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Expatriate Acculturation: Linking Predeparture Experience To Initial Experience

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study conducted on the relationship between predeparture factors and adjustment factors in the initial stage of expatriate adjustment in a new environment. In particular, this study looks at the adaptation factors of new Chinese expatriates from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia who have been living in Auckland for no more than 5 years. Factor analysis, correlation and discriminant analysis were applied to a sample of 187 respondents and the results highlighted that expatriates who came from environments dissimilar to New Zealand or who have not had previous overseas experiences considered the New Zealand environment 'harsh' compared to expatriates who are from an environment similar to New Zealand or who have previous overseas experience.



Expatriate Acculturation: Linking Predeparture Experience To Initial Experience

An area of research in expatriate studies that has been neglected, is the relationship between the cultural background of expatriates and the culture in the host country (Stening and Hammer, 1992). Stening and Hammer explored the cross-cultural adaptation of American managers in Japan, Japanese managers in America and the experiences of Americans and Japanese in a third country, Thailand. They concluded that "...Japanese and American managers differ significantly in their attitudinal satisfaction with living in a foreign culture.." and that "...the cultural background of the expatriate sojourner may be more important than the particular country-specific environment in influencing cross-cultural adaptation" (1992:77). In addition to this, an acculturation process should accommodate individual factors, such as, past experiences, personality and age.

Mendenhall and Oddou (1985) have reviewed empirical studies that directly investigated the adjustment patterns of expatriate managers in foreign assignments. They revealed four dimensions that were related to successful expatriate acculturation; the self-oriented dimension, the others-oriented dimension, the perceptual dimension, and the cultural-toughness dimension. The self-oriented dimension was concerned with the strengthening of the expatriate manager's self esteem, confidence and mental hygiene. The others-oriented dimension deals with factors that enhances the expatriate manager's ability to interact with the locals in the host nation. The perceptual dimension deals with the ability of the expatriate manager to understand why



foreigners behave the way they do in adjusting to the unfamiliar cultural environment. The last dimension, the cultural-toughness dimension, considers reasons why some cultures seem more difficult to adapt than others.

In his article, Selvarajah (1998) explained that expatriates experience a certain amount of excitement, keenness, and anxiety about the prospect of going to a new environment. He suggested that the availability of information or lack of information of the new environment will influence the personal outlook of the expatriate prior to departure and on arrival.

Based on the above claims, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

- H1** The expatriate's outlook on experience in New Zealand is negative if information on New Zealand is not readily available prior to departure.
- H1** The expatriate's initial experience in New Zealand is negative if information on New Zealand is not readily available prior to departure.

Selvarajah's proposition is also that the amount of knowledge the expatriate has about the new environment, the more positive is the expatriate's outlook of New Zealand before and after arriving in New Zealand.

Based on the above proposition, the following two hypotheses are forwarded for testing:

- H3** The expatriate's outlook on experience in New Zealand is positive if the expatriate has knowledge of New Zealand before departure.
- H4** The expatriate's initial experience in New Zealand is positive if the expatriate has knowledge of New Zealand before departure.



Thompson (1989), in his book *Toronto's Chinatown*, analysed the characteristics of the new Chinese expatriates. He argued that the environment from which the expatriates came will impact on their adaptation in the new environment. Thompson argued that Hong Kong having been a British protectorate, the expatriates from Hong Kong are literate in English and Chinese and this bilingualism is an important factor in the social processes of the new environment, particularly as it affects middle class interaction.

Based on the above understanding, the following hypothesis is forwarded for testing.

H5 The environment from which the expatriates came will impact on their adaptation experiences in the new environment.

Selvarajah (1998) also forwarded the argument that the initial experience phase covers the developmental cognitive aspect of the expatriate's experience. It incorporates the honeymoon phase (Adler, 1986; Oberg, 1960; Torbiorn, 1982) and the culture shock phase (Oberg, 1960). The length of this stage varies from a few weeks to a year (Adler, 1986; Church, 1982; Oberg, 1960). The length of this phase is influenced by prior experience in other countries since such experience will better equip the expatriate to deal with the new environment.

