

Peeping Before Leaping: Push And Pull Resilience of Expatriate Adaptation

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)
2024, Vol. 16 (3) pp 109-124
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UITM Press
Submit date: 30th October 2024
Accept date: 20th December 2024
Publish date: 31st December 2024

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Proposed citation:

Ndagi, A., & Ali, A. J. (2024). Peeping Before Leaping: Push And Pull Resilience of Expatriate Adaptation. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 16(3), 109-124.

Abstract

The world is a marketplace for the good, the bad and the ugly giving rise to activities that either make or mar multinational organisations' endeavours. The global spate of terrorism, racial discrimination, political and religious tensions and conflicts, climate change and degradation, economic instabilities and skirmishes are all attracting the attention of both international management scholars and industry players. In recent, there has been a major focus on expatriate adaptation, particularly in hostile environments. Effective expatriate job performance is established in the literature to be predicated by successful adaptation. Hence, maladaptation leads to expatriate failure and premature repatriation costing those involved huge financial and managerial losses. This article contributes to knowledge and practice by identifying key predictors of expatriate adaptation. Relying on the tenets of Black's model of adjustment and espousing the anxiety uncertainty management theory, the study examined extant literature leading to the establishment of a research framework that appraises key factors ranging from individual, organisational and environmental that predict expatriate adaptation in a hostile environment.

Keywords:

Expatriate adaptation, Hostile environment, Expatriate resilience

1 Introduction

In today's globalized world, it is increasingly common for conglomerate to assign employees abroad to represent their interests in the management of subsidiaries. This mission also creates enabling opportunities for the employees to gain leadership experience, acquire new perspectives on modern work environment, and expose them to valuable diverse cultural acclimatation (Georgakakis, Dauth, & Ruigrok, 2016; Counihan, 2009; Morley & Heraty, 2004). Consequently, many countries and organisations rely and benefit from the activities of expatriates for knowledge transfer, expertise and competitive advantage (Bashir, 2024; Shao & Ariss, 2020). For example, in Malaysia, attaining the 20th position in terms of economy, well-being, innovation, and creativity rankings by 2050 is hinged on the attraction of foreign experts (Mohamad & Hassim, 2023). In Nigeria, as a result of unabated brain drain, the country depends on expatriates to execute infrastructural projects (Nweze, 2016). The story is the same some European, Asian and GCC countries (Pau, 2023; IMF, 2022; OECD, 1999; Larner, 2007).

However, sometimes expatriates are posted to challenging and unfamiliar locations (Faeth & Kittler, 2020) that poses both physical and psychological discomfort and fear to them. They face unique obstacles as they strive to adapt and succeed when they find themselves in hostile environments. According to Luo (2023) and Ashifa (2021) while living abroad, can encounter challenges in deciphering local customs, communication styles, and social expectations. Also, language barriers further complicate effective interaction, hindering their integration into the new environment. Importantly, the level of successful adaptation of expatriates can significantly impact an expatriate's overall performance and well-being while working overseas. In some climes they suffer from mild to severe safety concerns and discrimination based on nationality, gender, race, or sexual orientation. Previous studies demonstrated how expatriates living in physically hostile environments, including high levels of human induced dangers such as socio-political intimidations and religious extremism, encounter multiple trauma (Martel, 2022) and are at a higher risk of physical harm or even loss of life. (Chan et al., 2022; Arman, 2023).

To subdue these challenges, expatriates required strong support systems, particularly from their organizations in prioritizing their safety and well-being and providing adequate training, resources, and logistics (Bader et al., 2015). Peeping before leaping into hostile environments is crucial for expatriate adaptation and resilience. It would also promote the safety, welfare and resilience of expatriates in hostile environments by providing comprehensive pre-departure orientation and training, regular check-ins and support during the assignment, and access to resources for mental health and well-being (Heffield, 2016).

This study proposes a framework for empirical examination of expatriate resilience in hostile environments. The proposed study would examine the factors that obstruct the adaptation of expatriates, identify probable support windows that could moderate their anxiety and propose a framework for empirical research. In this article, the terms

adaptation is used instead of adjustment popularized by Black's seminal work of 1989; Aycan 1997; and Lee and Liu 2006. As evidenced in literature, adjustment refers to the short-term responses and changes an individual makes in attempting to cope with certain changes in the environment. It is seen as the process of finding a temporary balance between personal needs and the demands of the environment. It is often conceptualized as a precursor to more long-term adaptation processes (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Adaptation, on the other hand is the longer-term, more enduring changes that occur as individuals learn to integrate into new environment. It involves deeper, more systemic changes in one's behavior, attitudes, and cognitive frameworks to achieve a more sustainable equilibrium with the environment. Adaptation can be the outcome of successful adjustment processes, leading to a more permanent state of functional fit between the individual and their surroundings (Berry, 1997). The fundamental difference is the length of time that is required to acclimatize.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Expatriate Adaptation

