



Expanding horizons on expatriate adjustment: A look at the role of emotional display and status



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ABSTRACT

As organizations are becoming increasingly global, the number of expatriate workers around the globe is increasing. Although expatriate adjustment has been well researched, other aspects of the expatriate's cross-cultural experience have not been examined in depth. This review explores one such aspect, the role of emotion in cross-cultural experiences, and examines literature from the 1990's to present on emotion and status as it could relate to the expatriate experience. Specifically, the authors examine the role of emotion across cultures, emotional display rules and status in order to deepen our understanding of how emotion could affect international adjustment and the training process. In addition, the authors provide avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

In today's international business arena, organizations are increasingly sending employees on international assignments to gain a competitive edge. These expatriate workers and their international assignments are indispensable to organizations for both developmental and functional reasons (Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique, & Burgi, 2001). Unfortunately, some literature reports that the estimates for premature return range between 20 and 50% (Aycan, 1997; for criticism of the failure rates see Harzing, 2002) and the estimated cost associated with the early return of an expatriate is between \$250,000 and \$1.25 million (Mervosh & McClenahan, 1997). Given the importance of successful expatriation for organizations in today's global business market, researchers and human resource practitioners are interested in examining factors related to expatriate success.

Much of the research on expatriate success has focused on international adjustment, the extent to which an expatriate is able to adjust to the host culture, and cross-cultural training programs designed to facilitate successful adjustment. Such research is important as adjustment is positively related to performance and intent to stay in the host country (e.g. Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Caligiuri, 1997; Parker & McEvoy, 1993) and negatively related to the expatriates' intention to return to their home countries early (Forster, 1997; Gregersen & Black, 1990; Takeuchi, Yun & Tesluk, 2002). Despite the importance of such findings, the emphasis on international adjustment may have led researchers to ignore other potentially meaningful avenues of research on expatriate experiences - avenues that may also lead to a better understanding of international adjustment overall.

In particular, the role of emotions in the intercultural experience and the status associated with being an expatriate (i.e., temporary foreign worker) in the host country have been identified as potential factors that could influence the expatriate experience (e.g. Gullekson & Vancouver, 2010; Tan, Hartel, Panipucci, & Strybosch, 2005). Thus, this paper will review the potential role of both emotions and status in intercultural work contexts with the aim at better understanding how they may influence

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expatriate behavior and ultimately adjustment. To do so, we will review the research on the role of emotion in cross-cultural experiences, paying particular attention to the emotional display rules that exist across cultures. Then we will review how status may affect both emotions and behavior relating to expatriates. The implications for such research on international adjustment and cross-cultural training will also be discussed. Throughout, we will provide readers with some avenues for future research.

2. Emotion in cross-cultural experiences

One area that has received little attention in expatriate research is the role of emotional behavior in cross-cultural experiences. According to Tan et al. (2005) “cross-cultural encounters in the expatriate experience are essentially social encounters, where culture shapes an individual's emotional expressions, experiences, and management in a social setting, and differences in culture lead to differences in acceptable forms of emotional behavior” (p. 4). Therefore, expatriate and cross-cultural researchers need to more thoroughly examine the role of emotion in such experiences.

Indeed, Matsumoto and colleagues recognize the importance of emotional behavior and have recently called emotion regulation the “gatekeeper skill” in intercultural adjustment as it “allows people to engage in successful conflict resolution that leads to effective, long-term intercultural communication” (Matsumoto et al., 2003, p. 2). According to Matsumoto and colleagues, it does so by allowing individuals to not act on their emotions, giving them more time to engage in critical thinking about the causes of differences and miscommunication. In doing so, the individuals are able to create new expectations and awareness for similarities and differences among individuals. A key point here is that individuals crossing cultural boundaries (i.e., expatriates and other types of sojourners) need to have an accurate representation of what are appropriate emotional displays in the cross-cultural encounter in order to regulate their emotions appropriately. As expatriates engage in cross-cultural encounters, they need to regulate their emotional displays according to what is appropriate in the host culture—that takes an understanding of what the “correct” behavior is in that country. This understanding of the differences and similarities among cultures is the cornerstone of cross-cultural training. Yet, as will be expanded upon later, cross-cultural training programs often emphasize how the host country natives behave, and do not consider that there may be different ways of behaving for a foreigner in the country.

Thus, emotion and emotional behavior likely play crucial roles in the international experiences of expatriates, especially when the norms for emotional behavior are very different in the host culture as compared to the norms in an expatriate's home culture. If aspects of emotion do play a significant role in the international experience and adjustment process, then these aspects should also be integrated into formal training programs. In the following sections we will articulate ways in which emotional display may differ across culture and its implications for training.

2.1. Cultural differences in display rules of emotion

Research on emotion has provided evidence that cultural differences do exist in emotional behavior (e.g. Biehl et al., 1997, Ekman, 1972, Friesen, 1972, Matsumoto, 1990, Matsumoto, Kasri, & Kookan, 1999, Matsumoto, Yoo, Hirayama, & Petrova, 2005, Matsumoto et al., 2008, Mesquita, 2001, Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). One aspect of particular importance for expatriates crossing cultural boundaries is emotional display rules, which are said to govern what is acceptable emotional behavior. Specifically, display rules direct how people are to display their emotion in a given situation (e.g., to what degree, to whom), and these rules may differ across cultures. These rules are crucial when discussing work experiences, as emotional display rules are shared among members of the same work unit. Diefendorff and colleagues looked at nurse groups and found that nurses in the same unit shared emotional display units, which impacted both directly and indirectly their emotional regulation, burnout and job satisfaction (Diefendorff, Erickson, Grandey, & Dahling, 2011).

The idea that there are cultural rules governing our emotional display gained prominence in studies by Ekman (1972) and Friesen (1972). They found that Japanese and American participants exhibited the same negative facial expressions while watching a stressful video clip in a room alone. However, when an experimenter was present, there was a substantial difference in the facial displays between the Japanese and American participants. It appeared that cultural display rules required many Japanese to mask their negative feelings with a polite smile, whereas the American display rules allowed the US participants to continue displaying their negative emotions. The results of these two studies demonstrate the existence of emotional display rules and support the idea that display of emotion would differ across cultures. Recent research suggests that people from different countries actually use different facial muscles in response to the same emotional state (Elfenbein, Beaupré, Lévesque, & Hess, 2007), again implying that different display rules are at play. Additional research has corroborated the idea that there are different emotional display rules across countries (e.g., Matsumoto et al., 2005; Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, & Krupp, 1998; Stephan, Stephan, & de Vargas, 1996).

For example, Matsumoto and colleagues (Matsumoto et al., 1999) investigated the cultural differences in judgments of expression intensity and subjective experience of emotions, which are governed by the culture's display rules. American and Japanese participants were shown slides of faces depicting seven universal emotions and asked what emotion was being displayed, the intensity level of the facial expression, and the intensity level that the poser is actually experiencing. Differences were found between American and Japanese observers in their judgments of both the poser's intensity of emotional expression and their subjective experience of the emotion. Specifically, it was found that Americans perceived the expression as more intense than did the Japanese participants. However, the Japanese perceived greater intensity than did Americans in the poser's experience of the emotion. The authors contend that these results may be explained by the differences in the two cultures. That is, the Japanese may infer that the experience is more intense than the expression displayed because, culturally, they have norms that discourage one from outwardly expressing

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