



## Expatriate success and thriving: The influence of job deprivation and emotional stability



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### ABSTRACT

Moving beyond the dominant emphasis in the expatriate literature on adjustment problems, we integrate self-determination and relative deprivation theories to examine the role of thriving in the expatriate experience. Using data from 121 international teachers in the United States, we found that perceptions of job deprivation with respect to cultural instruction competence were negatively related to expatriate thriving. Perceptions of job deprivation with respect to autonomy and relatedness were more negatively associated with expatriate thriving when expatriates' emotional stability was low. Finally, thriving was a positive influence on expatriate engagement and actual retention beyond adjustment.

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International assignments, whether self-initiated or organizationally supported, have become an important asset both for individuals and organizations (Bonache & Brewster, 2001). For individuals, international assignments offer a chance to improve managerial skills and cross-cultural competencies (Mendenhall, 2001), and, in certain cases, are prerequisites for career advancement (Daily, Certo, & Dalton, 2000). From a macro perspective, organizations recognize that international assignments play a crucial role in building global skills (Takeuchi, 2010) and executing successful international business strategies (Mendenhall, 2001). Consequently, considerable research has been devoted to examining the key factors associated with successful expatriation (e.g., Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004). In particular, because of the costs associated with early return, scholars have focused on the decision to return home prematurely as a result of expatriate maladjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005).

This focus on maladjustment as a predictor of expatriate quit decisions parallels the Mobley-extended models of turnover (e.g., Mobley, 1982; Rosse & Miller, 1984) that focus on job dissatisfaction as a stimulant of withdrawal behaviors (see Harrison, 2002, for

a review of the withdrawal literature). Similar to the domestic withdrawal literature (Tett & Meyer, 1993), withdrawal cognitions of expatriates are often used as a surrogate measure of actual withdrawal behavior (e.g., Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). Job dissatisfaction and maladjustment trigger expatriate thoughts of and plans to prematurely return home (e.g., Shaffer & Harrison, 1998).

Although extant research has helped to clarify the role of adjustment on expatriate early return decisions, our understanding of this process primarily has been confined to the outflow of negative affect (i.e., job dissatisfaction and maladjustment), and adverse cognitions. In this paper, we shift our research attention to expatriate retention instead of turnover. This conceptual shift enables us to look at different mechanisms that represent a positive, motivational pathway underlying the expatriation process that goes beyond adjustment. Specifically, we examine the role of thriving on expatriate success as one such mechanism.

Defined as a motivational state that is comprised of a joint experience of vitality and learning (Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007), thriving serves as an adaptive function that helps individuals navigate their work contexts to promote their own development (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2004, 2005). Building on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), Spreitzer et al. (2004) suggest that under social conditions that promote the development of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, individuals are more inclined toward thriving. When individuals are thriving, they feel progress and momentum, and they experience a sense of learning (greater understanding) and

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vitality (aliveness) (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Thriving allows individuals to understand whether their work is supporting their professional development in a positive direction (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Expatriates tend to view international assignments as instrumental in improving their talent base, making them more valuable due to skill acquisition, personal development and career enhancement (Parker & Inkson, 1999). They also place a high intrinsic value on the overseas experience for the opportunities it brings for personal development and enrichment of their personal lives. Therefore, we believe thriving is particularly relevant in the expatriate context because it reflects a positive and meaningful experience for expatriates. As such, we contend that thriving will be especially conducive to expatriate success, which we construe in terms of work engagement and retention.

If thriving is a key ingredient of expatriate success, then it is important to identify factors that contribute to expatriate thriving. In alignment with self-determination theory, which is the conceptual foundation for thriving, we focus on autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of expatriates. As with all employees, expatriates compare their benefits and resources, which are designed to fulfill needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, to their colleagues in similar positions (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012). Through this social comparison process, expatriates perceive job deprivation if the host organization does not provide them with what they expect or feel they deserve (Feldman, Leana, & Turnley, 1997; Ren, Bolino, Shaffer, & Kraimer, 2013). Drawing on relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976; Martin, 1981) and integrating it with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), we suggest that perceptions of job deprivation will inhibit expatriate thriving. Specifically, we argue that expatriates' fulfillment of important needs such as autonomy, competence and relatedness relative to their perceptions of comparison others is crucial for expatriate thriving.

