



# A framework and typology of adjustment responses to extra-cultural disorientation experienced during intercultural assignments

Denise Potosky

*The Pennsylvania State University, Great Valley School of Graduate Professional Studies, 30 E. Swedesford Road, Malvern, PA 19355, USA*

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 August 2015

Received in revised form 17 January 2016

Accepted 30 January 2016

### Keywords:

Adjustment

Individual adaptation

Intercultural

Expatriates

Global work assignments

## ABSTRACT

The psychological mobility required in global work assignments creates an exigency for psychological adjustment. The new framework presented in this paper conceptualizes adjustment as a person's efforts to adapt to episodes of disorientation encountered when working in intercultural contexts. Specifically, individuals experience "extra-cultural" disorientation when they lack interpretive frames during episodes of cross-cultural interaction, and this disorientation triggers the psychological adjustment process. Adjustment responses will vary along a continuum between applying one's own familiar cultural patterns and learning from new situational cues during interactions with others. Individual adaptation theory offers a generalizable model for understanding adjustment, and four key elements of individual adaptation (managing stress, learning and sense-making, organizing behavioral routines, and negotiating personal versus organizational demands) mirror recurring themes in the cross-cultural management literature. A typology of adjustment responses is offered to illustrate a person's psychological state after responding to one or more extra-culturally disorienting episodes. Adjustment responses may be integrated into behavioral routines, mindsets, and identities, and different types of responses may facilitate different roles or work assignments.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Organizations seek "culturally astute actors" to participate in global teams, to represent organizational interests in international and cross-cultural contexts, and to negotiate with local leaders in host environments (Shenkar, Luo, & Yeheskel, 2008, p. 915). These agents may include corporate expatriates (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005), self-initiated expatriates (SIEs; Suutari & Brewster, 2000), flexpatriates (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, & Herbert, 2004), short-term international assignees, "frequent travelers" (Tahvanainen, Welch, & Worm, 2005), repatriates, and those with domestic jobs that include international responsibilities (DJIRS; Tharenou, 2002). Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, and Bolino (2012) refer to these various types of international work arrangements as global work experiences, which are an increasingly common and important element of many people's careers.

From the perspective of the boundaryless career framework (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), an individual enacts his or her career along two dimensions: physical mobility, which entails moving across jobs, organizations, occupations, and sometimes national borders, and psychological mobility, which refers to a person's capacity to make transitions across perceived boundaries (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). While some individuals will physically move across geographical borders during the course of their global careers, all will work across psychological borders with respect to cultural boundaries (Point & Dickman,

E-mail address: [dxp16@psu.edu](mailto:dxp16@psu.edu).

2012). “An international assignment is not only a physical adventure in a more or less remote land, but also a psychological adventure that requires the willingness to revise deeply held beliefs concerning one’s own identity” (Sanchez, Spector, & Cooper, 2000, p. 105).

In their examination of career choices and consequences, Shaffer et al. (2012) present a taxonomy of global work experiences in which different types of work are mapped within a space defined by three dimensions: The degree to which global work requires physical mobility, cognitive flexibility, and disruptions to nonwork routines. For example, expatriates must move somewhere else, interact with foreigners, and accept disruptions to their lives outside of work. Members of global virtual teams do not travel to new locations for meetings, may interact frequently with culturally diverse others, and experience moderate disruptions to their non-work routines. Global domestics, who have responsibilities in other countries but generally do not travel, do not interact frequently or directly with foreigners, and do not experience many nonwork disruptions. As these examples illustrate, Shaffer et al.’s (2012) taxonomy classifies different types of assignments according to the nature of global work, but does not focus directly on the psychological adjustment process or the responses of individuals involved in this work. In contrast, the present paper describes the adjustment that psychological mobility entails when working across cultural boundaries and presents a typology of adjustment responses.

