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Emotional support on re-entry into the home country: Does it matter for repatriates' adjustment who the providers are?

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of repatriates' emotional support providers (home country friends/relatives, host country friends/relatives, and friends/relatives with expatriate experience) on both their psychological and sociocultural adjustment on re-entry into their home country. The study builds on social identity theory and examines the mediating role of the salience of repatriates' international role identity. Predictions are tested using a quantitative survey data of 121 repatriates. The results show a positive indirect effect of the amount of support repatriates receive from home country friends/relatives on both dimensions of adjustment through a decreased salience of their international role identity. Furthermore, analyses show a negative indirect effect of maintaining supportive connections with host country friends/relatives on both psychological and sociocultural adjustment through an increased salience of repatriates' international role identity. The results also show a direct effect of having or not having host country friends/relatives as emotional support providers in such a way that repatriates who do not have supportive host country friends/relatives are better psychologically adjusted upon re-entry. This study raises new questions about generally accepted advice for the adjustment strategies of expatriates, such as building connections with host country nationals.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, more and more people are exposed to the challenges of temporarily living abroad, for instance expatriates (BGRS, 2014). Expatriates are typically distinguished from other people who temporarily move abroad, such as international exchange students, through their employment in the host country (McNulty & Brewster, 2017). Expatriates' international move can be initiated by their employer or by themselves, and they often face a challenging time when adapting to a totally new environment with different cultural norms and habits (Wang & Kanungo, 2004). When moving abroad, they also physically leave behind their established social network (Adelman, 1988). Although the Internet nowadays makes it easier to keep in touch with the home network, extant research points to the importance of establishing social relationships with host country nationals and other expatriates. Both these groups are found to be crucial social support providers with a positive impact on expatriates' satisfaction with their foreign assignment (e.g. Podsiadlowski, Vaclair, Spieß, & Stroppa, 2013) as well as their adjustment in the foreign country (e.g. Johnson, Kristof-Brown, Van Vianen, De Pater, & Klein, 2003). Accordingly, a general consensus exists among scholars that expatriates should be encouraged to build supportive relationships with host country nationals and other expatriates during their foreign assignment.

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To date, however, research has overlooked the impact of support from host country nationals and other expatriates on the last part of the expatriation cycle: returning to the home country. Existing research shows nevertheless that returning to the home country is often a challenging experience for repatriates – that is, people returning to their country of birth after having lived and worked abroad – (Bossard & Peterson, 2005). As research on the expatriation phase already points to the influence of social support on expatriates' adjustment, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of repatriates' adjustment by examining the influence of their informal social support network outside their core family. Currently, knowledge about how repatriates' informal support networks affect their re-entry experiences remains limited. The research of Cox (2004) is one of the few exceptions, and suggests that maintaining supportive home country relationships during the period of being abroad makes re-entry easier. Evidence concerning the effect of support from other expatriates and from host country nationals remains unclear, however, as research has failed to consider the former and is inconclusive about the latter (Szkudlarek, 2010). Whereas Rohrlach and Martin (1991) found that the more students discussed significant issues with host country nationals the more difficult their re-entry was, Hammer, Hart, & Rogan (1998) did not find any effect of the number of host country friends on managers' re-entry stress and difficulties. Acknowledging the specific situation of repatriates, research on their support providers should focus on home country as well as host country relationships, and relationships with other expatriates (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). This research takes a first step in this direction by examining to what extent repatriates' social support providers – in terms of home country friends/relatives, host country friends/relatives and friends/relatives with expatriate experience – affect their adjustment on re-entry.

Research also needs to consider the underlying mechanisms of how the adjustment of repatriates is influenced by social support providers. To do this, the current research draws on identity theory. Most identity work on expatriates and repatriates has focused on their cultural identity: their feelings of belonging and self-definition in terms of the home and the host culture (Adams & van de Vijver, 2015). However, another dimension of their identity that is specific to their mobile lifestyle is their *international role identity*: the importance they attach to their expatriate or repatriate role for their self-definition (Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, & Ren, 2012). In line with Kraimer et al. (2012), this research focuses on repatriates' international role identity. In short, identity theory states that role identities are in essence a product of social interactions, as the salience of a role identity depends on the commitment to role relationships based on that position (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Moreover, identity theory states that the more salient a role identity is for someone, the more challenging it will be when events disrupt or threaten this role identity (Thoits, 1991). Accordingly, role identities could explain how role relationships influence the experience of role-related transitions. Because returning to the home country can be seen as an event that threatens repatriates' international role identity, this research wants to investigate to what extent repatriates' social support providers – in terms of home country friends/relatives, host country friends/relatives and friends/relatives with expatriate experience – affect the salience of their international role identity and consequently their adjustment on re-entry.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Repatriation adjustment

While research on repatriates' adjustment is traditionally framed in the work of Black and colleagues (e.g. Black, 1992), this study builds on the model of Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The model of Black and colleagues distinguishes between different dimensions of psychological adjustment, whereas the model of Ward and colleagues is richer in the sense that it focuses not only on psychological adjustment, but also on sociocultural adjustment, that is, the behavioral competence to function effectively in social and cultural life (Hippler, 2015). The model of Ward and colleagues sees psychological and sociocultural adjustment as interrelated but distinct concepts that are partly predicted by different types of variables (e.g. Ward & Searle, 1991). Studies in this stream of research typically frame psychological adjustment in an uncertainty and stress reduction perspective, and sociocultural adjustment in a social learning perspective (e.g. Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Most research that focuses on both dimensions of adjustment aims to explain the unique variance of each adjustment dimension, and therefore usually specifies a distinctive set of predictor variables for each dimension. This study, however, aims to investigate how repatriates' emotional support providers influence both their psychological and sociocultural adjustment on re-entry. We are therefore interested in how social support influences both the unique and the shared variance of the two dimensions.

Emotional support providers

Scholars widely agree on the multidimensional nature of “social support” and often divide the concept further into emotional, informational, and instrumental support (Thoits, 1985). Social network research shows that a similar distinction needs to be made when looking at social support providers. In other words, people often rely on different relationships for different types of support (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). The current research focuses on repatriates' emotional support providers, as research shows that affective support is particularly important for well-being (Majodina, 1995). Research concerning expatriates also shows that emotional support is critical for their psychological adjustment and successful relocation abroad (e.g. Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). Moreover, the broader literature detailing adaptive behavior research shows that emotional support is also a crucial mechanism to enhance behavioral adjustment. For instance, the research of Malecki and Demaray (2003) show that emotional support (and not informational, appraisal, or instrumental support) from teachers is a predictor of students' social skills and academic competencies. According to Adelman (1988), this also holds for an expatriation situation, as “social feedback that reassures persons undergoing cross-cultural adjustment that these are temporary and pervasive reactions to a new situation that can help restore cognitive and behavioral control” (p. 186). Accordingly, it is particularly interesting for this study to focus on repatriates' emotional support

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