Thus it is expected that:

H6 Prior overseas experience influences adaptability in New Zealand

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



A single questionnaire, back translated from English to Mandarin, was distributed randomly to 300 selected Chinese expatriates from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia based on name lists provided by ethnic associations in Auckland. After appropriate follow-up, 187 questionnaires were returned, of which 166 were useable, yielding a response rate of 62 per cent. The sample consisted of 15.7 per cent of the respondents coming from China, 22.3 per cent from Hong Kong, 20.5 per cent from Taiwan, and 39.2 per cent from Singapore and Malaysia.

In the questionnaire, for most metric variables, there are five numbered alternatives, 1 to 5, where low numbers represent low levels or minimum amounts and high numbers represent high or maximum amounts. Measures were carried out on background factors of the expatriates and their initial experience in New Zealand.

Data Analysis

45 per cent of respondents were less than 26 years old, 30.7 per cent were between 26 and 35 years of age, 12.7 per cent of the respondents were in the 36 to 45 age group and the balance were above 46 years of age. The reason for this concentration in the younger age group was because most of the older respondents preferred not to answer the questionnaire. The older Chinese had English language difficulty or could not understand English at all. Secondly, the older Chinese were either embarrassed, unsure of the research implications or feared answering the questionnaire may lead to unnecessary trouble as a consequence. Most of the older Chinese are from conservative traditional backgrounds where information generally has been restricted. The sample also showed that New Zealand was the first overseas place of residence to 72.9 per cent of the respondents. The remaining 27.1 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had lived in another country before coming to New Zealand.



This research employed factor analysis, correlation and discriminant statistic model to interpret the data. Questions 28, and 29 have 14 and 15 variables (sub-questions) for each question and factor analysis was used to summarise the variables to one variable (factor) for each question. The identified single factors are then used for subsequent correlation, and discriminant analysis. In this research, Factor 1 will represent question 28 and Factor 2 will represent question 29. The high eigenvalues (7.15, 7.11) of the two factor analysed variables are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Principal Components Analysis

Factor	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %
Factor 1	7.15168	51.1	51.1
Factor 2	7.11049	47.4	47.4

Note: Significant Eigenvalue > 1, and % of variance and Cumulative % > 30%

Notations

Factor 1 (Q28) Information on adaptability factors prior to departure
Factor 2 (Q29) Feelings on adaptation factors on arrival

In this research, a classification of the respondents was needed based on where (country) they came from and whether their settlement in New Zealand is their first overseas experience. Based on their initial experience, we examined the difference between the four Chinese ethnicity groups from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore/Malaysia using discriminant analysis on the factor reduced variables.

Results



The correlations between the factor analysed single variables and initial experience is presented in Table 2. The correlation matrix revealed that (Q18) lack of information about New Zealand ($r = -0.23$, $P = 0.003$) affected the expatriates understanding of the adaptability factors in New Zealand prior to departure (Q28). This suggests that the availability of information would help reduce the level of anxiety and stress in the ‘preparing to move’ phase. These findings support H1 and H2.

The expatriates understanding of adaptability factors in New Zealand prior to departure (Q28) was significantly related to the knowledge the expatriate had on New Zealand ($r = 0.64$, $P = 0.000$). The level of initial experience in New Zealand (Q29) was significantly related to the knowledge the expatriate had before departure from their respective home countries to New Zealand ($r = 0.52$, $P = 0.000$). This findings support H3 and H4 respectively.

TABLE 2
Correlation Matrix of Initial Experience and Information on New Zealand

	FACTOR 1	FACTOR 2	Q17.KNOW	Q18.INFO
FACTOR 1	1.0000 P= .	.		
FACTOR 2	.6272 P= .000	1.0000 P= .	P= .000	
Q17.KNOW	.6447 P= .000	.5166 P= .000	1.0000 P= .	
Q18.INFO	-.2315 P= .003	-.2004 P= .011	-.2244 P= .004	1.0000 P= .

