



Expatriate personality and cultural fit: The moderating role of host country context on job satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

This study draws on the cultural fit hypothesis to examine interactive effects of host country context and four (Multicultural Personality Questionnaire) expatriate personality traits – Cultural Empathy, Social Initiative, Emotional Stability, and Open Mindedness – on job satisfaction. The cultural fit hypothesis maintains that it is not only the expatriate personality traits per se, but the cultural fit between expatriate personality traits and host country cultural values, norms, and prototypical personality traits that predict expatriate adjustment in host countries (Searle & Ward, 1990). Providing partial support for the cultural fit hypothesis, data derived from 191 expatriates in Brazil and Japan shows that the importance of two personality traits varies in these countries. Specifically, expatriates with high Cultural Empathy were more satisfied with their jobs in Japan than in Brazil, whereas Social Initiative was more important for expatriates in Brazil.

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1. Introduction

The accelerating globalization has led multinational companies (MNCs) to continue to rely heavily on expatriate assignments to increase their competitiveness in the global market place (Global Relocation Trends Survey [GRTS], 2012). However, these overseas assignments require expatriates to adapt to novel, complex work contexts, and such challenging assignments are often associated with low levels of expatriate adjustment in host countries (Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that a plethora of research has focused on the antecedents of expatriate adjustment and effectiveness (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005, for a review).

Despite the progress, many questions regarding drivers of expatriate effectiveness remain. One relevant question comes in the cultural fit hypothesis (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Chang, 1997; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004), which maintains that it is not only the expatriate personality traits per se, but the cultural fit between expatriate personality traits and host country cultural values, norms, and prototypical personality traits that predict expatriate adjustment in host countries. Personality traits refer to “dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions” (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 29). While previous research and conceptual models

have linked expatriate personality traits to numerous expatriate outcomes (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005), cross-cultural psychologists have argued that they either overlook or give little attention to host country context (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Ward & Chang, 1997; Ward et al., 2004). In contrast to the assumed uniformity in the predictive power of personality traits, culture fit research has demonstrated that the degree of fit between the individual (often international student or immigrant) and host country in terms of values, beliefs, and personality characteristics enhances individuals’ well-being (Schiefer, Möllering, & Daniel, 2012).

This study, by giving attention to the host country context in the examination of expatriate personality traits and job satisfaction, contributes to the expatriate literature in three ways. First, this study draws on the culture fit hypothesis to examine the interactive effects of host country context (Brazil and Japan) and expatriate personality traits on job satisfaction. While personality traits are important antecedents of job satisfaction in domestic settings (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002), these constructs have received little attention in expatriate research (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). In addition to the limited research on expatriate personality traits and job satisfaction, to the best of our knowledge, only two studies have investigated these constructs in conjunction (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011; Oudenhoven, Mol, & Van der Zee, 2003). While these studies conducted respectively in Japan and Taiwan suggest that certain personality traits facilitate expatriate job satisfaction, their findings are inconsistent perhaps due to single country research design. Similar equivocality is identified to

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exist in research on expatriate personality traits and cross-cultural adjustment (Ward et al., 2004). In comparison to single country studies, the present study takes into account the interactive effects of two different host countries on job satisfaction. This study further extends cultural fit research by shifting the focus from sojourners and social interaction adjustment to expatriates and job satisfaction.

Second, in contrast with the bulk of expatriate research relying on the Five-Factor Model of Personality (Big Five) (McCrae & Costa, 1990), this study uses the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) to measure expatriate personality traits. Unlike the Big Five, alleged not to provide the level of specificity of the effects of personality traits on work-related outcomes in cross-cultural settings (Hough, 1992), the MPQ is specifically designed to measure personality traits underlying multicultural effectiveness and shown to explain more variance in intercultural settings (Leone, Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Perguini, & Ercolani, 2005). The MPQ consists of the following personality traits: Cultural Empathy, Open Mindedness, Social Initiative, Emotional Stability, and Flexibility. Cultural Empathy refers to the ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of members of different cultural groups. Open Mindedness refers to an open and nonjudgmental attitude toward people with different social norms and values. Social Initiative is a tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to take initiative. Emotional Stability is a tendency to remain calm in stressful situations. Flexibility is the capacity to tolerate uncertainties and the ability to learn from past experiences and to adjust one's behaviors where necessary. While Social Initiative is positively related with the Big Five trait Extraversion and Emotional Stability is negatively related with Neuroticism, the MPQ scales that correspond with the Big Five scales cover more specifically various aspects in intercultural settings (Leone et al., 2005).

