"I Am Not Stupid, I Just Don't…"-
A Qualitative Study of Expatriates' Cross-Cultural Experiences

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored the unique experiences of expatriates in adjusting to cross-cultural situations and confronting challenges in global journeys. Personal narratives written by previous or current expatriates were collected as qualitative data and content analysis was conducted. The results clarified three themes contributing to the complex process of cross-cultural adaptation.

Increased globalization in almost every arena has led to more frequent and deeper interactions among people from different cultural backgrounds. However, unsuccessful cross-cultural interactions cause a lot of problems. For example, under performance on global assignments is costly for both multi-national organizations and employees. Diplomatic blunders often fail international development projects. Poor adjustments cost individuals psychological well-being.

The current study aimed to examine the unique experiences of expatriates in such cross-cultural journeys as well as their perceptions and reactions when facing potential challenges. An expatriate is an individual who travels voluntarily to a foreign country usually for specific objectives, such as educational, professional, or personal opportunities, with intention of returning to his/her home country (Church, 1982; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Expatriates usually include scholars, students, corporation managers, ministers, and relief workers. Expatriates stand in the front line of cross-cultural encounters because they have face-to-face interactions with members of a new culture in daily situations. Their experiences provide valuable information about cross-cultural communication process, building a foundation for those who plan to live overseas in the future.

Conceptual Framework

Much literature related to the cross-cultural experiences of individuals has examined expatriates' adjustment to new sociocultural environments. Two relevant theories, U-Curve theory (Lysgarrd, 1955) and bicultural model of acculturation (Berry, 1986, 1997) served as the conceptual frameworks for the current study. Individuals' adaptive experience in a new cultural environment is an acculturation process involving continuous changes in attitudes, emotions, and conducts (Marin, 1992). Lysgaard (1955) described such overall change patterns as a U-Curve. Individuals start out with excitement and high functioning, followed immediately by confusion and decreased competency, and finally regain optimism and satisfaction by acquiring more knowledge of the new culture.

Researchers especially point out that when individuals realize the familiar cues are removed in a new cultural situation, they experience sudden increased stress responses, known as cultural shock (Oberg, 1960). Culture shock is mostly considered a natural progression followed by adjustment (Kim, 2001; Norell, 2000), which involves learning, reflecting, and developing familiarity, comfort, proficiency in regard to expected behaviors, assumptions, and values inherent in the new culture. According to Filmeridis (2003), several researchers have classified

two common types of adjustment: psychological and sociocultural. Psychological adjustment focuses on an individual's subjective attitudes and emotional satisfaction in a new cultural environment; whereas sociocultural adjustment focuses on an individual's behavior and ability to interact with members of the host culture. These two parallel dimensions of adjustments are related, although in varying magnitude according to different studies (see Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Therefore both measures should be considered to gain comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural adjustment (Norell, 2000).

Bicultural model of acculturation (Berry, 1986, 1997) concerns individuals' cultural identification during the cross-cultural experiences. Contrast with mono-cultural model, which suggests that individuals possess one cultural identity at the cost of the other, bicultural model argues that embracing a second culture does not necessarily involve abandoning the original culture (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). Instead, identification with one culture is independent of identification with another culture (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). In other words, bicultural individuals are able to develop an identification to fit in with the norms and values of the host culture, while maintaining the sense of identity with their original cultural contexts. By doing so, bicultural individuals internalize and maintain two cultures, manage the accessibility to both of them (Norell, 2000), and negotiate both of them comfortably without giving up their identification with either culture (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

The key to managing and negotiating between two cultural identifications is recognizing the context and shifting identification according to the context (Bennett, 1993). Bicultural individuals make deliberate choices of actions in specific situations rather than following the prevailing norms of the co-national culture (Kim, 2001). As a consequence, they maintain flexibility to go back and forth between the two and tend to be successful in resolving and reconciling contradictions (Bennett, 1993; Filmeridis, 2003; Kim, 2001).

