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Person-environment fit and emotional control: Assigned expatriates vs. self-initiated expatriates

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ABSTRACT

Studies exploring the difference of assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) have recently started to emerge. However, so far few results have been connected to theory developed in this area. In the current study, we use responses from 324 business expatriates in China and take departure in the two elements of the person-environment fit theory, supplementary fit and complementary fit. We use the supplementary fit element of this theory to explain why emotional control (low dispositional anger and high self-control) increases performance and satisfaction in China. We rely on the complementary element of person-environment fit theory for understanding why this effect may vary between AEs and SIEs. Our argument is that as opposed to SIEs, AEs could add contact and knowledge from the parent company to the local organization thus complementing it. Our findings, with regard to supplementary fit, show that self-control has a positive association with both job performance and job satisfaction while trait anger has a negative effect on job satisfaction. In relation to complementary fit, also as expected, we found a buffering moderation effect of being AE, meaning that the negative effect of their trait anger on job satisfaction was diminished for this group.

1. Introduction

For several years, the expatriation literature has focused on expatriates as a homogenous group sent from a parent company (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). However, recently, scholars have started to look also at different types of expatriates such as expatriate NGOs (Fee & Gray, 2012), expatriate academics (Jonasson, Lauring, Selmer, & Trembath, 2017), foreign executives in local organizations (Arp, Hutchings, & Smith, 2013), public expatriates (Selmer & Fenner, 2009), flexpatriates (Mayerhofer, Müller, & Schmidt, 2010), and inpatriates (Moeller, Maley, Harvey, & Kiessling, 2016). The greatest interest, however, has been directed toward the growing group of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) that relocate on their own initiative without the support of a parent organization (Selmer & Lauring, 2010; Tharenou, 2013).

This interest has led to a rapidly growing number of academic publications on SIEs and how they can be distinguished from assigned expatriates (AEs) (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Tharenou, 2013). The academic focus on SIEs is driven not only by the fact that international assignments are expected to continue to increase in the coming years (GRTS, 2013; van Erp, van der Zee, Giebels, & van Duijn, 2014), but also by SIEs now being more numerous than AEs (65% vs. 35%) (Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011).

There is, however, not only scholarly attention on the growing group of SIEs. A corporate interest is driven by SIEs being accessible from the host country and being relatively inexpensive, not requiring an expatriate compensation package (Andresen, Bergdolt, & Margenfeld, 2012a; Banai & Harry, 2004; McKenna & Richardson, 2007; Tharenou & Harvey, 2006). Moreover, the pool of headquarter nationals willing to expatriate has been argued to be shrinking due mostly to dual career issues (Tharenou, 2013). Still, for some types of job roles, SIEs are less qualified than AEs. For example, because of their parent company experience, AEs are superior in implementing firm strategy, transferring HQ corporate culture or information (Tan & Mahoney, 2003; Tharenou, 2013; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Hence, organizations may not be able to substitute all AEs with SIEs.

In this article we aim to first assess the supplementary person-environment fit of personal characteristics in a specific local context. Secondly, we explore if there could be differences between AEs and SIEs indicating a complementary fit. To test the two elements of person environment fit theory on AEs and SIEs, we have chosen to focus on the People's Republic of China (henceforth, China). This is for several reasons. With its current population of 1.3 billion China is one of the world's fastest growing economies with a large and increasing group of middle-class consumers. This, according to Tung (2016) makes the country vital for those with an interest in doing business

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internationally. In consequence, China has also become one of the top destinations for international assignments (Zhang & Harzing, 2016). However, in terms of language and culture, China deviates substantially from many other countries – not least the ones in the OECD where most SIEs and AEs in China originate (cf. Peng, Lu, Shenkar, & Wang, 2001; Selmer, Lauring, & Feng, 2009). This also makes China one of the most challenging destinations, with the highest failure rate in the world (Brookfield, 2014). Finally, in China, organizational position, such as AE or SIE status, has been argued to have great significance (cf. Takahashi, Ishikawa, & Kanai, 2012). The Chinese context is therefore relevant and useful for the purpose of this study.

As a collectivist country, China is known for the emphasis on conformity to societal rules (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). This is a reason for emotional self-regulation being perceived as essential for the individual's functioning in the group (Chen et al., 2015). Lacking self-control and display of strong emotions can be at odds with the maintenance of interdependent social interaction (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In this regard, Zhou, Eisenberg, and Wang (2004) maintain that self-focused emotions, such as anger, motivate individuals to eliminate the threat to the sense of self and to assert the self's independence. This, however, is seen as harmful to the collectivity of the social unit. Similarly, Kitayama, Mesquita, and Karasawa (2006) argue that anger as a socially disengaging emotion is particularly problematic because it can be destructive for the social harmony of the group. The specific importance of anger (negative) and self-control (positive) in Chinese culture has led to a number of studies focusing on those two particular traits when comparing Chinese and Western populations (e.g. Liew, Kwok, Chang, Chang, & Yeh, 2014; Mauss, Butler, Roberts, & Chu, 2010; Zhou et al., 2004; Zhou, Lengua, & Wang, 2009).

