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Untangling the Laundry List

General Mental Ability, the Big Five, and Context Related Variables as Predictors for
Expatriate Success

- Summary -

Introduction and Theoretical Background

The introduction gives an overview of expatriate management related aspects and outlines the need for further research in this area. Following the introduction, the terms *expatriate* and *culture* are defined; the reason for the study's setting in South Korea is explained. Describing its theoretical background, the study first defines the criteria applied, namely *adjustment* and *job performance*. Subsequently, the predictors are presented and hypotheses are derived.

In defining adjustment, the paper follows Black and colleagues differentiating between the dimensions of *work adjustment, interaction adjustment,* and *general adjustment* (Black, 1988; Black & Stephens, 1989; Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall, & Stroh, 1999). The difference between adjustment as an internal, psychological, emotional state (Caligiuri, 2000a) and adjustment as the extent to which expatriates have been able to adapt their behavior to the host environment (Brewster, 1995) is discussed.

Job performance is defined drawing from both domestic and expatriate research as Sinangil and Ones (2001) state that "for expatriates, critical incidents will be different ... but the overall taxonomy and structure of the job performance domain will remain essentially unchanged" (p.433). For developing a performance model to be used in this study, three studies proposing models of expatriate job performance were selected: Arthur and Bennett (1997), Caligiuri (1997), and Ones and Viswesvaran (1997). The model was developed by matching the three models. Considerations for developing a new model of expatriate job performance are described in detail.

On the predictor side, due to their outstanding theoretical and empirical importance, the main focus of the study is on cognitive ability, namely *general mental ability* (GMA), and personality, namely the *Big Five*. Nevertheless, several context specific factors are also presented. They encompass: *Tolerance of Ambiguity* (another personality-related variable), *prior international experience, culture novelty, cross-cultural training participation, length of time spent working in Korea, language proficiency, extent of organizational support, worries about repatriation, and favorableness of the spouse's opinion prior to departure.* All

predictors are either hypothesized to be positively related to adjustment, a specific dimension of adjustment, job performance, a specific dimension of job performance, or more than one of the criteria. Derivations of hypotheses are theoretically substantiated which are explained in detail in the full text.

Methods

The method-part of the paper first describes the present sample. Second, the measures for both independent and dependent variables applied in this study are explained. Third, the procedure used for data collection is described.

The sample size of this study is $N = 66$; comprised of German and Austrian expatriates working in South Korea. In all aspects, participants of this study resemble a typical expatriate sample. A structured interview-guideline was developed to assess demographics as well as all context specific variables, except Tolerance of Ambiguity. As measure for GMA, the study applied the Wonderlic Personnel Test (Wonderlic Inc. 2002), the NEO-PI-R (Ostendorf & Angleitner, 2004) was used to assess the Big Five personality factors, AT-14 (Kischkel, 1984) was applied to measure Tolerance of Ambiguity. Self- and other-ratings were obtained for adjustment and job performance. However, other-ratings could only be obtained for part of the sample. The adjustment measure for this study was designed following the three dimensional model of Black and colleagues (Black et al., 1999), resulting in a 4-item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert-scale. The Alienation Adjustment Scale (Middleton, 1963) was added as an additional measure of adjustment for self-ratings only. The study's model of expatriate performance was translated into a 17-item questionnaire. Again, a 5-point Likert-scale was used, partially supported with behavioral anchors. All measures were applied in German. In the case that the person rating the expatriates' performance and adjustment wasn't fluent in German, an English version of the related questions was prepared using the *back translation method* (Brislin, 1980). All standardized measures were applied during the interview. To obtain other-ratings, participants were asked to name someone who was sufficiently knowledgeable and could rate their adjustment and performance.

Results

The results-section is structured along the two criteria of adjustment and job performance. In accordance with more up-to-date statistical standards, no statistical significance tests are reported for any of the analyses conducted. Instead, this study reports point estimates of effect sizes and surrounding confidence intervals (see Wilkinson and the

Task Force on Statistical Inference, 1999). As claimed by many influential statisticians (e.g., Schmidt & Hunter, 1996), when possible, data were corrected for range restriction in the predictors and unreliability in the criteria.

Generally, results for both criteria in self- and other-ratings show fairly high score values and small standard deviations. No hypothesis could be confirmed for GMA, Openness, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and several context variable related hypotheses. However, Emotional Stability shows a large ($r = .81$) correlation with other-ratings of adjustment; cross-cultural training participation also correlated positively with other-ratings of adjustment ($r = .71$). Partial support was found for the relation of length of time working in Korea ($r = .37$) and language proficiency ($r = .46$). Both aspects have a positive impact on self-ratings of adjustment, showing small to medium correlations. Slightly different results emerged when adjustment was measured with the Alienation Adjustment Scale. Only one correlation emerged that does not include zero in the 95% confidence interval in regard to performance: Conscientiousness is positively related with self-ratings of performance showing a medium $r = .30$ correlation. This relation did not emerge in other-ratings of performance.

Intercorrelations of the criteria measures display some noteworthy patterns: Independently, self- and other-ratings of the different dimensions of adjustment and performance correlate with a medium to high degree with each other. Ratings of the different dimensions also correlate with the overall self- or other-rating measure. However, self- and other ratings of either adjustment or performance did not correlate with each other, nor did ratings of adjustment correlate with ratings of performance.

To test its applicability as a supplemental personality measure it was tested, whether Tolerance of Ambiguity can be empirically distinguished from the Big Five. Tolerance of Ambiguity shows two moderate correlations with Big Five factors: A positive correlation with Emotional Stability ($r = .43$) and a negative relation with Conscientiousness ($r = -.34$). Regressing Tolerance of Ambiguity on the Big Five, it appears that the multiple correlation of the Big Five with Tolerance of Ambiguity is large ($R = .59$) but not unity. A large part of variance in Tolerance of Ambiguity is explained by the Big Five ($R^2 = .34$). However, there is a substantial part of specific variance that remains unexplained.

Discussion

Various trains of thoughts are suggested in order to explain every result of the study. Factors that could have led to results other than hypothesized are discussed. Apart from the limitations described in discussing individual aspects of the study, general limitations are

outlined. Giving an outlook, several aspects that have not received much attention in expatriate research but are considered to be of high importance are pointed out to the reader. Among these aspects are dual-career couples, borderless careers, motivational aspects, and compound personality traits.

Concluding, this study lends support to the notion that the two Big Five factors of Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability can be used for predicting expatriate adjustment and performance. It also raises concern of indiscriminately using constructs, i.e., Tolerance of Ambiguity, that at first sight seem to be promising in the expatriate context, but actually still need further theoretical elaboration. As for the lack of findings in regard to General Mental Ability, the study will hopefully encourage further research on the development of a short measure of GMA in German and study its predictive validity in the expatriate context. Furthermore, findings on the importance of context specific variables, such as language ability and length of the assignment, underline that the work of Human Resources departments should not stop at selecting those to be sent abroad, but needs to include carefully designed support measures throughout the whole endurance of the assignment.

This study explicitly used adjustment and performance as the two criteria of expatriate success, and clearly distinguished between these two constructs. At the same time, it suggests that one should understand adjustment as a construct which differs depending on the perspective one applies, the expatriate's or an observer's perspective. By doing so, this study contributed to untangling the laundry list of criteria frequently used in expatriate research.