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The intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses and children

Ali, Anees Janee

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Chapter 2

The Importance of Expatriate Spouses' and Children's Intercultural Adaptation to the Success of the International Business Assignment

- 2.1 Theories of expatriate adjustment**
- 2.2 Major findings in the expatriate field that are related to expatriate spouses and children**
 - 2.2.1 Relation between family adaptation and expatriate's success/failure**
 - 2.2.2 Relation between family adaptation and expatriate adaptation**
- 2.3 Concluding remarks**

The major part of this chapter addresses studies that demonstrate the importance of effective adjustment of expatriate spouses and children to the success of international business assignments. The chapter starts with a discussion of the major theories on expatriate adjustment that include the adaptation of expatriate family members. We end this chapter by discussing the major findings of studies in the expatriate field that are related to expatriate spouses and children.

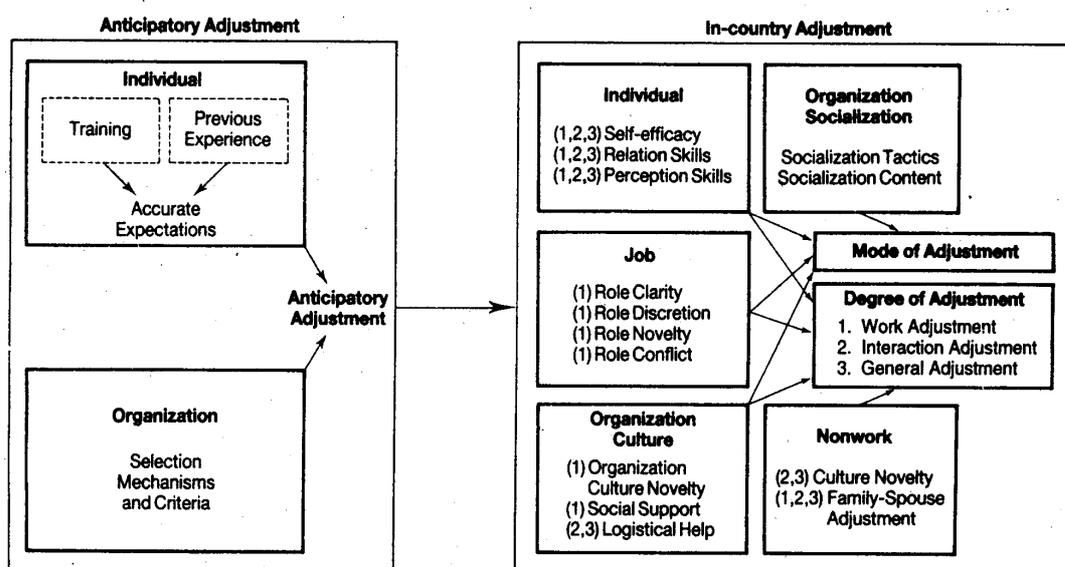
2.1 Theories of Expatriate Adjustment

In this section, we will address theories of expatriate adjustment that take into consideration the importance of family members' adaptation to expatriates' general and working adaptation. We will focus on two major theories, namely:

- The Framework of International Adjustment by Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991)
- The Model of Intercultural Adjustment by Parker and McEvoy (1993)

Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) proposed a model of expatriate adjustment (see Figure 2.1). The proposed model suggests a number of factors that affect adjustment. Job-related and organizational factors form the core of this theory. Determinants were divided into factors related to “anticipatory adjustment” that is adjustment in the period before departure and factors related to “in-country adjustment”, that is the adjustment to the host country. In the proposed model the authors categorized the adjustment of the spouse and family under non-work adjustment. They suggested that family-spouse adjustment influences the expatriate's work, interaction, and general adjustment. However, they do not specify how the expatriate's family members affect these outcomes measures. Moreover, the model developed by Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991) was not tested empirically.