Expatriate adaptation is a crucial aspect of international management especially in hostile environments. Recognizing the idea of expatriate adaptation is essential for both companies and individuals involved in international operations. It refers to how well an individual acclimates to living and working in a foreign country (Haslberger, 2005; Chen, 2019). It is characterized by cultural adjustment, social integration, language proficiency, and coping with the challenges unique to the host environment. According to Black and Mendenhall (1990), there are at least three specific facets of international adjustment involving work, interaction, and general adjustments.

In construing expatriate's general adjustment Black and Stephens (1989) laid the background describing it as involving the overall expatriate's psychological comfort level with the new environment. Its indicators include degree of expatriate's openness and absorption into the host culture, level of appreciation of the adequacy of medical facilities available, lodging and recreation services, and potentials for economic prosperity while living there. Their acquaintance with these probable antecedents largely shows how much they are able to maneuver their overall adaptation process. By attaining this feat, expatriates become celebrated guests and comfortable with their new environment while fulfilling their new role expectations (Takeuchi, Yun, & Russel, 2002). Access to effective general adjustment accords expatriates stable emotional and cognitive effort to discover, share and link with contacts, engage in social interaction, maintain excellent relationships with their hosts (Sterle, Vervoort, & Verhofstadt, 2018).

Work adjustment in this context refers to the adaptation to work roles, tasks, environments, and responsibilities. According to Aryee and Stone (1996), it involves role discretion, co-worker support, and work-method ambiguity. Breiden et al (2004) stated that it can be achieved and maintained when expatriate abilities and needs

align with job requirements and reinforcements, and their organizational commitment influences the level of adjustment achieved during international assignments. Expectedly, Breiden et al. (2006) found that the fit between expatriate managers' abilities and needs, job requirements, and incentives significantly influences their work adjustment. However, in a gender-sensitive study, Yu and Ren (2021) found that female expatriates' work adaptation is influenced by organisational culture (bothering on inclusivity and diversity) and host national culture (bothering on tightness and looseness as well as masculinity and feminism).

From mode and style of communication, social etiquettes to value systems, expatriates encounter interaction-based adjustment which describes the comfort level attained when engaging with the host country national in both work and non-work circumstances. It further involves expatriates learning the nuances of non-verbal communication, admiring cultural etiquette, developing cultural sensitivity, eschewing apparent ethnocentrism, and mastering basic conversational strategies. Since the seminal work of Black and Stephens (1989), additional efforts have been sustained in establishing the antecedents of expatriate interaction adjustment. The meta-analysis of Han, Sears, Darr, and Wang (2022) indicated that beyond the big five threats, expatriate's level of cultural responsiveness, social and emotional intelligence exert a stronger influence on expatriate adjustment outcomes. Ali, Zee, and Sanders (2003) provided extended insight involving open-mindedness, emotional stability, family cohesion, family adaptability, and work satisfaction to be strongly associated with expatriate intercultural adjustment. Although findings from two different studies; Wang, and Takeuchi (2007) and Chew, Ghurburn, Terspstra-Tong, and Perera (2019) pointedly contradicts each other with respect to the role interaction adjustment in predicting expatriate performance. The former reported partial mediation effect while the later declared total absence of mediation effect.

2.2 Hostile Environment

A hostile environment has perspectives. First is the micro (domestic) environment. It involves acts such as sexual harassment, workplace bullying, unfriendly supervisors, and cantankerous colleagues. In contrast, the macro expatriate's hostile environments are often external to their place of work and include threats of kidnapping, terrorism, home invasion, street crime, culture shock, natural disasters, violence, and general tragedy among other threats and exposures (Posthuma, Ramsey, Flores, Maertz, & Ahmed, 2019; Nowlan 2014).

Bader, Schuster, and Dickmann (2019) define a hostile environment as a country, region, or specified location, which is subject to war, terrorism, insurgency, civil unrest, or extreme levels of crime, banditry, lawlessness, or public disorder. A hostile environment can be viewed from another perspective through three (3) different lenses. One relates to physical hostility, the second to organisational hostility and the third relates to psychological hostility.

