



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

International Business Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ibusrev



Just like a fine wine? Age, emotional intelligence, and cross-cultural adjustment

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 April 2014

Received in revised form 4 September 2014

Accepted 10 September 2014

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Age

Cross-cultural adjustment

Emotional intelligence

Expatriates

Socioemotional selectivity theory

ABSTRACT

In this study, we use socioemotional selectivity theory to shed light on the role of expatriates' age in the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) of expatriates on assignment. We test our hypotheses using hierarchical regression models and a sample of 254 French expatriate managers. Our analysis reveals a number of interesting findings. First, we find that age is a facilitator of regulation and utilization of emotions on general living adjustment and of regulation of emotions on interactional adjustment. Second, our complementary analyses show that expatriates' prior expatriation experience affects the relationship between EI and CCA differently and less prominently than age. Overall, our analysis is one of the first attempts to provide a more detailed theoretical understanding of the relationships between age, expatriation experience, EI and CCA in the context of expatriation.

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1. Introduction

Up to now the role of age remains largely unexplored and under-theorized in expatriation literature: expatriates' age is commonly used as a control variable, however, it is rarely examined as a potential predictor of international assignment outcomes (cf. Olsen & Martins, 2009). At the same time, the literature on lifespan development psychology suggests that peoples' emotions, motivations and attitudes tend to develop and change throughout their lifespan (Carstensen, 1993, 1995; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Bringing these two streams of literature together, in this paper we apply socioemotional selectivity theory to examine the role of expatriates' age in moderating the relationship between their emotional intelligence (EI) and cross-cultural adjustment (CCA).

CCA, defined as the degree of an expatriate's psychological comfort in new cultural and work-related contexts (e.g. Black & Stephens, 1989; Caligiuri, 1997), was shown to be a challenging (e.g. Aycan, 1997; Caligiuri, 2000) and emotionally demanding

(Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005; Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2013) process. It is generally conceptualized as comprising three dimensions: general living, interactional, and work adjustments (e.g., Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Black & Stephens, 1989; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). A wide range of different factors has been identified to influence expatriates' CCA (for reviews see Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003). Among these factors, the interest in the emotional aspect of expatriation, most often conceptualized as emotional intelligence (EI), has been gaining attention (e.g., Gabel et al., 2005; Koveshnikov, Wechtler, & Dejoux, 2014).

EI is defined as an enduring personal trait which underlines the person's ability to adaptively identify, understand, manage, and harness emotions of both in self and others and use these emotions to facilitate cognitive processing (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Schutte et al., 1998). Generally, research finds support for the importance of EI for expatriates' CCA.

Therefore, given that EI is important for expatriates' CCA and an expatriate's EI is likely to change over his/her lifespan, there may be an important link between these variables that unfortunately up to now remained largely unexplored in expatriation literature. To address this gap, in this paper we draw on lifespan development psychology, and more specifically on socioemotional selectivity theory which examines how people's emotions, motivations and attitudes change over their lifespan (Carstensen, 1993, 1995;

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Carstensen et al., 1999), to suggest that age can be an important moderating factor in the relationship between expatriates' EI and CCA. Additionally, we shed some light on whether age and expatriation experience can be treated interchangeably or the two are theoretically distinct constructs that have different effects on how expatriates use their EI for CCA. We adopt a quantitative design and test hypotheses derived from socioemotional selectivity theory on a sample of 254 expatriates.

The paper is organized as follows. Drawing on socioemotional selectivity theory, in the next section we develop a number of hypotheses concerning the moderating role of age in the relationship between expatriates' EI and CCA. Then, we test our hypotheses using hierarchical regression models and report our findings. The final section discusses the paper's findings, their implications, and the suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Age, emotions and cross-cultural adjustment

The literature on expatriation has noted a number of personal characteristics that can potentially influence CCA (for overviews see Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Hechanova et al., 2003). In this study we focus on the influence of age, which has so far been left with little attention. In fact, age is not included as a potential predictor of CCA in main theoretical frameworks, all of which are based on thorough analyses of existing literature (e.g. Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou's (1991) adjustment model, Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al.'s (2005) meta-analytical model, or Lazarova, Shaffer, and Westman's (2010) expatriate work-family performance model). Moreover, when it is included, the analyses yield mixed results (for summary see Hechanova et al., 2003): age appears to have negative influence on general living and interactional adjustment but positive on work adjustment.