Figure 2.1
Framework of International Adjustment

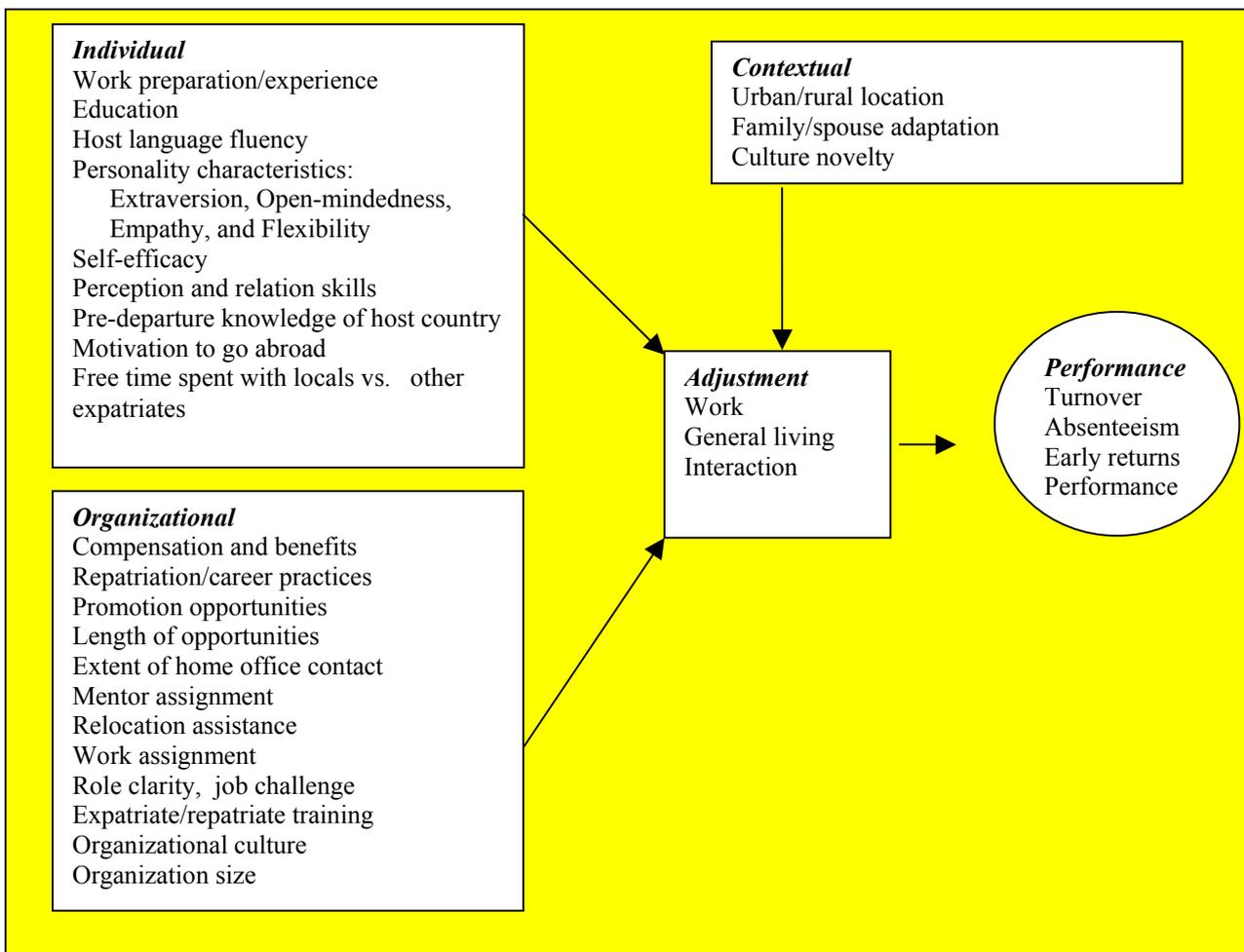


Source: Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate the numbered facet(s) of adjustment to which the specific variable is expected to relate.

Parker and McEvoy (1993) further developed the model that was forwarded by Black et al. (1991). In their model (see Figure 2.2), they distinguished between individual, organizational and contextual antecedents that may influence the expatriate's work, general living, and interactions in the host country. In their model, "family/spouse adaptation" is grouped under contextual antecedents. They regarded this variable beyond direct organizational control. Again, Parker and McEvoy (1993) did not carry out any empirical research on the issue of family/spouse adaptation.

Figure 2.2
Model of Intercultural Adjustment



Source: Parker and McEvoy (1993), Model of Intercultural Adjustment

Even though the two models of intercultural adjustment above are targeted to expatriates' intercultural adjustment, they have generated our interests in selecting a few of the variables to be examined as determinants of

intercultural adaptation among expatriate spouses and children. For examples, host language fluency, personality characteristics, culture novelty, and intercultural interaction. In addition, other variables related to intercultural adaptation that have not yet been investigated among expatriate spouses and children will be analyzed (see Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 8).

2.2 Major findings of research in the expatriate field that are related to expatriate spouses and children

The literature under review revealed that there is a lacuna in the literature on intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses and children. Only a small amount of studies were found that explicitly address this issue and the discussion below clarifies the lack of empirical findings in the expatriate spouses' and children's field. From these studies, we divided the findings into two categories that show the relation between:

- i. Family adaptation and expatriate's success/failure
- ii. Family adaptation and expatriate's adaptation

An overview of these studies is presented in Appendix A.1 and the method of literature review is presented in appendix A.2.

