advancement, authority, company policies and practices, compensation, co-workers, creativity, social service, social status, human relations supervision, technical supervision, variety, and working condition in determining job satisfaction.

Besides that, Moulik and Mazumdar (2012) identified three dimensions of expatriate satisfaction: (1) the individual-level determinants, (2) the organisational-level and (3) environment-level determinants. The first dimension is the individual-level, which would encompass that the individual's ability to cope with an intercultural stress, communication and relationships. The second dimension, the organisational-level is the different job/task characteristics that enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction. The third dimension is environment-level are linked to the location of the assignment. Thus, this study operationalised job satisfaction as an attitude of expatriates towards work as a result of his or her perception about fit between him/her and the organisation during working in Malaysia.

3.3 Cross-cultural adjustment (CCA)

Zein (2015) identified that cultural impact is well understood by international managers, but it is unfortunate that is still ignored or underplayed by the majority of organisations. From that point, culture impact could be most benefit from understanding it especially for organisations. The current study, the researcher's interest to study on cross-cultural adjustment (CCA). Cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) is the conceptualization of the level of psychological comfort an expatriate has the various aspects of the host culture (Black & Stephens, 1989). In the literature of Black and Stephens (1989); there are three specific areas of Cross Cultural Adjustment which are 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) (Ramalu et al., 2010).

According to Ramalu et al. (2010), CCA is therefore suggested as key determinant of expatriate success in their international assignments. From previous research showed that CCA is a temporal and primary outcome of an expatriate's assignment that can affect the development of secondary or more distal expatriate adjustment. Furthermore, according to Ramalu et al. (2010), among the spillover effects of CCA are anxiety, job satisfaction (Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002), organizational commitment (e.g. Shaffer and Harrison, 1998), job performance and premature return from assignment (Black & Stephens, 1989; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003). This shows that there are relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and job satisfaction. Moreover, Davies, Kraeh, and Froese (2015) addressed that the adjustment of expatriates is therefore a crucial factor in determining the success or failure of an expatriate's stint abroad. In this study, cross-cultural adjustment is a mediator on the relationship between cultural empathy and expatriate job satisfaction.

4. Conceptual model of the study

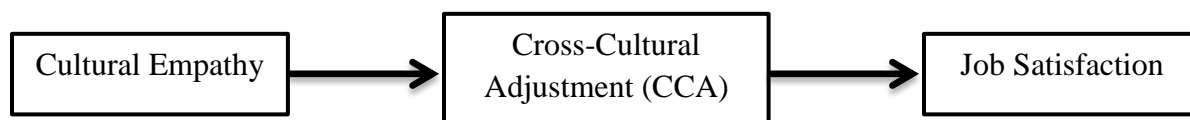


Figure 1: Proposed Framework

Based on the objective of the study that is to be examined the effect of cultural empathy on expatriate job satisfaction, the above proposed framework was developed in Figure 1.1. The instrument used was adopted from Stride, Wall, and Catley (2007), Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Ponterotto, and Fietzer (2013) and earlier related studies. Besides, according to previous management scholars, it has relatively scant attention in the literature on intercultural management (IM) (Rozkwitalska & Basinska). However, in multicultural working environments of individuals are exposed to cultural barriers, face specific challenges as well as encounter

opportunities hardly probable for their domestic settings, which, therefore, affect the perceived level of their job satisfaction. For example, in Malaysia, there are multiracial and multicultural people. Thus, it can be a barrier to the expatriates when working in this host country with different cultures.

In the current study, cross-cultural adjustment is the mediator on the relationship between cultural empathy and expatriate job satisfaction. If there have a relationship between all variables in the study, for example, independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV), IV and mediator variable (MV), MV and DV, it can have a mediator between IV and DV (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008). Thus, in this study will focus on the mediating of cross cultural adjustment in the relationship between cultural empathy and expatriate job satisfaction.

5. The relationship between cultural empathy and expatriate job satisfaction

Cultural empathy is the ability and sensitivity to read the feeling and thoughts of people from other cultural backgrounds (Hawes & Kealy, 1981; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2013; Van Oudenhoven, Mol, & Van der Zee, 2003). To explain more, cultural empathy is regarded as the opposite of ethnocentrism, or a propensity to view one's traditions and behaviors as right and those of others as wrong. In other words, culture emphatic expatriates, on average, are likely to gain acceptance and social support from HCN employees and thus have higher job satisfaction (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2013).

According to Froese and Peltokorpi (2011), the positive influence of cultural empathy on job satisfaction also suggests that social skills can be a more important determinant than language proficiency in a work context. Meanwhile, according to Peltokorpi and Froese (2014) as cited in Church (1982), cultural empathy is regarded to view one's traditions and behaviors as right and those of others as wrong. Since ethnocentric expatriates are likely to make little effort to understand or consider the perspectives, idea, and behaviors of others, it is not surprising that they are identified to have less satisfying work relations with HCNs in comparison to expatriates who exhibit a more tolerant orientation (Huang, Chi, & Lawler, 2005). Peltokorpi and Froese (2014) as cited in Shin, Morgeson, & Campion (2007), cultural empathetic expatriates, on average, are likely to gain acceptance and social support from HCNs employees and thus have

higher job satisfaction.