(Coefficient / (Cases) / 2-tailed Significance)
" ." is printed if a coefficient cannot be computed

Notations

- FACTOR 1 Information on factors prior to departure
- FACTOR 2 Feelings on factors on arrival
- Q17.KNOW Knowledge of New Zealand prior to coming
- Q18.INFO Difficulty in obtaining information about New Zealand prior to departure



In Table 3 the results of the discriminant function by group mean, evaluating where the expatriate are from (Q4) by initial experience (Q29) are presented. The discriminant analysis is highly significant ($P = 0.0007$). That is to say, grouping people based on where they are from with their initial experiences in New Zealand is meaningful. The findings support H5.

TABLE 3
Group Mean of Initial Experiences: Country Groups

Group	Function 1	Country
1	0.25649	Malaysia/Singapore
2	- 0.24647	Taiwan
3	0.22957	Hong Kong
4	- 0.70015	China

($r=0.3403$, $P=0.0007$)

Table 4 presents the results of the discriminant function, by group mean evaluating whether living in New Zealand is the expatriates first time of living overseas (Q5) with initial experience in New Zealand (Q29). This discriminant analysis measuring this relationship is highly significant ($P = 0.000$). This suggests that exposure to another environment and gaining the experience of living with other communities provides better coping mechanisms in a new environment. This finding supports H6.

TABLE 5
Group Mean of Overseas Experience

Group	Function 1	
1	- .47322	First time overseas



2 1.21986 Not first time overseas
($r=0.6074$, $P=0.000$)

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that there is a close link between the predeparture experiences and the initial experience in the new environment. In creating this relationship, the expatriate is particularly influenced by variables such as (1) the amount of information about New Zealand that the expatriate has prior to arrival in New Zealand, (2) the knowledge that the expatriate has about New Zealand prior to coming to New Zealand, (3) the backgrounds of the expatriates, and (4) the experiences prior to coming to New Zealand.

Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) suggest that the pre-departure training was important to the expatriates in adjusting to the host environment. Also Sheehan and Johnson (1992) developed some key factors for acculturation training in the new environment. The main purpose of training is to provide expatriates with information about the host country, so as to improve their adaptability chances. The results of this study show that useful and appropriate information obtained by the expatriates prior to coming to New Zealand will influence their initial experience in New Zealand. The possibility of reducing the culture shock and increasing the chances of adapting to the new environment is reflected in the value placed on information.

Thompson (1989) suggested that the environment from which the expatriates came impacted on their adaptation to the new environment. His assertion appears to be support by this study. The results of this study demonstrate that the expatriate's initial experience is significantly related to their place of origin. The findings of this research shows that the Chinese expatriates from



Singapore/Malaysia and from Hong Kong had better initial experience in the new environment than the Chinese expatriates from China or Taiwan.

The explanation for this may lie in the fact that the Chinese expatriates from Singapore/Malaysia and Hong Kong are from multicultural environments compared to the mono-cultural environment of China and Taiwan. This exposure to a multicultural environment is easily extended to the predominantly bi-cultural New Zealand Society. These expatriates are generally well educated and they can communicate in fairly fluent English as well as Chinese dialects. All these factors help the Chinese from Hong Kong and Singapore/Malaysia to cope better in a foreign culture such as New Zealand than the Chinese from China and Taiwan. When the Chinese from China move to a new country, they experience the differences in language and values which lead to feelings of loss, rejection and frustration (Furnham and Bocher, 1986). They face intense culture shock.

The results of this study also suggest that expatriates with previous overseas experience have better initial experiences in a new environment. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) emphasised the importance of previous overseas experience in the cross-cultural adjustment. Previous overseas experience is therefore an important factor influencing adaptation.



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