According to Foulds (1964), a hostile environment is not peaceful, not orderly, and not able to exert control with precision due to the overflow of wrong and disastrous phenomenon or abnormal exposures and exposing employees to danger. If intractable elements exist in any society or organisation such that their presence portends threat and danger to the physical and psychological well-being of its inhabitants, such a society is a hostile environment. For example, as a result of living in an environment that is at risk of terrorism or other forms of hostility, Expatriates may be susceptible to random and recurring circumstances and more severely than in a safer environment. They are faced with more uncertainties from which they must navigate a potential danger to their living while striving for successful assignment completion. Hence, we find it obvious to portend that expatriates in hostile (particularly terrorism-endangered) countries encounter superior levels of wide-range anxiety owing to their location (Bader et al., 2015).

The United States Labour Law describes a hostile work environment as one where an individual's behaviour within a workplace creates an environment that is difficult or uncomfortable for another person to work in, due to illegal discrimination. From a technical perspective, a hostile work environment is a workplace in which the conduct of employees creates the tendency for a discriminatory environment that a reasonable person would find so abusive or intimidating to proceed with work (Wells & Kracher, 1993; Vartanian, 2012; Cavico et al., 2015). A hostile environment is also intentional discomfort, harassment, or outright intimidation perpetrated either by the organisation or by someone else to hurt the sensitivity of other employees.

The concept of a hostile environment, as it relates to expatriates' experiences, has been insightfully examined through the lens of Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, initially proposed by Gudykunst in 1998. AUM Theory, evolving from the foundations of Anxiety and Uncertainty Theory (AUT), posits that the key to effective intercultural adjustment lies in the management of anxiety and uncertainty. This framework suggests that individuals can achieve successful intercultural communication and adjustment by effectively managing the levels of anxiety and uncertainty they experience in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

Building on this conceptual foundation, the adjustment model proposed by Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou in 1991 further elaborates on the dynamics of intercultural adjustment. According to their model, high levels of uncertainty are inversely related to the level of adjustment, indicating that greater uncertainty typically leads to poorer adjustment outcomes. This model underscores the critical role of uncertainty in shaping the adjustment process for expatriates.

Empirical support for these theoretical propositions is found in the work of Stroh et al. (1994) which not only confirmed the assumptions made by Black et al. but also identified several key predictors of expatriates' general adjustment. Among these predictors are pre-departure attitudes toward an international assignment play a crucial role, along with job satisfaction, role novelty, and the perceived impact of an international assignment on one's career trajectory. Additionally, the assurance of

employment upon return, the cultural difficulty of the host country, and the adjustment of the expatriate's spouse were also significant factors influencing general adjustment.

These findings collectively highlight the complexity of the adjustment process for expatriates, indicating that it is influenced by a multifaceted set of factors that extend beyond the immediate challenges of managing anxiety and uncertainty. The insights derived from AUM Theory, coupled with the empirical findings of studies like that of Stroh et al., provide a overall understanding of the factors that contribute to successful adjustment in a hostile or unfamiliar environment. This body of research underscores the importance of preparatory measures, support systems, and personal attitudes in facilitating the adjustment process for individuals navigating intercultural transitions. Based on these conclusions, this study proposes that:

H1: Hostile environment would have a negative relationship with the adaptation of expatriates

Note that the measurement of a hostile environment would be based on the description of Foulds (1964); Vickers (2014); and Bader, Schuster, and Dickmann (2019).

3 Factors Influencing Expatriate Adaptation In A Hostile Environment

Factors influencing expatriate adaptation in a hostile environment can vary greatly depending on the specific circumstances and individuals involved. However, some common factors tend to play a significant role in shaping the experience of expatriates. One key factor is the level of support provided by the organization sending them abroad. This includes not only practical assistance such as housing and transportation but also emotional support and cultural training. When companies prioritize these aspects, it can significantly enhance an expatriate's ability to adapt to a hostile environment. Another important factor is the individual's characteristics and skills. Adaptability, resilience, open-mindedness, and effective communication skills are all qualities that can contribute to successful adaptation.

Besides, extended literature identified a myriad of factors that test the resilience of expatriates in an attempt to establish their base in a new location. They include Ali et al. (2003) who identified open-mindedness, emotional stability, family cohesion, family adaptability, organisational support, and work satisfaction; Čuhlová (2019) identified intercultural competence, language skills, intercultural training, previous cross-cultural exposure, motivation, and cultural distance; Bierwiazzonek and Waldzus (2016) recognized culture distance, social interaction, social resources, and family-related concerns.

