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The political skill and will of expatriates in acculturating to the politics of an organization in a new culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and conceptualizes the process through which expatriates acculturate to the politics of an organization in a new and dominant culture that differs from their origin culture. In addition to an overview of acculturation, we review research on the emergence and perception of political context in organizations, and on political skill and political will. We posit that politically-relevant situational characteristics in organizations and work interact with national culture to affect the intensity with which expatriates perceive politics in their organization. Based on their political skill (operationalized as high versus low) and their political will (operationalized in terms of concern for self versus concern for others), we describe the different political behavior expatriates will use as a means of acculturating to their political context and the effects those strategies have on their acculturative stress and individual effectiveness in the organization.

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Acculturation research to date has greatly expanded our knowledge of the acculturation process and acculturation strategies, much of which can be extrapolated to the workplace. To further build upon these advances, Doucerain, Dere, and Ryder (2013) contend that greater understanding is needed specifically of organizational contexts that impact the psychological, physical, and behavioral processes of acculturation in a foreign workplace. In addressing their concerns, and the call of this special issue, we elaborate on organizational politics as an important aspect of organizational socialization (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994) that is intertwined with cultural effects, and explicate its role in expatriate acculturation.

Past research has explored the importance of political skill in an expatriate manager's success in global assignments (e.g., Harvey & Novicevic, 2002; Harvey & Novicevic, 2004). The present paper moves forward by recognizing the complementary role of political will in determining an expatriate's strategy for acculturating to organizational politics, and describes the integration of workplace and cultural characteristics that give rise to such politics (Fig. 1). In doing so, we make several contributions to the literature: (1) providing a framework for the arising of politics across cultures, (2) conceptualizing the

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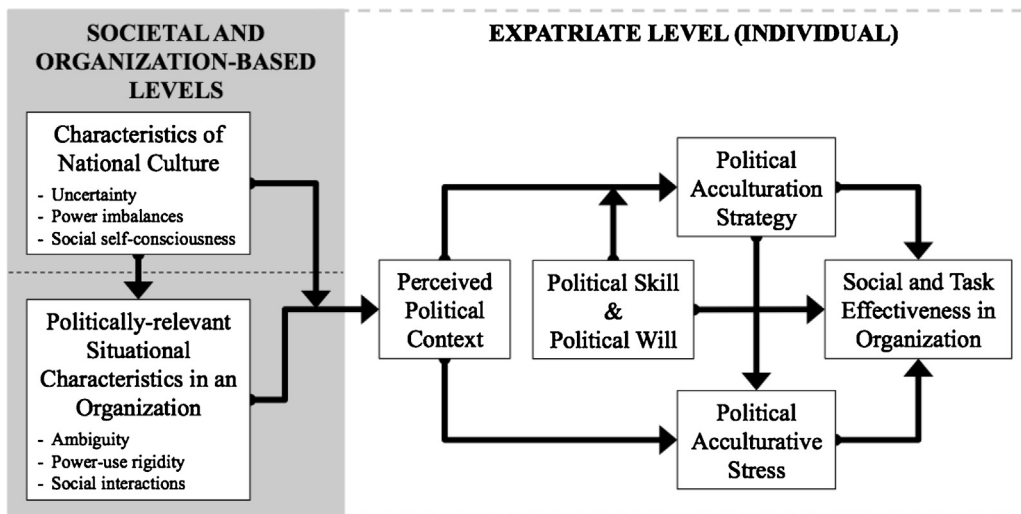


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the politics of acculturation.

intersection of political skill and will in the formation of political acculturative strategies, and (3) contrasting of the effects of such strategies on expatriate stress versus effectiveness. We begin by reviewing the basics of both acculturation and politics, move on to integrate them with culture, then explore the formation of political acculturative strategies in conjunction with political skill and will, and end by discussing outcomes.

1. Acculturation

Acculturation is the process by which newcomers learn and adapt to the ways existing members of a group have themselves learned to survive in their environment. Where culture itself is “a learned and shared pattern of behavior which is characteristic of a group living within fairly definite boundaries and which is interacting socially among themselves” (Berry, 1976, p. 9), acculturation is the integration of individuals with different cultures (Berry, 2005). Once introduced, newcomers experience *psychological acculturation*, or a change in their personal cultural identity, which is heavily dependent upon “continuous first-hand contact” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149) and reciprocal cultural influence (Sam, 2006) via social interaction between the newcomer and members of the new and dominant culture. Berry (1976, 2005) suggests that two types of behavior arise during acculturation: (1) behaviors that are easily adopted because they are similar to the newcomers’ original culture, (2) behaviors uniquely adopted in response to acculturative stress from psychological differences between the cultures.

If left unmanaged, acculturative stress can cause strain reactions, feelings of marginality or high uncertainty as to one’s position in either culture, and/or attitudes toward the new culture that are characterized by rejection. Berry’s (1997) work suggests that individuals appraise the resources they have to manage their acculturating experience and then choose an acculturation strategy as a coping mechanism (cf. Lazarus, 1991). To the extent that a particular strategy alleviates stress, a newcomer will have an easier time adapting and succeeding in their new culture. Berry asserts that individuals will engage in either problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping when faced with stress (Lazarus, 1991), and that these coping strategies will take different forms based on an individual’s views toward their old and new cultures.

The typology of acculturative coping strategies has four factors (e.g., Berry, 1997) with two motivational axes: (1) importance of one’s origin culture and desire to maintain it, and (2) desire to participate and interact with the new culture. Combined, these yield four behavioral acculturation strategies: (1) *assimilation*, members take on the cultural identity of the new culture and maintain frequent contact; (2) *integration*, members maintain their own culture yet co-exist and interact with the new culture; (3) *separation*, members maintain their own culture by isolating themselves; and (4) *marginalization*, members have little interest in maintaining their culture or contact with the new culture (often from failure of forced assimilation and separation). The appraisal and engagement of resources for coping, depends on the unique nature and process for social interaction and reciprocity within the social context individuals find themselves.

In organizations, informal social influence norms, known as organizational politics, are among the dominant forces shaping social interactions and both the use and acquisition of resources that could help one cope with acculturative stress. Since psychological acculturation relies so heavily on social exchange and interactions, success in acculturating depends in large part upon how well newcomers adapt to the politics of their new organization and new culture. Politics have already been recognized as one of the critical domains to which newcomers must socialize themselves (Chao et al., 1994), and below we expand on this topic by conceptualizing a model through which political acculturation takes place in organizations. For consistency, we will from here onward refer to acculturating employees in a new culture as *expatriates*.

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