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The intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses and children

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Summary

The intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses and children is quite a new topic. There is little research has been carried out in this field and one of the objective of the present thesis is to fill in the gap in the literature. We have developed an intercultural adaptation model for both expatriate spouses and children in order to study the determinants that contribute to their intercultural adaptation. Among the studied determinants are personality, family, expatriates' work characteristics, work-home interference, home-work interference, and attachment styles.

The first part of the study focused on expatriate spouses' intercultural adaptation. Personality characteristics, family characteristics, and expatriates' work characteristics were examined as the determinants of the intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses. In this study, indicators of expatriate spouses' intercultural adaptation were Psychological Well-being, Intercultural Interaction/Interaction with Locals, and Socio-cultural Adjustment. Among a sample of 248 expatriate spouses it was first shown that in particular the personal characteristics of Open-mindedness and Emotional Stability were associated with expatriate spouses' adaptation. In addition, Family Cohesion and Family Adaptability were also found to have an impact on expatriate spouses' adaptation. Of the variables related to expatriates' work, both Support from Company and Expatriates' Work Satisfaction were significantly related to spouses' intercultural adaptation. Finally, the influence of a number of demographic variables was examined. Particularly the duration of expatriation, command of the local language, having visited the country prior to relocation, and economic situation seemed to contribute to expatriate spouses' adaptation.

A follow-up study of about one year interval was performed among a sample of 50 expatriate spouses. This study showed that expatriate spouse' personality characteristics dominated as the determinants of their intercultural adaptation in a host country. Open-mindedness was significantly related to expatriate spouses' interaction with the local people whereas Open-mindedness, Social Initiative, and Flexibility were significantly related to expatriate spouses' Socio-cultural Adjustment in a host country. Family characteristics and expatriates' work characteristics did not show any effects on the three indicators of intercultural adaptation. The results indicated that personality characteristics, particularly Open-mindedness, Social Initiative, and Flexibility sustained as "long-term" determinants of successful adaptation to a host country.

Next, we were interested in the influence of the expatriate spouses' original culture on their adaptation. First, we investigated the effect of cultural background in terms of Hofstede's four cultural dimensions on intercultural adaptation of expatriate spouses who have expatriated in the Netherlands. In general, we expected that expatriate spouses from cultures similar to the Netherlands adapt more easily to the Netherlands than expatriate spouses from different cultures. This was only weakly supported for expatriate spouses from Individualism and Uncertainty Avoidance cultures. As predicted the determinants of intercultural adaptation differed across cultures. Example, Flexibility was found to be a more important determinant of intercultural adaptation among expatriate spouses from Collectivistic cultures as compared to Individualistic cultures and was also more important to adaptation of expatriate spouses from strong as compared to weak Uncertainty Avoidance cultures. We also found that family characteristics were more important among expatriate spouses from Collectivistic cultures and personality as well as expatriates' work characteristics were more important among expatriate spouses from Individualistic cultures. Results from this study, however, should be considered cautiously because of the imbalance in the number of respondents scoring high and low on each of Hofstede's cultural dimension.

Furthermore, we examined the influence of both expatriates' and their spouses' work-home interference (WHI) and home-work interference (HWI) on spouses' intercultural adaptation. Due to increased demands at work expatriates may have less energy to help their spouses with tasks at home. Moreover, high demands in their own work situation may interfere with tasks at home and vice-versa. Take for example an expatriate who has to take his/her children home from school while at the same time an important meeting has been scheduled. Previous studies have proven that resources and demands at home and at work situations affect work-home interference. Ninety-four expatriates and their spouses participated in the study. First, expatriate spouses' adaptation was found to be affected by resources and demands they experienced at home, particularly among the non-working spouses. Second, both positive and negative interference between home and work roles affected working spouses' level of adaptation. Third, the negative spill over effects of roles at home on the work of their partners (i.e., the expatriates) affected expatriate spouses' in a negative manner. Furthermore, negative spill over effects reported by expatriates were significantly negative related to their spouses' intercultural adaptation. Interestingly, expatriates' home demands in the presence of negative home work interference had a negative effect on spouses' adaptation.

An expatriate spouse once told the author,
“It is a sin to have a child while expatriating.”

How bad it is to bring a child or children along while expatriating? In this study, the influence of a number of determinants of expatriate children's intercultural adaptation was examined. One hundred and four children participated in the present study. With respect to the family characteristics, Family Cohesion, Family Adaptation, and Family Communication appeared to be important predictors of expatriate children's intercultural adaptation. Of the five personality characteristics, Social Initiative and Emotional Stability indicated significant effects on children's general and psychological health as well as socio-cultural adjustment and satisfaction with the living conditions. In addition, Open-mindedness showed a significant relationship with expatriate children's general and psychological health. Among the determinants, the attachment styles of expatriate children dominated as the strongest predictor of expatriate children's intercultural adaptation. Both an Ambivalent Attachment Style, and a Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment Style displayed negative significant effects on expatriate children's general and psychological health, and also on their socio-cultural adjustment/satisfaction with the living conditions. As expected, the Secure Attachment Style of expatriate children positively affects both indicators of intercultural adaptation. In terms of the parents' work characteristics, only Expatriates' Work Satisfaction was found significantly related to both indicators of expatriate children's intercultural adaptation. Finally, demographic data such as participation in decision to relocate and whether expatriate children felt that their parents really considered their opinions regarding the relocation were both positively related to expatriate children's general and psychological health. Command of the local language and having siblings in the host country contributed to their socio-cultural adjustment/satisfaction with the living conditions.

