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Goal Orientation, Self-Efficacy, and Cross-Cultural Work Adjustment among Western Expatriates in Asia

Helen M. Parker (Helen.Parker@consciousmoney.com.au)

Centre for Applied Psychology
University of Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia

Anita S. Mak (Anita.Mak@canberra.edu.au)

Centre for Applied Psychology
University of Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia

Abstract

The present study extended Gong and Fan's (2006) research with sojourning students' adjustment, by investigating the effects of dispositional goal orientation (learning, performance-prove, and performance-avoid; VandeWalle, 1997), and self-efficacy in work and sociocultural competence, on two aspects of expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment (operationalised as work adjustment and job satisfaction). Participants were 125 Western expatriate workers based in nine different Asian countries (68% male and 32% female; ranging from 24 to 62 years of age), who completed a questionnaire on expatriate adjustment. Learning goal orientation (and not performance-prove or performance-avoid goal orientation) was positively associated with work self-efficacy, work adjustment, and job satisfaction. Regression analysis of work adjustment revealed that the best predictor was age followed by work self-efficacy. A second regression analysis showed a medium effect size for sociocultural efficacy as the final predictor of job satisfaction. Three-step mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) indicated that work self-efficacy mediated the relationship between learning goal orientation and work adjustment. Similarly, sociocultural efficacy mediated the relationship between learning goal orientation and expatriate job satisfaction.

Introduction

Expatriate assignment failure is a costly problem for multinational businesses in an increasingly global environment. In monetary terms, expatriate failure typically costs organisations from US\$250,000 to US\$1,000,000 for each repatriated employee (Varner & Palmer, 2002), making expatriate adjustment a vital issue for investigation.

Goal Orientation and Cross-cultural Work Adjustment

Recently, goal orientation and self-efficacy have emerged as antecedents of adjustment in workers and students (e.g., Gong & Fan, 2006; Porath & Bateman, 2006). Cross-cultural work adjustment is particularly relevant for gauging expatriate success, as it deals with the domain of most concern to their international employers, i.e., the expatriates' adjustment to their new jobs (Black & Gregersen, 1991). Job satisfaction is another facet of work-related adjustment. Lack of job satisfaction is a primary determinant of expatriate intention to quit assignment (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998).

Gong and Fan (2006) introduced goal orientation to the cross-cultural adjustment literature by a longitudinal study amongst sojourning students. They found a direct positive relationship between learning goal orientation, and academic and social adjustment. Other studies suggest that learning and performance-prove goal orientations lead to positive outcomes and performance-avoid goal orientation is maladaptive in sales settings (VandeWalle, 1997). Previous research also suggests that an employee's goal orientation positively predicts job satisfaction (Farr, Hoftmann, & Ringenbach, 1993).

Goal Orientation and Expatriate Self-efficacy

Goal orientation relates to self-efficacy in academic and sales environments (Gong & Fan, 2006). Individuals with a strong learning goal orientation tend to exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy in a performance context compared to individuals with a weak learning goal orientation (Breland & Donovan, 2005).

Performance-prove goal orientation may be positively associated with task self-efficacy and performance, in environments that are highly consistent in nature, such as multinational businesses (Kozlowski et al., 2001).

This suggests that a performance-prove goal orientation might be adaptive for expatriate employees.

Self-efficacy and Work Adjustment

Certain domains of self-efficacy, such as work self-efficacy, are posited to contribute to expatriate cross-cultural adjustment (Gong & Fan, 2006). It is conceivable that the sociocultural efficacy domain, relating to intercultural competence, plays a role in expatriate adjustment. Expatriates who interact successfully with host nationals and are open to host cultural norms, are likely to be better adjusted (Bell & Harrison, 1996). Expatriates with greater work self-efficacy and sociocultural efficacy, are likely to be better adjusted at work, and experience greater satisfaction. Gong and Fan's (2006) study also provides initial evidence that the relationship between dispositional goal orientation and cross-cultural adjustment is mediated by domain self-efficacy.

Research Aim and Hypotheses

This study was the first to introduce goal orientation to the field of expatriate adjustment. We examined dispositional goal orientation, work self-efficacy, and sociocultural efficacy as factors in expatriate cross-cultural work adjustment. Also for the first time, self-efficacy was examined as a possible mediator in the relationship between goal orientation and cross-cultural work adjustment. The first research hypothesis was that work adjustment and job satisfaction were positively associated with learning goal orientation, performance-prove goal orientation, work self-efficacy, and sociocultural self-efficacy, and negatively associated with performance-avoid goal orientation. The second hypothesis was that the relationship between goal orientation and work adjustment was mediated by work self-efficacy and sociocultural efficacy. The final hypothesis was that the relationship between goal orientation and job satisfaction was mediated by work self-efficacy and sociocultural efficacy.

Method

Participants

The 125 Western expatriate participants (68% male and 32% female), were aged from 24 years to 62 years with a mean age of 37 years ($SD = 8.49$). The participants resided in 9 Asian countries with 58% living in Hong Kong, 12% in Singapore and 10% in Seoul, Korea. Respondents had been living abroad for an average of 71 months ($SD = 12.02$).

