



Brief report

The effects of personality on host country nationals' helping behaviors toward expatriates

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ABSTRACT

Host country nationals (HCNs) play a critical role in facilitating expatriate adjustment and performance. This study emphasized the importance of HCNs helping expatriates in the HCN–expatriate working relationship. The effects of HCNs' Big Five personality traits on HCNs' helping behaviors toward expatriates were examined from a sample of 169 HCNs from 35 foreign enterprises in Taiwan. Agreeableness was positively related to HCNs helping expatriates. Theoretical implications for the expatriate literature and practical implications of selecting HCNs as expatriates' host mentors or trainers on the basis of personality were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have noted that most of the previous research in the expatriate literature has placed greater emphasis on the perspective of expatriates, while another important stakeholder of expatriate assignment, host-country nationals (HCNs), remains largely unvisited (Takeuchi, 2010; Toh & DeNisi, 2005). Scholars have long acknowledged the essential role that HCNs can play in influencing expatriate success through their ability to provide or withhold the needed job assistance, social and psychological support, and cultural cues to expatriates (Palthe, 2004; Toh & DeNisi, 2005). The present study intends to shift the spotlight from expatriates to another imperative but often quiet factor in expatriate success, HCNs, the expatriate's host country supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates. This study has two objectives. The first is to examine HCNs' helping behaviors toward expatriates in the HCN–expatriate relationship. The second is to examine whether certain HCN personality traits might facilitate their helping behaviors.

1.1. The importance of HCNs and HCN personality

Expatriates' poor performance and inability to adjust to the host environment have often been associated with expatriate failure (Tungli & Peiperl, 2009). Scholars have long acknowledged the essential role that HCNs can play in influencing expatriate success by their ability to provide or withhold the needed job assistance, social and psychological support, and cultural cues to expatriates (Aycan, 1997; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Toh & DeNisi, 2005).

Empirically, the positive effects of social relationships with HCNs on expatriates have been well documented. From the social learning perspective, Black (1988) found that expatriates form their expectations about the host country by interacting

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with HCNs. Aryee and Stone (1996) found expatriates' adjustment to be higher when support was available from HCNs than when it was not. Froese, Peltokorpi, & Ko (2012) found expatriates' social interactions with HCNs to be positively related to greater adjustment and satisfaction. For more information, please see Takeuchi (2010).

A widely accepted personality framework is the Big Five model, which consists of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Personality traits are considered as an important determinant of helping behaviors (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000) and social relationships with others (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Next, we respond to the call from Toh and DeNisi (2007) to obtain a better understanding of how individual HCN differences relate to their working relations with expatriates.

1.2. HCN personality and helping behaviors toward expatriates

Although helping behaviors from HCNs are an important factor to expatriate success, scholars have also cautioned that one cannot simply assume that HCNs would always be motivated to help their expatriate counterparts. Toh and DeNisi (2005, 2007, p. 282) argued that HCNs' helping behaviors toward expatriates are often discretionary, "not formally required by the job and are instead extra-role" as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). HCNs perceive providing helping behaviors to expatriates as a matter of personal choice, rather than a part of the job description. Discretionary behaviors from HCNs need to come from their own personal initiative and be motivated intrinsically.

Therefore, we apply the helping dimension of OCBs in this study. Helping behaviors refer to behaviors that occur in weak situations (Organ, 1994). Helping is directed toward a specific person (Williams & Anderson, 1991). For example, experienced HCNs voluntarily help new expatriates to learn about culturally-based workplace practices and internal dynamics in the host organization or direct new expatriates to the other host resources of critical job knowledge and information (Vance, Vaiman, & Andersen, 2009).

Personality traits are expected to be reflected in behaviors more frequently in weak situations than strong situations (Mischel, 1977). We argue that the working dynamic of HCNs and expatriates is also similar to the description of a weak situation. First, HCNs' behaviors aimed at helping expatriates are often discretionary and exhibited on a voluntary basis (Toh & DeNisi, 2007). Second, HCNs' helping behaviors toward expatriates are often not associated with external incentives (Toh & DeNisi, 2005). Third, depending on their perceptions of expatriates, different HCNs can interpret and respond to expatriates differently (Pichler, Varma, & Budhwar, 2012; Toh & Srinivas, 2012). Next, we discuss two personality traits, agreeableness and conscientiousness, which have received the most scholarly attention when examining personality traits and OCBs. Agreeableness and conscientiousness are considered to be two well-established Big Five personality predictors of OCBs (Ilies, Fulmer, Spitzmuller, & Johnson, 2009; Organ & Ryan, 1995). However, although a great deal of research has examined relationships between the two personality traits and OCBs, to our knowledge, no study has examined relationships between personality and OCBs in the expatriate–HCN relationships and the cross-cultural context. This study fills this void in the literature. For the other three Big Five personality traits, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience, where examinations are considerably more limited (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006), in this study, we do not develop specific hypotheses but we include them in the analyses for exploratory purposes.

Personality traits associated with agreeableness include being courteous, trusting, good-natured, cooperative, and soft-hearted (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Personality researchers found that because people who are high in agreeableness tend to value others' welfare intrinsically, they have a tendency to think well of coworkers and offer help to others when the appropriate situation arises (Organ et al., 2006). A number of studies have found one's agreeableness to be related to his or her helping behaviors toward others (Konovsky & Organ, 1996; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994; Neuman & Kickul, 1998; Organ, 1994), especially when cooperative action is needed. Furthermore, Graziano and his colleagues found from four series of studies that people high in agreeableness tend to be less influenced by group membership and offer more helping behaviors to outgroup members than people low in agreeableness (Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007). Such finding is of great interest because scholars have often found that HCNs categorize expatriates as outgroup and such categorization discourages HCNs' willingness to provide assistance to expatriates (e.g., Varma, Toh, & Budhwar, 2006). As such, we posit the following:

Hypothesis 1. HCNs' agreeableness is positively associated with HCNs' helping behaviors toward expatriates.

Conscientiousness refers to being dependable, thorough, organized, and reliable (Barrick & Mount, 1991). The results of two meta-analytic investigations show that conscientious had a positive effect on interpersonal helping behaviors (Ilies et al., 2009; Organ & Ryan, 1995). Conscientiousness traits have a stronger focus on task accomplishment and awareness of what needs to be done, so it is expected that conscientious HCNs will likely have similar behaviors when working with expatriates. Evidence shows that conscientious employees are prone to carry out tasks that are not part of the job (e.g., Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994).

A number of studies have linked conscientiousness with helping behaviors toward others (Hattrup, O'Connell, & Wingate, 1998; Hogan, Rybicki, Motowidlo, & Borman, 1998; Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007; Neuman & Kickul, 1998). In all, it is arguable that conscientious HCNs have more awareness of what needs to be done in expatriate–HCN relationships, for instance, if the new expatriate is experiencing a sense of isolation, they are more likely to take the initiative to orient the new expatriate to the host operation and introduce him or her to other HCNs even when it is not required.

Hypothesis 2. HCNs' conscientiousness is positively associated with HCNs' helping behaviors toward expatriates.

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