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Acculturation and overseas assignments: A review and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

This review analyzes two streams of literature that are exploring a similar phenomenon from separate perspectives and only recently have they began to overlap; that of migrant acculturation (from the psychology, sociology and anthropology research) and international assignee adjustment (from the international business research stream). We conducted a multiple correspondence analysis on a sample of 389 articles to provide the intellectual structure of the research in these fields.

Our research indicates that: (1) the standard 2×2 matrix of acculturation is insufficient; (2) most past research focuses on USA to other countries and vice versa, suggesting there is much work left to explore other pairs of cultures (“there and back again” is not the same globally); (3) as global organizations are dominating the marketplace with many various staffing forms, variables such as corporate culture and management interaction will need to be incorporated; (4) research needs to include dynamics over time as many individuals who have worked outside of their home country often become multi-cultural with a global mindset and the typical acculturation framework is insufficient; (5) past acculturation research focuses on the work or the sociocultural context separately, while both need to be included; (6) and the extended family (parents, relatives, close friends, etc.) need to be considered.

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1. Introduction

Our research attempts to review the appropriateness of extant acculturation frameworks in regard to the differing types of overseas assignments, suggest where acculturation in the 21st century should focus and to propose a future research agenda to guide more scholarly work in this area. The motivation for our research is that two streams of literature have been exploring this phenomenon from separate perspectives and only recently have they began to overlap; that of *acculturation* (from the psychology, sociology and anthropology-PSA research) and international assignee *adjustment* (from the international business-IB research stream) (Lu, Samaratunge, & Härtel, 2012). Acculturation from the PSA fields focuses on immigrants to a new country and their degree of adaptation (Berry, 1997) while the IB research focuses on the relocation of employees

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to a new country and their relative success in the work assignment (Okpara & Kabongo, 2011). The success of both types of individuals has the focus upon the host country and the ability of the individual to adapt to the new culturally challenging circumstances.

The unit of analysis of the PSA acculturation research was the understanding of the integration and adaptation process upon migration and the subsequent necessity for policy makers in the receiving countries to understand the immigrants' issues (Berry, Phinney, Kwak, & Sam, 2006). Recent PSA research combined cultural fit research and acculturation research to assist in explaining how an individual's personality traits, values, beliefs and behavior, as well as their adaptation to the host country are affected (Schiefer, Möllering, & Daniel, 2012). The research suggests that immigrant's success in following the four acculturation strategies (Assimilation, Integration, Marginalization and Separation) (Berry, 1997) will be moderated by the degree of fit between the individual and the society in terms of cultural fit (Juang, Nguyen, & Lin, 2006).

PSA acculturation suggests that immigrants have to consider two key points: the importance of the preservation of their identity and characteristics pertaining to their home country; and how important is it to participate in the host country (Leong, 2014). The PSA current literature accepts that of the four acculturation strategies, integration (commitment to both home country heritage and adaption to the new host country) will be more successful as there will be lower stress, higher self-esteem, pro-social behaviors, fewer negative anti-social behavior of the adolescent, higher life satisfaction and a more positive workplace well-being (Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Scottham & Dias, 2010; Wang, Schwartz, & Zamboanga, 2010). The PSA acculturation research is beginning to cross-over into research that has been the focus of the IB field; that of examining work related attitudes in regard to the acculturation orientations and work-related well-being (Peeters & Oerlemans, 2009).

Although the concept of acculturation has been studied scientifically since 1919 (Rudmin, 2003), the standard framework for PSA acculturation research (Assimilation, Integration, Marginalization and Separation) (Berry, 1997) now is being challenged to think beyond this approach (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Recent PSA research suggests that perhaps a more selective approach depending upon the type of intercultural contact such as private, public or work environment might be more successful (Navas et al., 2005). For example, Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands used different acculturation strategies depending upon their public versus private life (Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2004). Although past PSA research suggests that integration may be the best approach, this strategy may only be viable in a multicultural society (Berry, 2001). In the Netherlands, Turkish immigrants' self-reported behaviors suggesting integration was very different from actual behaviors due to the inability to actuate because of the dominant Dutch culture (Arends-Tóth, Van de Vijver, & Poortinga, 2006).

There is a wide spectrum of countries' cultures; from those countries that are very multicultural with many differing subcultures without a single dominant culture (ex. Canada, USA, etc.) to those countries where a single dominant culture is maintained (i.e. the Netherlands, Japan, etc.). A country that is multicultural illustrates that cultural minorities are encouraged and positively accommodated (Downie, Koestner, ElGeledi, & Cree, 2004) and now, due to globalization, many individuals are multicultural. An immigrant who is multi-cultural (or bi-cultural) can identify with the distinct cultures, internalize the cultural schemata and are knowledgeable about the cultural values, norms and beliefs (Brannen & Thomas, 2010). Due to these factors it is argued that the present standard PSA acculturation framework is unsuitable for global application (Doucerain, Dere, & Ryder, 2013) and a more multi-dimensional (including individual characteristics, family situation, country multiculturalism, globalization of norms, etc.) version of acculturation is required to accommodate actuality (Downie et al., 2004). The IB research also continues to argue often models are too simplistic to account for individual differences as people may have multiple cultural identities (Arnett, 2002; Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005) and "bi-culturalists" are a growing demographic group of expatriates (Lakshman, 2013). Our research assists in identifying the commonalities within each field to draw upon and to assist in the development of more complicated models.

The IB field has been researching the importance of cultural adjustment as more employees are being sent overseas on foreign assignments than ever before (Okpara & Kabongo, 2011) and that it is estimated that as many as 40% return prematurely due to the inability to adapt to the host countries' culture (Kim & Slocum, 2008; Tung, 1988). The term used in the IB research is cross-cultural adjustment as well as acculturation, with the IB definition of; the process of adaptation to living and working in a foreign environment with the perceived degree of psychological comfort and familiarity with the new culture (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991). The key difference in the two literature streams (PSA versus IB) is the focus on the work environment in the IB stream, but that is now changing (e.g. Lu et al., 2012).

Another key difference in the two literature streams is that migration could be considered a permanent move by an immigrant, yet in the IB literature the move by an employee could be temporary, lasting between 2 and 5 years. However, due to this short length of time, one could argue that the cultural adjustment process is more important due to the inherent nature of the shortness of time for success. For example, the employees that are sent to overseas assignments are called expatriates and plan to return to their home country at some point (McGinley, 2008). Empirical evidence suggests that cultural adjustment is an important aspect for success in expatriate job performance (Forster, 1997; Harvey, 1996) as the lack of assignee adjustment causes inadequate performance, psychological stress, negative effects on the expatriates' families, as well as the long-term career repercussions upon repatriation of a failed expatriate assignments (Selmer, 2001).

A recent trend in the IB expatriate research examines whether an expatriate's capability to effectively adjust to an international assignment is in fact partly a function of the cultural distance between the expatriate's home country and the host country (Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2008). This research mirrors the PSA research in regard to cultural fit. For example, immigrants' personality traits and adaptation to the host country is partly moderated by the degree the personality traits match the norms, values and practices of the host country population (Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004).

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