Finally, recognizing that individuals react differently to events based on their personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992), we examine one individual trait, emotional stability, as a moderator of the relationship between perceptions of job deprivation and thriving. Emotional stability is the tendency to react calmly to stress and to experience positive emotional states (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Emotionally stable expatriates are, therefore, more likely to effectively manage the turbulence often associated with an international assignment and be successful in fulfilling their work responsibilities and interacting with host country nationals (HCNs) (Hogan & Holland, 2003). Although rated as the second most important personality trait in implicit theories of expatriate adjustment and task performance (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1999), emotional stability emerged as the dominant trait associated with expatriate work adjustment and retention (Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006). Because emotionally stable individuals are better at managing stress-inducing events due to their calm and even-tempered disposition (Korotkov, 2008), we expect that those with high emotional stability will be less likely to experience declined thriving due to perceptions of job deprivation.

By examining the role of thriving in expatriate success, we make several contributions to the expatriate literature. First, we go beyond the dominant emphasis on expatriate adjustment problems to highlight the role of expatriate thriving. We demonstrate that thriving is an important mechanism that leads to expatriate engagement and retention. Second, by integrating relative deprivation theory and self-determination theory, we take a first step at identifying the key antecedents to expatriate thriving. We suggest that perceptions of job deprivation with respect to the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, will inhibit expatriate thriving. Moreover, recognizing the importance of personality in expatriate role transitions (Shaffer et al., 2006), we examine emotional stability as a potential

moderator of perceptions of job deprivation's effect on thriving. Overall, our study demonstrates the usefulness of both relative deprivation theory and self-determination theory as lenses for understanding expatriate thriving.

## 1. Expatriate thriving

Thriving is defined as “the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work” (Spreitzer et al., 2005:538). Vitality refers to feelings of energy and aliveness, while learning denotes acquisition and application of knowledge and skills. Together, the joint experience of vitality and learning constitute a sense of thriving (Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007), and they reflect the affective (vitality) and cognitive (learning) foundations of personal growth (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). According to Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, and Garnett (2011), individuals who are thriving experience growth and momentum marked by a sense of energy and vitality, and a sense that they are continually improving and getting better at what they do. Thriving is conceptualized as an adaptive function guiding individuals in assessing their forward progress (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Therefore, thriving is the psychological experience of growth in a positive capacity (Carver, 1998). It is important to consider the joint effects of both dimensions of thriving as each dimension enhances the other. If one is learning but feels stress, thriving may suffer (Porath et al., 2011). Reversing the case, one may feel energized but may lack learning, and thriving is again limited.

Previous research has distinguished thriving from similar concepts encompassing positive functioning such as flourishing, flow, resilience, subjective well-being, work engagement and intrinsic motivation (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Spreitzer et al., 2005; Spreitzer, Lam, & Fritz, 2010). For instance, thriving is similar to the affective-motivational construct of work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010) in that both thriving and work engagement reflect an energetic force (i.e., vitality and vigor, respectively). But thriving differs from work engagement because it includes learning and therefore emphasizes growth and development (Niessen, Sonnentag, & Sach, 2012). Similarly, although thriving represents a motivational state, it is not the same as intrinsic motivation (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009). As Sonenshein, Dutton, Grant, Spreitzer, and Sutcliffe (2005) found, thriving may reflect intrinsic motivation but also comprises feelings of achievement and recognition. Also, thriving is a socially embedded construct (Spreitzer et al., 2005), while intrinsic motivation does not usually require reinforcement from the external environment (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009).

Thriving is also different from expatriate adjustment and cross-cultural adaptation, two important concepts in the expatriate literature. Expatriate adjustment is a three-dimensional construct (Black & Stephens, 1989) and is defined as the expatriate's psychological comfort with respect to work, cultural and interaction dimensions (Black & Stephens, 1989). Thriving does not relate to psychological comfort but explores the area of personal growth via learning and vitality. It captures a more positive and meaningful experience for expatriates rather than just a sense of comfort or adjustment to an international assignment. Cross-cultural adaptation, on the other hand, represents a complex process in which an individual becomes capable of functioning effectively in a culture other than that person's original culture, in which he or she was socialized (Haslberger, 2005). Cross-cultural adaptation is related to learning but only to those competencies that are required within a particular culture. Thriving, instead, has a joint influence of learning and vitality, and learning is not limited to cultural competencies.

Increasingly, expatriates accept international assignments for intrinsic benefits such as personal development, learning, and

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