6. The relationship between cultural empathy and cross-cultural adjustment (CCA)

The main problem that always expatriates have to deal is the inability to adjust in foreign environments. According to Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, and Lepak (2005), the inability of expatriates to successfully adjust to foreign environments has been cited as one of the most frequent reasons for unsuccessful overseas assignments (eg., (Caligiuri, 2000; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). From the empirical study from Ramalu et al. (2010) and Hannay (2015), it shows that cultural empathy is significantly related to Cross Cultural Adjustment. With the degree that own cultural empathy enable them to adjust the new cultural environment to improve or successfully perform their job/assignment well. Furthermore, according to Peltokorpi (2008), expatriates with a high level of cultural empathy are likely to be able to empathize with the behaviors, feelings, and thoughts of host country nationals. Thus, this will lead to an easier for expatriates to adjust with the new foreign environment.

7. The relationship between cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) and expatriate job satisfaction

From the previous study by Hassan and Diallo (2013), found that there is a significant relationship between Cross Cultural Adjustment and job performance. In this study, the researcher will be examined the relationship between Cross Cultural Adjustment and expatriate job satisfaction. According to above mentioned, it also showed that there is a relationship between Cross Cultural Adjustment and expatriates job satisfaction. Expatriate who successfully adjust working with the different environment will get greater job satisfaction. Based on the above review of the concepts, the paper puts forward following hypotheses:

Hypotheses 1: Cultural empathy attributes positively affects expatriate job satisfaction.

Hypotheses 2: Cross-cultural adjustment positively affects expatriate job satisfaction.

Hypotheses 3: Cultural empathy significantly related to cross-cultural adjustment.

8. Proposed future empirical testing

A cross-sectional sample survey field study is employed in this research as data were collected at a single point in time. According to Sekaran (2003), cross-sectional studies refer to the study can be conducted in which data are gathered just once, perhaps over a period of days or weeks or months in order to answer a research question. In this study, the unit of analysis is the individual of expatriates working in manufacturing industry in Malaysia. Sekaran (2003) also defined that a sampling frame as a list of elements in the population. The sample for this study will be taken from the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) directory 2014. The FMM directory is published by the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers Association. This directory provides a list of all sectors of manufacturing companies in Malaysia.

The study used a set of survey instruments containing questionnaires for measuring the variables of the study. Wherever possible, measurement items for constructs proposed in the research model were adopted from prior validated empirical research. Items were thoroughly revised in terms of wording, specificity, and length to ensure the relevance to this particular study context. Language and wordings were modified to make sure that these statements could be easily understood by targeting respondents.

8.1 Instrumentation

In this study, the scale items for personality traits dimension will be adopted from (Van der Zee et al., 2013) . A sample item for cultural empathy dimensions includes “Understands other people’s feeling”. In this study, the researcher will be used 5-point Likert Scale for all variables measurement. There are eight items for cultural empathy. Meanwhile, a total of 15 scale items will be used to measure the job satisfaction in this research. According to Stride et al. (2007), this job satisfaction measurement was developed Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979) as a robust instrument that is easily completed by employees at all levels and is psychometrically sound. The main reason using this scale is because it has been widely used in healthcare, manufacturing jobs, educations, construction work, the service sector and off-shore oil installations (Stride et al., 2007). Cross-Cultural Adjustment (CCA) as a mediator variable that is measured with 14-items, self-reported Expatriate Adjustment Scale adopted from (Black & Stephens, 1989). The following Table 1.1 indicates the measures of the study variables used in

the study.

Table 1.1: Instrumentation of the study variables

Study Variables	No. of Items	Source of Scale	Cronbach Alpha (α)
Cultural empathy	8	Van der Zee et al. (2013)	0.81
Job satisfaction	15	Stride et al. (2007)	0.87
Cross-cultural adjustment (CCA)	14	Black and Stephens (1989)	
1) General adjustment			0.82
2) Interaction adjustment			0.89
3) Work adjustment			0.91

Source: Author

9. Conclusions and future recommendation

Cultural empathy is supported by Froese and Peltokorpi (2011) the positive impact of cultural empathy on job satisfaction also suggests that social skills can be a more important determinant than language proficiency in a work context. Moreover, cultural empathetic expatriates, on average, are likely to gain acceptance and social support from HCNs employees and thus have higher job satisfaction. According to Peltokorpi (2008), Ramalu et al (2010) and Hannay (2015) cultural empathy is the most significant predictors of cross cultural Adjustment.

Multicultural Personality (MPQ) is used in this study because of reliable, valid, and suitable instrument. The five dimensions have consistently emerged from exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses and explained more variance on multicultural success than the Big Five. Besides, the use of expatriates is that a larger cultural difference between the parent company and the overseas business guides to an apparent need for control and communication, and this reason would be results in a greater dependence on expatriates (Hassan & Diallo, 2013).

For future recommendation, this study should be doing in the longitudinal study in order to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. Besides that, there are other multicultural dimensions of personality should be do for future research to examine expatriate job satisfaction. Moreover, another facet like job performance can be done for future research in order to identify the effect of multicultural personality. Another suggestion is that the international experience can

be a moderator for future study.

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