3.1 Individual (Personal) Factors

In literature, it is widely described as a personality trait. According to Shaffer et al. (2006), personality dynamics are the most important antecedents of expatriate cross-

cultural adjustment. They defined it as the enduring patterns of how individuals behave, feel, and think. In other sources, personality factors that influence expatriate adaptation include self-efficacy, previous international experience, cultural sensitivity, and social network (Bhatti et al., 2013); multicultural personality, assertiveness, academic self-efficacy, and social support (Lee & Ciftci, 2014); cultural intelligence, spousal support, cultural empathy and social initiatives (Sambasivan et al., 2017). In a unique study of expatriate adaptation Black and Gregersen (1991) indicate that family well-being is an important prerequisite for successful overseas assignments. While Haslberger and Brewster (2008) acknowledged the findings they added that particularly so in high-risk countries.

In a critical review of personal characteristics that influence expatriate adaptation, Holopainen and Björkman (2005) found that communicational ability positively affects expatriate success, whereas stress tolerance and relational ability did not significantly relate to expatriate adaptation. Bader et al. (2015) investigated the situation of 121 expatriates deployed to a terrorism-endangered country and found that safety-related intra-family tension significantly impedes expatriates' performance. Although organizational support is presumed to diminish this influence. Based on these affirmations, this study proposes that:

H2: Individual/Personal characteristics (multicultural personality) would influence the adaptation of expatriates in a hostile environment

3.2 Organisational (Work-Related) Factors

What constitutes organisational support concerning expatriate adaptation differs from context to context (Kawai & Strange, 2014). It is widely believed by management scholars that organisational support exerts a positive considerable influence on employees' commitment which also propels performance. (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Aycan, 1997). In a mediation analysis of expatriate adaptation, Awais et al. (2003) reported that organisational factors including consultative working culture, team culture, training and motivation positively influence expatriate adaptation. Shaffer et al. (2006) and Wang and Takeuchi (2007) construe that organisational factors consist of job performance, goal orientation, self-efficacy, self-monitoring, task, people orientation, relationship ability, and international experience. In a study of 94 US firms, Martin and Bartol (2003) identified organisational factors influencing expatriate performance including clarifying performance expectations before the performance rating, objectivity of the appraisal system, and the incorporation of career choice positively influence perceptions of expatriate performance. Al-Mazrouei and Zacca (2021) in a survey of 175 operational expatriate employees in Dubai reported that organisational factors measured by procedural, distributive, informational and interpersonal justice significantly influence job performance. Whereas, Na-Nan (2018) sampled 210 expatriate teachers in Thailand and reported that organisational support indices positively correlate with expatriate adaptation. In determining key organisational practices that influence expatriate adaptation, Sousa et al. (2017) submitted that cross-cultural orientation and language training are the most common

organisational support practices that consistently show a positive influence on the performance and adaptation of expatriates. Given these corroborations. This study assumes that:

H3: Organisational support practices would moderate the anxieties arising from hostile environments and lead to effective expatriate adaptation.

3.3 Environmental (Non-Work Related) Factors

Of all the endogenous variables of interest that are of utmost concern to both management scholars and human resource management practitioners, performance is more central. Perhaps because it is the ultimate measure of goal attainment and upon which strategic decisions of the organisations are based (Löffler & Baier, 2013). However, in international management, the performance of expatriates is predicated on their adaptation. Consequently, adaptation is dependent on environmental factors (Farcas & Gonçalves, 2017; Song et al., 2019; Takeuchi et al., 2005). According to Takeuchi et al. (2005), during international engagements, expatriates may experience higher levels of psychological strain due to significant changes in the environment. Having landed in new work and new cultural environment, expatriates will need to learn the duties, conducts and norms of the host subsidiary and new work procedures (Black et al. (1999). Inversely, this circumstance will create supplementary pressure on the expatriate in both work and nonwork domains making him cope with multiple burdens (Adler & Gundersson, 1997). Hence, the degree of both work and general adjustments is envisaged to deteriorate as a result of the extra psychological work strain that expatriates encounter.

Feitosa et al. (2014) in synthesizing employee characteristics for determining adaptation, identified environmental factors (i.e. organizational, family, and interpersonal support) as crucial features that determine the adaptation process of expatriates. Similarly, Zimmermann et al. (2003) reported that perceived environmental conditions are tantamount to the adaptation of German expatriates in China. This relies on these submissions to propose that:

H4: Perceived environmental factors (culture) would influence the adaptation process of expatriate

4 Formation Of Research Framework And Theoretical Underpinning

Relying on the tenets of Black et al. model of adjustment and the anxiety uncertainty management theory in Gudykunst and Nishida (2001), this study proposes a research framework that would lead to investigating how individual (personal), organisational (work-related), and environmental (work-related) factors influence adaptation of expatriate adaptation in a hostile environment (Posthuma et al., 2019; Fee et al., 2019; Fang, 2020; Mosselson, 2021). Living and working as an expatriate in a hostile environment can present numerous challenges that require resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness. One of the primary hurdles faced by expatriates is the language barrier. Being unable to communicate effectively with local colleagues or

residents can hinder their ability to perform their job effectively and integrate into the community. However, this challenge is the central issue behind AUMT.