On the other hand, recently more practitioner-oriented sources¹ have started to question the widely-established assumption that younger professionals are likely to adjust better to new locations and cultures than their older colleagues. The reality seems to be that driven by their ambition and eagerness to travel, younger professionals often fail to engage themselves in true cultural adjustment and are often caught unprepared when cultural differences emerge and get in the way of doing business. Meanwhile, older professionals are seen as having a number of advantages over their younger colleagues, namely they are more flexible, have more freedom to move, and possess steady temperament, calmness, and confidence of more mature individuals. Thus, these arguments suggest that, counterintuitively, age might have a positive association with CCA. However, academic literature on the topic has been rather rare. Therefore, there is a need to develop specific theoretical arguments concerning the role of age in expatriates' CCA (cf. Olsen & Martins, 2009).

It should be noted that whereas age remained relatively rarely examined in the literature, substantially more attention has been devoted to the role of expatriation experience in CCA (e.g., Aryee & Stone, 1996; Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Kim & Slocum, 2008; Takeuchi & Chen, 2013; Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). Moreover, whereas it seems to be plausible to argue that age and professional experience are closely related and thus can be treated

as interchangeable, yet we think that there are reasons to expect age and prior expatriation experience to have differential effects on expatriates' CCA. Experience, on the one hand, is likely to be contingent on specific assignment (e.g., the type, the duration and the complexity of task to accomplish) and/or context-related factors (e.g., national cultural similarity, the nature of local organizational practices and cultures). It is not likely to be directly transferrable between different contexts and assignments due to its specific and idiosyncrasy. On the other hands, age as a personal demographic characteristic of an expatriate cannot be attributed to any external factors. With age expatriates are likely to develop more generic emotional and cognitive skills, which are less likely to be bound by any specific assignment- or context-related factors and thus can be applied to diverse contexts and situations.

In this study, we use socioemotional selectivity theory to develop theoretical links between age, EI and CCA. It is a life span theory of how time horizons shape human motivation and attitudes (Carstensen, 1995; Carstensen & Mikels, 2005; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Löckenhoff & Carstensen, 2004). It suggests that people's age, emotions and attitudes are closely intertwined and personal goals are always set in a temporal context. When people perceive time as expansive, which is typical for younger adults, they tend to concentrate on preparing for future by acquiring potentially to-become-useful information and expanding their horizons. In contrast, when people perceive their time as shrinking, i.e. when they get older, they start to place increasing value on emotionally meaningful goals and invest more cognitive and social resources in obtaining them. This shift promotes emotions regulation (i.e. control over emotions that an individual experiences and expresses).

The literature on EI tends to suggest that with age individuals are likely to become more emotionally intelligent because their emotional functioning tends to improve in middle and later adulthood (e.g., Mayer et al., 1999; Mayer, Caruso, Salovey, & Sitarenios, 2002; Van Rooy, Viswesvaran, & Pluta, 2005). More specifically, Carstensen et al. (2000) suggest that age is associated with more differentiated emotional experience. Also, periods of highly positive emotional experience are more likely to endure and periods of highly negative emotional experience are likely to be less stable among older people. Taken together, these findings seem to support the idea that emotional abilities, such as EI, improve with age.

Hence, socioemotional selectivity theory appears to be relevant for theorizing the role of age as a moderator in the relationship between expatriates' EI and CCA. We now turn to developing our hypotheses based on this theory.

2.2. Age, emotional intelligence and general living adjustment

Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that as people get older they increasingly direct their attention to emotionally meaningful aspects of life, such as, for example, the desire to lead a meaningful life (Carstensen, 1993, 1995; Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). It means that when the future is perceived as limited, the present-oriented goals (i.e. 'here and now') that maximize emotional meaning of life become more relevant. To accomplish this, older adults tend to be better at regulating their emotions by avoiding negative but intensifying positive emotional states and being more flexible in adjusting their emotional reactions and experiences in response to different life situations (Löckenhoff & Carstensen, 2004).

Younger adults have a tendency to process negative information more thoroughly than positive information and weigh negative information more heavily in impression formation, memory and decision making (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In contrast, older adults tend to favor

¹ Bar-Pereg, M. (2012). Young, single, new job, new country? (March 2012), http://www.expatica.com/nl/essentials_moving_to/relocation/young-single-new-job-in-new-country_12968.html, accessed 26.8.2014. BBC: Freedom to move: Older professionals in new life abroad (January 2012), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16591514>, accessed 26.8.2014. Global Relocation Trends Survey (2011), Brookfield Global Relocation Services. http://www.brookfieldgrs.com/knowledge/grts_research/grts_media/2011_GRTS.pdf, accessed 26.8.2014.

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