



Antecedents and effects of host country nationals negative stereotyping of corporate expatriates. A social identity analysis



Jaime Bonache^b, H el ene Langinier^{a,*}, Celia Z arraga-Oberty^b

^a *Ecole de Management de Strasbourg, Humanis, 61 avenue de la For et Noire, 67085 Strasbourg Cedex, France*

^b *Universidad Carlos III, Calle Madrid, E-28903 Getafe, Madrid, Spain*

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ABSTRACT

This paper extends the influential analysis on stereotyping from cultural studies to the realm of international assignments. Drawing on social identity theory, the paper takes the perspective of host country nationals (HCNs) as the basic units of analysis, and develops a theoretical model on the antecedents and effects of HCNs' negative stereotyping of expatriates. The paper also suggests some initiatives that, according to social identity theory, can be used to combat negative stereotyping in multinational corporations and so overcome the cross-cultural interpersonal conflicts that lie at the heart of expatriates' adjustment issues.

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1. Introduction

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"—William Shakespeare (1905), *The Merchant of Venice*

Stereotypes are generalisations about people based on group membership (Lippmann, 1922; Katz & Braly, 1933; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Wyer & Srull, 1989; see Stangor, 2009, for a review). They are beliefs that all members of a particular group have the same qualities that define the group and differentiate it from other groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Operario & Fiske, 2001). As our opening quote from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* suggests, such beliefs emphasise differences and ignore the similarities, having the potential of to make the relationships between certain groups difficult and conflictual.

Given the prevalence of stereotypes in wider society, it is logical that their study is an important area of research in a number of fields and specialties, including cross-cultural organisational behaviour (Schneider & Barsoux, 2003; Triandis & Trafimov, 2001), social psychology (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Wyer & Srull, 1989), and moral philosophy (Blum,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jaime.bonache@uc3m.es (J. Bonache), helene.langinier@em-strasbourg.eu (H. Langinier), czarraga@ing.uc3m.es (C. Z arraga-Oberty).

2004). Studies in each one of these areas have analysed what stereotypes are, what they consist of, what lies behind them, their influence on relationships between people and society at large, and what can be done to reduce or avoid them.

In the specific area of international assignments, however, it is not so common to find analyses and discussions about stereotypes. Where they are considered, attention seems to be mainly restricted to the case of women (e.g., Caligiuri & Cascio, 1999; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Harris, 2004; Izraeli & Adler, 1994; Linehan & Scullion, 2004) or highly skilled migrants (e.g., Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Mamman, Kamoche, & Bakuwa, 2012; Syed, 2008), while other categories of employees are somewhat neglected. It is particularly surprising that despite the prevalence of national stereotypes in wider society, few attempts have been made systematically to analyse the impact of nationality on relationships among different national groups within multinational corporations (MNCs) (for exceptions see Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2010; Olsen & Martins, 2009). This is unfortunate because research shows that expatriates adjust themselves more or less successfully to the same host country according to their nationality (Selmer, 2001). For instance, French expatriates display a lower level of adjustment to China than their American, British and German counterparts. The demographic characteristics of expatriates have an impact on their adjustment. To understand this phenomenon, it is important to understand how these demographic characteristics relate to those of HCNs (Olsen & Martins, 2009). Interpersonal conflict between expatriates and HCNs emerges as the main cross-cultural issue faced in the realm of expatriation. Conflictual situations appear to be enhanced by co-workers' negative stereotypes: for example, American expatriates can be perceived as the exploiters of an underdeveloped local economy (Jassawalla, Truglia & Garvey, 2004). Elsewhere, Dolainski (1997) mentions "the ugly American expatriate". Multinationals need to take this phenomenon into account because cross-cultural conflict with HCNs has an impact on the coping strategies expatriates develop to adjust (Selmer, 1999). If the relationships with HCNs are too negative they will opt for a symptom-focused strategy instead of a more adapted strategy that focuses on problem solving. Unable to cope positively with their new environment expatriates may choose to go back home (Selmer, 1999). Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of the relationships with HCNs in expatriates' adjustment process, Toh and DeNisi (2007) denounce the relative absence of research on what drives HCNs to support expatriates' adjustment. Some researchers call for more attention to HCNs and the training they should receive in order to welcome expatriates (Jassawalla et al., 2004; Olsen & Martins, 2009); however to do this successfully, the perceptions of HCNs need to be understood. To reduce interpersonal conflict between HCNs and expatriates, with a view to improving their adjustment experience, it is crucial to understand the perceptions HCNs have of expatriates and the effect of these perceptions on the level of support they give. The purpose of this paper is to investigate stereotyping processes among HCNs in order to gain an understanding of this perception. Understanding the effect of stereotyping on expatriates is important, as the pool of expatriates grows increasingly diverse, reflecting the changing nature of the workforce and the global mobility of employees.

Here, we are interested in two of the more salient groups in the international HRM area: corporate expatriates (i.e. HQ managers assigned to a foreign subsidiary) and host-country nationals (i.e., local employees in an overseas subsidiary). Our aim is to offer a theoretical framework demonstrating when and why HCNs develop negative stereotypical perceptions of corporate expatriates, and the effects of these stereotypes on a number of key expatriate outcomes.

Our framework is based on social identity theory (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2004). We adopt this approach for two reasons. First, social identity theory explains what prompts identification with a group and the effects this has on relationships and conflicts between groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Our second reason is empirical: the application of social identity theory to explanations of group behaviour is well supported by numerous studies (for a recent review, see Haslam, Ellemers, Reicher, Reynolds, & Schmitt, 2010).

Our paper starts by clarifying the notion and the origin of stereotypes and the way they are conceptualised within social identity theory. Drawing on this framework, we present a model of the antecedents and (dysfunctional) effects of HCNs' negative stereotypical perceptions of corporate expatriates, and of the factors that help to weaken those stereotypes. In proposing this model, we hope to make an analytical contribution that may guide future empirical research in the field of expatriation area. We also aim to suggest some theoretically based initiatives that companies might take to combat negative stereotyping on the part of HCNs.

2. Stereotypes and social identity theory

2.1. Statistical generalisations and the notion of stereotypes

Stereotypes are generalisations about people based on group membership. The group may be a gender (e.g., women), a job category (e.g., public sector workers) or a nationality. This paper focuses on the stereotypes associated with nationality. To understand how they affect the way locals perceive expatriates, it is important to understand the underlying mechanism at the source of stereotyping. A recurring question related to stereotypes is the "kernel of truth" hypothesis: do they have a basis in reality? Terracciano et al. (2005) answer this in the negative for stereotypes linked to nationality and show that national character, as described by group members themselves, are not consistent with aggregate personality data. This assessment of personality traits through the five-factor model is recognised as valid and reliable (Costa & McCrae, 1992) whereas the accuracy of beliefs about national character still raises questions among scholars (McCrae, 2001). When compared to personality traits that are rooted in biology, national character appears to be a social construct and does not rely on the generalisation of a unique individual's experience. These aggregate personality traits have been compared to Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Mean personality scores from 33 countries were significantly and substantially correlated with cultural dimensions scores (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Stereotypes need to be differentiated from both personality traits and cultural dimensions. Indeed, when popular authors such as Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1999), and Inglehart, Basanez, and Moreno (1998) define societies in terms of, for instance, their degree of individualism, their power distance index, or respect for rules or traditionalism, they are in effect

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