Methodology

Personal journals were collected as data for this study, which allowed individuals to talk to a stranger (i.e., the researcher) about key experiences and events important for the research (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Denzin, 1989). The aim was to "obtain detailed evidence as to how social situations appear to [social] actors in them and what meanings various factors have for participants" (Angell, as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 134). All personal journals were acquired from a volunteer-reviewed online magazine named *Tales From a Small Planet* (n.d.). Online documents were used due to their easy access and convenience (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). One journal from each participant was used and analyzed as data. The length of the journal ranged from 1100 to 2200 words. Four participants were expatriates who either were living abroad or used to live abroad but had returned to their home countries. The participants were females, two single and two married. Christina grew up in the suburban U.S. Midwest and had spent 6 of the last 10 years in Casablanca, Morocco, with her Moroccan husband. Patricia was a freelance writer from Perth, Western Australia, who moved to Singapore in her early twenties with her husband – a Singaporean. Jennifer was a freelance writer from Rochester, New York. She worked as a corporate journalist in Denmark for 2 years. Nichole was living in a tiny German Dorf and working as an English instructor. She lived in San Francisco and Manhattan before. She was employed by local and national television, independent film companies, and assorted corporate environments.

Coding procedure followed three steps of operations, suggested by Seidel and Kelle (1995): (a) noticing relevant phenomena, (b) collecting examples of those phenomena, and (c) analyzing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures.

The following measures were taken to increase the trustworthiness. Peer review was conducted, with one student reviewer and one faculty reviewer. The author continuously wrote a researcher journal in the audit trail to keep track of the development of her own thoughts and feelings evoked during the process. Besides, rich descriptions and details were included in the final paper, which also aimed to "adequately and convincingly support the findings of the study" and to show that "the author's conclusion 'makes sense'" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 5).

Results

Three common themes emerged from content analysis: (a) facing challenges, (b) struggling, and (c) adjustment. These three themes represented four participants' perceptions, feelings, and reactions, through which they ascribed meaning to their cross-cultural experiences.

Theme 1: Facing Challenges

This process usually occurred during participants' initial contact with a new environment when they experienced difficulties in the new life. Christina encountered serious problems in such basic needs as dietary choices. She and her Moroccan relatives and friends had very different preferences on food and the way of eating, which caused direct confrontations several times. Unlike the direct confrontations Christina faced, Patricia had another kind of challenge in her transition of career and life situations in Singapore. When starting to work at home, she was left alone because, as she said, "no colleagues to greet in the morning, no department meetings, no one popping up in front of my desk to suggest a coffee break. There's just me, my computer and a quiet flat. " Besides, Jennifer and Nichole both suffered from language barriers. Jennifer would talk with friends or laugh at a joke in Danish one minute, and the next minute, all of a sudden she could not understand anything anyone was saying, which continuously brought Jennifer real difficulties. Nichole was so lost in the face of German language that she felt like living in early childhood again when words and sounds made no sense to her.

Theme 2: Struggling

This process involved participants' different psychological and behavioral reactions to the difficulties they faced. Participants expressed various types of emotions and behaved in line with their emotions. Moroccan relatives teased Christina about her American way of eating and her gaining too much weight, which made her feel insulted immediately even though she did not say it loud: "Did they not know that although we [Americans] are a direct and honest bunch, we bite our tongues when it comes to weight and other physical flaws?" Patricia, on the other hand, was discouraged by the lack of social interaction. Local friends and former colleagues were so busy that they rarely asked her out. She felt like her husband was the only person she knew in Singapore. Facing the language barriers, Jennifer justified not learning Danish by both the difficulty of the language and few chances of using it. Meanwhile, Nichole had to defend herself loudly to keep the language incompetence from compromising her self-esteem: "'You're not stupid; you just don't speak German,' I had to sternly remind myself."

Theme 3: Adjustment

This was a process in which participants regained a sense of control by trying out all possible approaches to go through difficulties. In addition, they reflected on the environment, the success, failures, and changes within them. Christina recognized the differences between Moroccan and American norms of eating and communicating over time. She started to feel comfortable to apply Moroccan behavior patterns when necessary. Similarly, Patricia stopped worrying and feeling bad and reached out to meet a new social group called Young Childless Female Expatriates, which consisted expatriates from all over the world in Singapore. She was filled with joy by such social interaction: "There's a huge smile plastered on my face during the

taxi ride back home." Both Jennifer and Nichole made steady improvement on language learning. Yet what's more important was, when looking back, both of them made more out of this process. Jennifer concluded that "learning a second language turned out to be one of those many things about living abroad that was as mind-expanding as it was difficult. In the end there's great joy in knowing the meaning of *tosproget Amerikaner* – bilingual American." Nichole finally regained her confidence by overcoming language difficulties: "Remember, I'm not a bumbling fool. I just don't speak German – well, not just yet."

