



## The influence of intercultural communication on cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes: Foreign workers in South Korea

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### ABSTRACT

Integrating intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment research, this study examines the impact of host country language proficiency, English use in the workplace, communication styles, conflict styles, and social interaction frequency with host country nationals (HCNs) on general, work, and interaction adjustment, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions of 125 foreign workers in South Korea. While host country language proficiency and social interaction frequency with HCNs had a more positive influence on general and interaction adjustment facets, English use in the workplace, congruent communication and conflict styles were more relevant to work adjustment and work attitudes.

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### 1. Introduction

Despite the abundant and increasing research on intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment, we know surprisingly little about the influence of intercultural communication on foreign workers' cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes. The lack of research linking inter-cultural communication to work and non-work adjustment facets can be attributed to different conceptual and empirical focus in intercultural communication and management disciplines. That is, communication researchers focusing often on intercultural communication competencies with student subjects have not taken into account work adjustment and work attitudes (e.g., Nishida, 1985; Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002). While management researchers have taken into account both work and non-work related adjustment facets, their studies, at best, are limited to one aspect of intercultural communication – host country language proficiency (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005, for a literature review). Traditionally, management researchers have not even taken into account host country language proficiency, expecting the cultural distance index (Kogut & Singh, 1988) to capture all relevant aspects of intercultural interactions. The cultural distance index is an aggregate measure of Hofstede's (1980) national culture dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, individuality, power distance, and masculinity.

While the cultural distance index explains a substantial portion of the variance in cross-cultural adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005), intercultural communication in work and non-work settings is a complex, nested phenomenon subject to individual and firm-level differences. For example, intercultural communication competence (ICC) theories suggest that individual communication competencies influence intercultural communication encounters and interaction adjustment (e.g., Kim, 2001; Martin & Hammer, 1989; Ruben & Kealey, 1979). Also, cultural fit theory implies that foreign workers whose communication styles are consistent with the host country's culture are likely to experience a high level of

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cross-cultural adjustment (Ward & Chang, 1997). Socioanalytic theory, in turn, is based on the assumption that situations create social expectations and that foreign workers tend to comply with those expectations if that compliance is consistent with their attitudes (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Firm-level differences may also exist because cross-cultural adjustment has been described as the dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment (Kim, 2001) and because home-country nationals' foreign-language proficiency varies across countries and firms (e.g., Peltokorpi, 2007a). Existing theories and intercultural communication research suggest that the cultural distance index and proficiency in the host country's language alone may not fully capture the complexities of intercultural communication.

The present study, by examining the effects of intercultural communication on foreign workers' cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes in South Korea (hereafter "Korea"), contributes to the cross-cultural adjustment literature in four ways. First, we draw on ICC, cultural fit, and socioanalytic frameworks for an interaction-based account of cross-cultural adjustment. This approach shifts the focus from the country-level cultural distance to actual communication-based intercultural interactions. Second, we divide intercultural communication into five dimensions – host country language proficiency, social interactions with home country nationals (HCNs), communication styles, conflict styles, and English use in the workplace – to examine their influence on foreign workers' work, general, and interaction adjustment; job satisfaction; and turnover intentions. Among these dimensions, only the language proficiency (e.g., Selmer, 2006) and social interactions with HCNs (Jun, Lee, & Gentry, 1997) have been addressed in cross-cultural adjustment research. Third, an increasing number of foreign workers have been classified as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), that is, individuals who make their own decision to work abroad (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009). However, despite the growing number of SIEs, few studies have focused on SIEs (Froese, 2011). The present study focuses on English-language teachers because, despite a sharp increase in the number of English-language teachers in East Asia, few studies have focused on them. For example, there are more than 30,000 foreigners teaching English in Korea, whereas there are only 7000 corporate expatriates (Korea Immigration Office, 2010). Finally, by examining cross-cultural adjustment in Korea, we respond to the call for extending this line of research to a wider range of countries (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005).

This study was conducted in Korea for several reasons. First, Korea is culturally and linguistically very different from English-speaking Anglo-Saxon countries (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), providing a challenging environment for English-language teachers and an interesting context for the present investigation. For example, Korea's homogeneous culture is characterized by vertical collectivism and high-context communication styles (Park, Hwang, & Harrison, 1996; Yum, 1988). In vertical collectivistic cultures, "people submit to the authorities of the in-group and are willing to sacrifice for their in-group" (Triandis, 2001, p. 910). High-context communication, in turn, takes place when "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, p. 79). By contrast, language teachers whose native language is English are typically from individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 1980; House et al., 2004) and exhibit low-context communication styles (Hall, 1976). In individualistic cultures, "people are autonomous and independent from their in-groups; they give priority to their personal goals over the goals of their in-groups" (Triandis, 2001, p. 909). Low-context communication occurs when "the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, p. 70). Such differences in culture and communication style are expected to influence foreign workers' cross-cultural adjustment and work attitudes.

In addition, the grammar and syntax of the Korean language are very different from those of the English language. For example, the low general English language proficiency in Korea and the unique writing style (*hangul*) of the Korean language can influence foreign workers' cross-cultural adjustment. In 2010, the average Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score for Korea (81 out of a total of 120 points) was substantially lower than that for several countries in Europe, including Denmark (99) and Germany (97) (TOEFL, 2011). Indeed, culture- and communication-related problems are shown to have negative effects on American expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment, interpersonal relations, and task performance in Korea (Park et al., 1996). In addition, although Korea's economy ranks 15th in the world and 4th in Asia, surprisingly few studies have focused on foreign workers in Korea. One possible reason for this may be the small number of foreigners living and working in Korea. However, the last decade has witnessed a sharp increase in this number from approximately 100,000 in 2000 to more than 1 million in 2010 (Korea Immigration Office, 2010), making the present study one of the pioneering studies of foreign workers in Korea.

The rest of this study is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a review of research on cross-cultural adjustment and intercultural communication and draws on ICC, cultural fit, and socioanalytic frameworks for foreign workers' intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment. Section 3 develops a set of hypotheses that link intercultural communication to cross-cultural adjustment and work-related outcomes. Section 4 presents the sample, control variables, measures, and statistical procedures, and Section 5 concludes by discussing the findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

Cross-cultural adjustment refers to an individual's psychological comfort with different aspects of a foreign environment (Black, 1988). Cross-cultural adjustment is often conceptualized as a multifaceted construct with three interrelated facets. In acculturation research (Searle & Ward, 1990), the facets of psychological, socio-cultural, and work adjustment are identified. In expatriate research (Black, 1988), three relatively similar facets of adjustment to the general environment, work, and interaction with HCNs are proposed. General adjustment is the degree of psychological comfort regarding the host culture's

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