The theory first introduced by William B. Gudykunst and Mitchell R. Hammer in 1987 defines high levels of anxiety one may experience as they come in contact with those of another culture. It tends to predict the other person's attitudes, values, feelings, beliefs and behaviours. It proposes that expatriate adaptation outcomes are based on the two mediating dimensions of uncertainty reduction and anxiety reduction. Although the application of the theory has generated mixed results in the previous studies (Nadeem & Koschmann, 2021), it is expected to underpin the relationships between the exogenous and endogenous variables in this proposed framework.

Another challenge to expatriate adaptation is culture shock arising from cultural differences (Dousin & Sulong, 2021; Walan et al., 2020; Varalakshmi & Rani, 2017). Expatriates may find themselves grappling with customs, traditions, and social norms that are vastly different from what they are accustomed to. This can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and feelings of isolation or alienation (Reddy, 2013; Uddin et al., 2019; Faraj, 2022). The lack of familiar support systems is yet another obstacle faced by expatriates in hostile environments. Being far away from family, friends, and familiar surroundings can take a toll on their mental well-being. They may also struggle with homesickness or feelings of loneliness Farooqi, 2014; Berg - Weger & Morley, 2020). Moreover, safety concerns pose significant challenges for expatriates living in a hostile environment. They must navigate potential security risks such as political instability or physical crime while trying to carry out their professional responsibilities. Additionally, access to reliable healthcare services might be limited or subpar in some hostile environments (Murphy et al, 2020; Glennerster & Hodson, 2020).

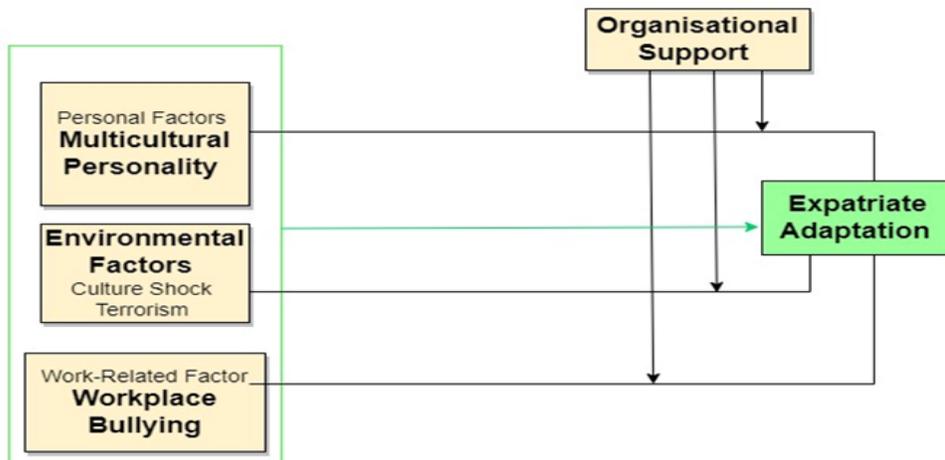


Figure 1: Proposed research framework

5 Conclusion

The challenges faced by expatriates in a hostile environment should not be underestimated. However, with proper preparation, support from employers, and personal resilience, Expatriates can thrive even in challenging circumstances. By addressing these obstacles head-on, Companies can contribute significantly towards ensuring successful adaptation for their employees abroad, despite these challenges, many expatriates successfully overcome them through various coping mechanisms, such as seeking support from fellow expats or joining local communities or clubs where they can build connections and gain insights into the culture. Successful international adaptation plays a vital role in the overall success of global businesses operating across diverse cultures. By understanding the factors influencing adaptation, companies can take proactive measures to ensure smooth transitions for their employees while also maximizing performance outcomes on international assignments.

Additionally, being open-minded and embracing diversity can greatly contribute to successful adaptation. Expatriates should be willing to learn from others' perspectives, accept different ways of doing things, and appreciate the richness that cultural diversity brings. Understanding local business practices is also vital for expatriate adaptation.

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