Discussion

The three themes that emerged help to understand the prevalent issues faced by expatriates in their cross-cultural experiences. In this section, the findings from the present study and previous research are discussed.

Theme 1: Facing Challenges

Accounts from all participants showed that in their initial contact with a new culture, they experienced some of the most common types of difficulties. More importantly, they were somehow shocked or at least surprised by such encounters because of the lack of knowledge of and few prior experiences with a new cultural context (Oberg, 1960). Such cultural contradictions caused expatriates' intense discomfort during intercultural contacts (Lysgaard, as cited in Filmeridis, 2003). Specifically, inconsistence of the culinary and verbal customs between the host culture and original culture caused increased tension on both sides and usually led to expatriates' or immigrants' discomfort (Regis, 1989). Relocation meant separating from extended family members and previous friends and usually caused a lack of social support (Norell, 2000; Sonderegger & Barrett, 2004). Language acquisition was one of the most common challenges facing by expatriates and immigrants because it impeded their functioning at work and daily life (Yeh et al., 2003).

Theme 2: Struggling

At a certain time during their cross-cultural experiences, all participants struggled with both their social performances and personal stress (Lysgaard, as cited in Filmeridis, 2003). The current report supported that contradictions of dietary and verbal customs caused expatriates' discomfort (Regis, 1989). Yet, the finding from the current study showed that the consequences could be more severe for some expatriates (i.e., the contradiction could cause the sense of insult and lead to arguments or gaffes in social interactions with the members of the host culture). The lack of social support brought powerlessness as well as withdrawal, which is in line with Norell's (2000) work. Similarly, language and communication barriers are believed to impose emotional burdens and psychological distresses on individuals (Yeh et al., 2003), which was supported by the present study. However, the current study also suggests a direct and close connection between individuals' language ability and self-esteem (or the lack of both).

Theme 3: Adjustment

The present study demonstrates that psychological and sociocultural adjustments are related. Reaching out for social interactions gave individuals immediate relief, which supports that sharing difficulties and feelings with those who have similar cross-cultural adjustment experiences makes individuals more connected with each other (Yeh et al., 2003). Language improvement helped individuals function well or at least adequately. Thus, they felt more comfortable and became more socially active than before. This is consistent with Rumbaut's (1995) finding that English-language competence is associated with lower rates of depression in Latino students.

As for an individual's identification with the host and the home culture, the current study generally supports bicultural model of acculturation (Berry, 1986, 1997). All participants spent efforts and certain amounts of time to adapt to a new culture and then establish their host cultural identity. Meanwhile, through this process, their identity with original culture did not diminish at all. Instead, exposure to a new culture is believed to increase the awareness of self, and psychological growth occurred through a series of crises and resolutions, which thus may reaffirm their original identity (Adler, 1975). In another words, an individual's identification with his or her culture of origin remains the same or does not diminish as one's acculturation into a new host culture (Kim, 2001).

Conclusion

The current study has illustrated different dynamics in expatriates' lives. However, the influence of a new culture was evident in the experiences shared by the participants. A few lessons referring to expatriates' cross-cultural experiences and the future research directions on such issues should be mentioned. First, this study indicates that adapting in a new culture could be a very complex process. Although all participants in the current study finally regained their competency in a culture, some of their accounts reminded that this may not always be the case. During the struggling period, several participants suffered from severe psychological problems. This was similar to the prior findings that relocating to a new country and learning social norms of a new culture are often linked with psychological distress and depression (Inman, Ladany, Constantine, & Morano, 2001; Sondergger & Barrett, 2004). Unfortunately, often times, individuals rarely reach out actively to seek assistance due to various reasons. The future research should focus on what factors may trigger individuals' actions (or inactions) of seeking help without systematic support. In order to do so, more in-depth interviews, case studies, and observations are needed because such approaches could facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the adaptation process (Filmeridis, 2003).

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