Third, this study extends the regional scope of expatriate research conducted largely on Asian, European, and North American host countries to Brazil, one of the four BRIC countries that is an increasingly common destination for expatriates (GRTS, 2012). To our best knowledge, this is the first English-language study focusing on expatriates in Brazil. This study does not only examine expatriates in Brazil but also compares the findings with expatriates in Japan, thereby broadening the scope of cross-cultural research based mainly on East-West (Asia-Europe/North America) comparisons (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005). By examining the cultural fit hypothesis in Brazil and Japan, this study further shifts the focus from the dominant individual-collectivism comparisons in cross-cultural research. While both Brazil and Japan are classified as collective countries (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), scholarly discussions and research enable to show that they are very different in their horizontal and vertical collective orientation (Triandis, 1995), cultural tightness and looseness (Gelfand, Nishii, & Raver, 2006), and prototypical personality traits (Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martinez, 2007).

The rest of this study is organized as follows. The following section provides a review of personality traits and job satisfaction in domestic and expatriate settings, and draws on the cultural fit hypothesis to explain the effects of host country context between expatriate personality traits and job satisfaction. The third section provides hypotheses that link expatriate personality traits to job satisfaction in Brazil and Japan. The fourth section presents the research sample and measures, and the fifth section presents the findings. The sixth section discusses theoretical and practical implications of the findings, and limitations and suggestions for future research. The seventh section concludes this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Personality traits and job satisfaction

Job satisfaction, “a positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's work or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300), is one of the most frequently researched work-related attitudes in the management and organizational behavior (OB) literature (Judge et al., 2002; Zimmerman, 2008). In domestic settings, research on situational factors suggests that numerous job, task, and organizational characteristics determine job satisfaction, which, in turn, acts as a determinant of organizational commitment and citizenship behavior, motivation, life satisfaction, absenteeism, anxiety, stress, turnover, and job performance (Zimmerman, 2008). Research on dispositional factors indicates further that personality traits, often measured through the Big Five, affect job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2002; Zimmerman, 2008). For example, a meta-analysis of the Big Five personality traits shows that job satisfaction is correlated with Neuroticism ($\rho = -.29$), Conscientiousness ($\rho = .26$), Extraversion ($\rho = .25$), Agreeableness ($\rho = .17$), and Openness to Experience ($\rho = .02$) (Judge et al., 2002). Neuroticism is related with negative Emotional Stability, showing characteristics of nervousness, moodiness, and a temperamental nature (McCrae & Costa, 1990). Conscientiousness is the degree to which a person is strong-willed, determined, and attentive. Extroversion is the degree to which a person is talkative, sociable, and enjoys social gatherings. Agreeableness is the tendency of a person to be interpersonally altruistic and cooperative. Openness to Experience is the extent to which a person is esthetically sensitive and aware of inner feelings and has an active imagination. Due to the overlaps with and the emergent state of MPQ research, this study draws on Big Five research to describe the effects of relevant personality traits on job satisfaction.

In expatriate settings, job satisfaction arises from successful adaption to overseas job requirements and from effective development of interpersonal relationships with employees and customers in host countries (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). Encompassing a wider array of work-related aspects, such as communication, job satisfaction is a broader concept than the related cross-cultural facet – work adjustment, defined as the extent of expatriate comfort and adaption regarding different performance standards and work values in a new environment (Black, 1988). Because of the overlaps with and the scarcity of expatriate job satisfaction research, this study draws on work adjustment research to describe relevant areas of expatriate job satisfaction. In expatriate research, numerous job, task, and organizational factors extrapolated from domestic settings are shown with US expatriate samples to increase expatriate job satisfaction (Black & Gregersen, 1990; Naumann, 1993), which, in turn, decreases turnover tendency in various host countries (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). Further, two studies have examined the influence of expatriate personality traits on job satisfaction. More specifically, the MPQ traits of Cultural Empathy (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011) and Flexibility (Van Oudenhoven, Mol, & Van der Zee, 2003) respectively facilitated job satisfaction in Japan and Taiwan. In contrast to Froese and Peltokorpi (2011) focusing on cultural distance and using the MPQ traits as control variables, the present study examines the interactive effects of the MPQ traits in two host countries. Extended to other work-related constructs, the Big Five traits, Openness to Experience (Chen et al., 2010; Huang, Chi, & Lawler, 2005), Emotional Stability (Chen et al., 2010), and Extraversion (Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006), are shown to facilitate expatriate work adjustment in various host countries. A study with an expatriate sample spanning across all continents except for Africa shows also that the MPQ trait, Social Initiative, enhanced expatriate work adjustment in

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