Measures

An online, self-report questionnaire measured participants' biographical information, dispositional

goal orientation, work self-efficacy, sociocultural efficacy, work adjustment, and job satisfaction.

Dispositional goal orientation was assessed using the 13-point Work Domain Goal Orientation Instrument (VandeWalle, 1997). Work self-efficacy was assessed using the short form of the occupational efficacy scale, from Schyns and Collani (2002). Sociocultural efficacy was a new measure based on the EXCELL[®] (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) Programme's key sociocultural competencies (A. Mak, personal communication, 12 April 2006). Work adjustment was measured using a subscale from Black and Stephens (1989). Job satisfaction was assessed using Hackman & Oldham's (1975) scale. Satisfactory Alpha values of $>.80$ were attained for all measures.

Procedure

Questionnaire data were collected online via www.questionpro.com, from the 31st May to 31st August 2006, using snowball sampling among Western expatriates based in Asia. An email request was sent to expatriate employees of a financial services institution, the members of the Australian Association of Hong Kong, and the expatriate contacts of the researcher. In total, there were 277 page views of the questionnaire, with 130 completed, giving an overall response rate of 47%, compared to page views.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all measured variables. The distribution of the age variable was significantly positively skewed. The distributions for the learning goal orientation, performance-prove goal orientation, work self-efficacy, sociocultural efficacy, work adjustment, and job satisfaction variables were significantly negatively skewed. The lack of normality in all these measures was accounted for in subsequent analyses by using a more conservative significance level of $p < .01$ (Devore & Peck, 2001).

Intercorrelations

Older age of the participants was associated with greater work adjustment only ($r = .35$). Higher levels of learning goal orientation were weakly associated with greater work adjustment ($r = .28$) and moderately associated with greater job satisfaction ($r = .32$). Performance-prove and performance-avoid goal orientations were not related to either work adjustment or job satisfaction. Higher learning goal orientation was moderately associated with greater work self-efficacy ($r = .41$) and showed a small association with sociocultural efficacy ($r = .23, p = .011$). Performance-prove goal orientation was related to greater work self-efficacy only ($r = .29$).

Regression Analyses

sociocultural efficacy variables were added in Step 3.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Actual range	Possible range	Skewness ^a
Age	37.3	8.49	24-62	≥18	.90
Learning goal orientation	5.68	.79	1.6-7	1-7	-1.29
Performance-prove goal orientation	5.11	1.03	2.25-7	1-7	-.70
Performance-avoid goal orientation	2.96	1.13	1-6.25	1-7	.35
Work self-efficacy	4.92	.77	2.13-	1-6	-1.42
Sociocultural efficacy	4.46	1.09	1-6	1-6	-.86
Work adjustment	5.74	.94	2.67-7	1-7	-.76
Job satisfaction	5.16	1.06	2-7	1-7	-.79

Multiple regression analyses assessed the relative contributions of the hypothesised predictors of the two indicators of expatriates' work-related adjustment (work adjustment and job satisfaction). The demographic variables were entered first into each regression. The goal orientation variables were entered in the second step. The work self-efficacy and ^a*SE* skewness ≈ .22

Two extreme multivariate outliers were deleted, giving final *N* = 125. Table 2 summarises the two regression analyses showing *R*² and ΔR^2 .

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for continuous variables

In the analysis predicting work adjustment, age contributed to the variance in work adjustment in Step 1 of the model, $F(2, 115) = 8.30, p < .001$. In Step 2, learning goal orientation attained significance, indicating that greater learning goal orientation predicted greater work adjustment, $F(5, 112) = 7.66, p < .001$. In the final step, age (medium effect size) and work self-efficacy (small effect size) contributed to variance in work adjustment, but learning goal orientation became non-significant. The overall model was significant, $F(7, 110) = 8.59, p < .001$. By obtaining the square of the semi-partial correlations, 11.6% of the variance in work adjustment is uniquely explained by age and 4.4% explained by work self-efficacy.

For the analysis predicting job satisfaction (see Table 2), the first step model, controlling for gender and age, was not significant, $F(2, 117) = 1.88, p = .157$. In Step 2, learning goal orientation explained variance in job satisfaction, $F(5, 114) = 4.42, p = .001$, indicating that higher learning goal orientation predicted greater job satisfaction. In the final step, sociocultural efficacy contributed significantly to job satisfaction, whereas learning goal orientation did not retain its initial significant effect, $F(7, 112) = 5.69, p < .001$. By obtaining the square of the semi-partial correlations, 8.4% of the variance in job satisfaction was uniquely explained by sociocultural efficacy.

Mediating Relationships

The potential mediation of learning goal orientation and work adjustment by work self-efficacy, was tested by the three step mediated regression method (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Learning goal orientation was significantly correlated with both work self-efficacy (see Table 1) and work adjustment (see Step 2 in Table 2). Finally in Step 3 (Table 2) work adjustment was simultaneously regressed on learning goal orientation,

work self-efficacy and sociocultural efficacy. The standardised Beta value for work self-efficacy was statistically significant whereas the Beta value of learning goal orientation became non-significant. Therefore the result suggested work self-efficacy mediated the relationship between learning goal orientation and work adjustment.