2.2.1 The relation between family adaptation and expatriate's success/failure

Let us take a look at studies in the first category that focus on the relationship between the spouses' and children's adaptation and the success or failure of expatriates in carrying out their international assignments. Most studies in this area did not involve the expatriate spouses and children actively and they used expatriates as the informants instead. Empirical studies by Tung (1984) and Harvey (1985) showed that the spouse's adjustment problems and family-related problems were among the major causes of international business assignment failures. Fukuda and Chu (1994) attempted to identify reasons for expatriate failures by examining the selection criteria and training programs commonly adopted by Japanese firms. They examined the impact of relocation of expatriate family members in relation to the failure of expatriate assignments. Fukuda and Chu (1994) also identified family situation as a factor that actively contributed to the expatriate's failure. Their study also revealed that the Japanese MNCs largely neglected the family situation. The inability of expatriate family members to adjust to the foreign environment placed enormous pressure upon the Japanese expatriates. Personal interviews with selected

Japanese executives indicated that children's education and spouses' social life were the two main problems areas. There were cases where spouses and children had to return to Japan for the children's education. The subsequent physical separation suffered by all members of the family in turn created a great deal of stress, often leading families to break up. The conclusion of Fukuda and Chu's (1994) study paralleled the study by Black and Stephen (1989) who also found that appropriate family adjustment is associated with success of international business assignments. The latter performed a cross-sectional study to examine the adaptation of the American expatriates in Pacific Rim areas.

In a more recent study among American expatriates, Caligiuri (1996) found that family adjustment was a significant predictor of the desire to terminate the international business assignment. Among a sample of 115 American expatriates, Birdseye and Hill (1995) studied factors that contributed to expatriates' dissatisfaction and intent to quit the job, organization and foreign location. Their empirical study showed that, among other factors (e.g., demographics, quality of life, job satisfaction, job autonomy), family factors significantly influenced expatriates' turnover intentions. The variables studied under the family factor were change in spouse's attitude, spouse's adjustment, spouse's satisfaction and number of children. The first three variables were found to be highly associated with the expatriates' turnover intentions. Arthur and Winston (1995) surveyed a sample of 338 expatriates, representing 56 nationalities, and asked them to rate the importance of a large number of factors to the success of an international assignment. Family factors ranked among the most important factors. Examples of family factors were the adaptability of the spouse and family, the spouse's positive opinion, the willingness of the spouse to live abroad, and a stable marriage.

In their empirical studies, Black and Stephen (1989) and Shaffer (1996) involved expatriate spouses and children actively as the informants and found that the adjustment of expatriate spouses is highly correlated to the adjustment of expatriates. Black and Stephen's (1989) study also revealed that the adjustment of expatriate spouses and expatriates was positively related to the expatriates' intention to finish the overseas assignment and not to return prematurely. In a similar vein, Shaffer (1996) found that expatriate spouses' general adjustment moderated the relationship between the expatriates' withdrawal cognition and moral commitment. In a later study by Shaffer and Harrison (1998), they found that a high level of expatriate spouses' adjustment was related to expatriates' moral commitment to complete the international business assignment and at the same time reduced expatriates' withdrawal cognition from completing the assignments.

Forster (1997) carried out an extensive study on expatriate failures. In his longitudinal study, expatriate spouses (all of the respondents were from the United Kingdom) filled in questionnaires during three time periods; *Time 1* (4-6 weeks prior to the move), *Time 2* (4 months after the move) and *Time 3* (8 months after the move). He found that expatriate spouses who reported more difficulties adapting to the host country were also likely to have partners (i.e., the expatriates) with higher stress levels and greater dissatisfaction with their job. At *Time 2*, the number of expatriate spouses that were working was smaller than before departure. Surprisingly, the working expatriate spouses were much less likely to rate the relocation positively than the expatriates. At *Time 3*, expatriate spouses showed higher stress levels than the expatriates themselves. They were more concerned than the expatriates about the effect of the move on their home life and the loss of contact with family and friends.

2.2.2 The relation between family adaptation and expatriate adaptation

The studies that fall into the second category are studies that focus on the relation between family members' adaptation and expatriates' adaptation. Tung (1998) showed that expatriates who were living with someone or who had children often resorted to the comforts of home to cope with the stress and strains of working abroad. Those with children were more prone to favor the separation mode as the acculturation strategy (i.e. keeping away from the local people while socializing with the other expatriates — see also chapter 3.1.2) and they wished to spend more time at home. Tung's (1998) study showed that having a family in the host country had a stabilizing effect on the international assignment. In his empirical study Usunier (1998) demonstrated that family satisfaction has a positive influence on the expatriate's personal satisfaction. He also found that the level of family's satisfaction with the experience of living in a host country has a positive influence on the anticipated duration of stay.

2.3 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we have revealed the importance of intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses and children to expatriates' success and adaptation while carrying out their assignments in the host country. Consequently, it is justified to conclude that the intercultural adaptation among expatriate spouses and children should not be neglected in research on determinants of success of international business assignments. Chapter 3 will discuss theories on intercultural adaptation among expatriate spouses and children.