While emotional control is highly important in a Chinese context it may also have important general implications for expatriation. Emotional control has been described as the “gatekeeper skill” in intercultural adjustment (Matsumoto et al., 2003). This is because it gives individuals more time to engage in critical thinking about causes of differences and miscommunication instead of acting directly on their emotions (Gullekson & Dumaisnil, 2016). In this regard it has been argued that expatriates need to regulate their emotional displays according to what is appropriate in the local culture (Firth, Chen, Kirkman, & Kim, 2014). If rules for emotional display in the host country vary much from what the expatriate is used to, additional emotional labor will be required for the expatriate to succeed (Haslberger, Brewster, & Hippler, 2013). In this line of thinking existing literature has connected emotional control to expatriate performance and wellbeing (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). Hence, emotional control is important for expatriates and in particular when relocating to China. We therefore explore the role of trait anger and self-control that could have a great effect on expatriates' performance and wellbeing in China. Moreover, we investigate differences between AEs and SIEs in relation to the outcome of their emotional control. We use job performance and job satisfaction as dependent variables since they have been described as key outcomes in the person-environment fit theory (Patsfall & Feimer, 1985). This model uses information about the relation of the desires and abilities of the person to the supplies and demands of the environment to predict an outcome (e.g., satisfaction or performance). Satisfaction is achieved when there is a good fit between the desires of the individual and the supplies of the organization. Performance, on the other hand, relies on a fit between personal abilities and environmental demands (Tinsley, 2000). To a high extent, desires and abilities can be determined by the individual's personal characteristics (Buss, 1991).

This research endeavor is important for several reasons. Although existing studies has established that self-control and trait anger have profound effects on performance and well-being in other samples (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), and are known to be central to

the role of management in East Asia (Bond, 1993; Wang, Karns, & Meredith, 2003), they have only been scantily investigated in relation to expatriates before. This is a crucial omission because we cannot necessarily assume that specific personal characteristics function similarly for expatriates as for locals. In this regard, Gullekson and Dumaisnil (2016) state that emotions has received little attention in expatriate research. According to them, more research is needed on emotional behavior of expatriates in relation to that of the host culture. Finally, assessing how the two different expatriate categories moderate the relation between personality traits and work outcomes could reveal yet uncovered variations in the work life of AEs and SIEs that may be essential for both theory development and practice.

2. Conceptualization and theory

2.1. Self-initiated expatriates

Being an SIE in general refers to expatriates who are hired individually on a contractual basis and are thus not transferred overseas by a parent organization (Andresen, Bergdolt, & Margenfeld, 2012b; Lee, 2005). In other words, SIEs take jobs in a foreign country, often with no planned time period, and with the legal employment decision made by a new work contract partner (Inkson & Myers, 2003; Tharenou, 2010). Hence, SIEs independently cross both country and organizational boundaries to seek work in a new organization that recruits them directly (Andresen et al., 2012a; Tharenou, 2013; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Because SIEs have no initial support from a home organization they are placed in what Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, and Ferzandi (2006) label a ‘weak situation’. Under such circumstances, it is argued that personal characteristics, such as emotional control, play a particularly important role as there is no external support network.

2.2. Personal characteristics: trait anger and self-control

Anger can be defined as a negatively toned emotion subjectively experienced as an aroused state of antagonism towards someone or something perceived to be the source of an aversive event (Owen, 2011). Anger is commonly experienced and therefore regarded as one of the basic human emotions. It can vary in intensity from mild annoyance or aggravation to fury and rage (Averill, 1982; Plutchik, 2002). Approximately one in ten people have been found to experience difficulty controlling their anger (Owen, 2011). *Trait anger* has been shown to be firmly established in one's personality in adulthood (Deffenbacher, Richards, Filetti, & Lynch, 2005). As such, it is argued to be an enduring disposition that predisposes individuals to experience the same environmental anger triggers but with a more intense, enduring, and aroused state anger than individuals low in trait anger (Dear, Watt, & Dockerill, 2003; Quinn, Rollock, & Vrana, 2014).

Self-control has been argued to be one of the most historically efficient means of ensuring that social and moral order are sustained (Harter, 1983). However, individuals are not equally good at managing their lives, holding their tempers, keeping their diets, persevering at work, fulfilling their promises, saving money, stopping after a couple of drinks, or keeping secrets (Tangney et al., 2004). Self-control is generally viewed as a personality trait defined by the individual's will-power to alter or override dominant response tendencies and to regulate behavior, thoughts, and emotions (Bandura, 1989; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999; Wang et al., 2003). As such, self-control emphasizes the importance of controlling immediate impulses and responses, interrupting undesired behavioral tendencies and refraining from acting on them (Logue, 1988). Self-control can also be perceived as a capacity to change and adapt the self so as to produce a better, more optimal fit

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