A great deal of research has focused on the situational factors and individual characteristics that might help a person adjust during international and intercultural encounters. Most management research has focused on expatriates, however, essentially modeling adjustment as a response to physical mobility. For example, Harrison, Shaffer, and Bhaskar-Shrinivas (2004) stated that “Adjustment is a more specific and narrow concept [than adaptation]. It refers to a psychological state or process of experience...[that] results from (an anticipated) temporary change in various aspects of the environment” (p. 210; brackets added by author). Given that global work experiences are increasingly important and commonplace, it is timely and important to focus on the adjusting that is integral to the successful performance of many types of global work assignments that require psychological mobility. Rather than develop an understanding of adjustment based on expatriation and then try to generalize to other forms of global work, this paper models the psychological adjustment process inherent in a variety of global assignments, including expatriation. Thus, one key contribution of this article is that it broadens the scope of intercultural adjustment research beyond expatriation by connecting it to what we know about how people psychologically adapt to boundary-spanning experiences.

Intercultural psychological adjustment can be understood and modeled as individual adaptation, which explains how people make psychological transitions across various types of boundaries. Ashford and Taylor (1990, p. 29) pointed out that “although personal and job transitions are discussed in many fragmented literatures (e.g., organizational change, entry, socialization, and self-management, etc.), the adaptation process underlying them is quite similar.” Ashford and Taylor (1990, p. 4) define individual adaptation as “the process by which individuals learn, negotiate, enact, and maintain the behaviors appropriate to a given organizational environment. ‘Appropriate’ indicates some degree of fit between the behaviors demanded by the environment and those produced by the individual such that individual is able to achieve valued goals.” Similarly, adjustment is defined here as the psychological process by which individuals make sense of new information, negotiate situational demands, manage stress, and appropriately regulate their behaviors when working across cultural boundaries.

Defining and examining adjustment using Ashford and Taylor’s (1990) dimensions of individual adaptation capitalizes upon common themes shared across research streams. The terms “adjustment” and “adaptation” have sometimes been used interchangeably in global management and cross-cultural research (e.g., Aycan, 1997), yet research on “adjustment” or “cultural adaptation” has neither adequately leveraged research on individual adaptation nor distinguished itself from it. For example, Molinsky (2013) observed that most of the cultural competence research literature has failed to consider the process of adaptation over time, but he refers to “adaptation” specifically as “cultural adaptation” following research traditions on acculturation offered by Berry (1997, 2003), biculturalism (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993), and stages of cultural adaptation (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960; Sanchez et al., 2000) without reference to the broader adaptation literature. For another example, Harrison et al. (2004) seem to regard adaptation as a process and adjustment as a response state. They define adaptation as “a process where relocating individuals alter their behaviors to achieve a degree of fit with different aspects of the environment” (p. 210), which they argue differs from adjustment, which they define as a psychological state (i.e., a feeling of comfort in response to stressful experiences). Yet, in their review they mention that adjustment can also be considered a process with respect to organizational socialization and work role transitions (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Nicholson, 1984), which is grounded in individual adaptation research and theory. The present paper adds clarity to the extant literature by modeling adjustment as an adaptation process, and by using this conceptualization to describe different types of responses to this process.

While the cross-cultural management literature, primarily focused on expatriation, has paid only passing reference to the individual adaptation literature, the individual adaptation literature has not focused on expatriates or cultural adaptation. As Harrison et al. (2004) noted, individual adaptation theory has often focused on changing work roles within or between organizations, e.g., a new job in a new place with a new group, and the socialization process associated with these transitions. Consequently, another contribution of this paper is that it extends Ashford and Taylor’s (1990) model by explaining how four adaptation tasks can be conceptualized as adjustment in cross-cultural contexts.

Extending both individual adaptation theory and adjustment theory, the proposed framework offers a typology of adjustment responses, which suggests possible psychological states as immediate outcomes of adjusting. That is, the conceptually-derived typology reveals a range of possible adjustment responses that can become integrated into behavioral routines, mindsets, and identities. The typology of adjustment responses is constructed based on the extent to which a person relies on his or her own values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms (VABNs) or focuses on new, encountered “foreign” (situated) cues in order to regulate stress and adjust frames of reference, behaviors, and motivation toward assigned goals. Overall, the proposed framework and typology provides important theoretical progress in cross-cultural adjustment research, offers a new link between adjustment and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/879544>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/879544>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)