The finding that sociocultural efficacy predicted job satisfaction, suggested a second mediation, i.e., sociocultural efficacy mediated the relationship between learning goal orientation and job satisfaction. From Table 1, learning goal orientation was weakly correlated with sociocultural efficacy ($r = .23, p = .011$) and significantly related to job satisfaction (see Step 2 in Table 2). Lastly, job satisfaction was simultaneously regressed on learning goal orientation, work self-efficacy, and sociocultural efficacy (see Step 3 in Table 2). The standardised Beta value for sociocultural efficacy was statistically significant whereas the Beta value of learning goal orientation became non-significant, suggesting that sociocultural efficacy

mediated the relationship between learning goal orientation and job satisfaction.

Discussion

The first hypothesis was partially supported, in that learning goal orientation was positively associated with work adjustment and job satisfaction. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Gong & Fan, 2006), greater learning goal orientation was related to greater work

self-efficacy, work adjustment, and job satisfaction. Performance-prove goal orientation was only weakly related to work self-efficacy, and had no significant relationship with either work adjustment or job satisfaction. Similarly, although posited to be maladaptive (Gong & Fan) performance-avoid goal orientation was not associated with either work adjustment or job satisfaction.

Table 2: Summary of regression analyses of work adjustment and job satisfaction.

Variable	Cross-cultural work adjustment measure			
	Work adjustment		Job satisfaction	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Step 1				
Gender	.11	.06	-.24	-.11
Age	.04	.36**	.02	.13
	$R^2 = .13; \Delta R^2 = .13^{**}$		$R^2 = .03; \Delta R^2 = .03$	
Step 2				
Gender	.07	.04	-.25	-.11
Age	.05	.42**	.02	.19
Learning goal orientation	.34	.29*	.37	.28*
Performance-prove goal orientation	.13	.14	.11	.11
Performance-avoid goal orientation	.01	.01	-.09	-.10
	$R^2 = .26; \Delta R^2 = .13^{**}$		$R^2 = .16; \Delta R^2 = .13^*$	
Step 3				
Gender	.14	.07	-.17	-.08
Age	.04	.36**	.02	.14
Learning goal orientation	.18	.15	.21	.17
Performance-prove goal orientation	.10	.11	.15	.15
Performance-avoid goal orientation	.02	.02	-.11	-.12
Work self-efficacy	.30	.25*	.07	.05
Sociocultural efficacy	.16	.19	.30	.32*
	$R^2 = .35; \Delta R^2 = .10^{**}$		$R^2 = .26; \Delta R^2 = .10^*$	

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

Higher levels of work self-efficacy were associated with greater work adjustment and job satisfaction. Higher sociocultural efficacy was also associated with greater work adjustment, and was found to be the strongest predictor of job satisfaction. These results were consistent with (and exceeded) prior meta-analytic

studies (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Hechanova et al., 2003), which had shown self-efficacy to be associated with interaction and work adjustment. In addition, older age was found to be the strongest predictor of work adjustment. Overall, this finding is inconsistent with existing research; Hechanova et al.'s 2003 meta-review of 600 expatriates found no

significant correlation between age and work adjustment.

The second hypothesis was supported for the relationship between learning goal orientation and work adjustment. Work self-efficacy was shown to mediate this relationship, consistent with Gong and Fan's (2006) study of student sojourners.

Lastly, we found only partial support for the relationship between dispositional goal orientation and job satisfaction being mediated by work self-efficacy and sociocultural efficacy. The relationship between learning goal orientation and job satisfaction only was found to be mediated by sociocultural efficacy. This suggests sociocultural efficacy is important in the expatriate work context, and contributes to job satisfaction in ways not observed for student sojourners or domestic workers (Gong & Fan, 2006).

An unexpected finding was the non-significant relationships between the two performance goal orientations and work adjustment. A larger, more homogeneous sample may have shown a significant relationship. Performance-prove goal orientation may yet prove adaptive in high-performance expatriate work environments.

The findings build on previous research attesting to the adaptive nature of learning goal orientation (Porath & Bateman, 2006), and reveals its positive contribution to adjustment outcomes in a new context: expatriate work-related adjustment. It is suggested that selecting individuals with a learning goal orientation for expatriate postings may be a useful strategy to ensure successful work adjustment.

We again showed the importance of self-efficacy for expatriate adjustment and specifically the role played by domain self-efficacy, in work and sociocultural competence. In addition, the study raises the possibility of sociocultural efficacy having a unique impact on expatriate job satisfaction. Few studies have examined the dynamics of the expatriate-host national relationship and further research in this area is warranted.

The study also suggests that older expatriates are better adjusted at work but this finding is incongruent with Hechanova et al.'s (2003) review. Therefore, it is premature to suggest that companies should employ younger expatriates. This finding may be linked to other factors not explored in this study, such as length of time on assignment.

There is no doubt that expatriates will continue to play a key role in ensuring the success of multinational companies. Hence, continued research into the "why, what, when, and how" of expatriate adjustment is essential, not only for the multinational employers, but

to improve the assignment experience for the expatriates and their families.

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