Nina Cole
Ryerson University

WHY DO FEMALE EXPATRIATES 'FIT IN' BETTER THAN MALES?

Female expatriates have been found to have better work adjustment and interaction adjustment than male expatriates, despite the additional challenges faced by women on foreign assignments. This paper considers three possible explanations for this finding: higher self-transcendence, experience in domestic contexts; and female work styles. Research propositions are proposed for future empirical testing.

The Growing Need for Expatriate Talent

The demand for expatriate employees is growing rapidly as it becomes increasingly necessary for firms to expand globally in order to create and maintain a competitive advantage in their industry. In today's global economy it is critical to attract, develop and retain employees with global knowledge and experience. These employees represent the human capital that is a key resource for creating and sustaining a company's worldwide competitive advantage.

Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find employees who will accept international assignments. Concerns about safety and security have increased in the post-9/11 world. Employees are concerned with the stress of cross-cultural relocation on their family and on the education and social development of their children. And the increasing prevalence of dual-career families presents unique challenges for many employees considering global postings. Skills developed during international assignments are often underutilized upon repatriation, and in some cases career development is hindered rather than enhanced by the time spent on global assignment (Suutari & Brewster, 2003).

Thus it is becoming increasingly important to seek out talented employees with interest in and potential for foreign assignments. There is an increasing business necessity for expanding the pool of candidates being considered for international assignments, rather than the narrow tradition of defining this group as almost exclusively male (Taylor, Napier & Mayrhofer, 2002).

Female Expatriates

Traditionally, expatriate employees have been overwhelmingly male (Adler, 1984). Females have been underrepresented in disproportion to the size of the qualified female labour pool (Caligiuri, Joshi & Lazarova, 1999). Adler (1984) has shown that three traditional reasons for not sending women on foreign assignments – women do not want to be international managers; companies refuse to send women overseas; foreigners' prejudice against women renders them ineffective, even when interested and sent - are 'myths' that do not represent reality.

Nevertheless, women are still an underutilized resource in international staffing, and represent an untapped source of human capital for expatriate assignments (Selmer & Leung, 2003). Although estimates of the percentage of expatriates that are female has increased over the last twenty years from 2-3 percent to 12-15 percent, this is still far less than the available pool of female managers which is close to 50 percent in North America (Calgiuri & Tung, 1999; Selmer & Leung, 2003).

Female expatriates may be placed in situations where cultural differences in attitudes to women in business could have a direct impact on their performance on the job, and thus the ability to be open to differences in values, norms and behaviours may be all the more important. Research has indicated that expatriates who are flexible in their attitudes towards cultural differences and are willing to learn from different cultural contexts are better adjusted to overseas assignments (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).

Female expatriates have been found to be equally successful to male expatriates in the performance of their international assignments (Napier & Taylor, 2002; Caligiuri & Tung, 1999). This result has been considered to be somewhat surprising, given that women are exposed to additional work and non-work challenges on expatriate assignments, such as working with host nationals whose cultural values and beliefs make it difficult for them to accept women as coworkers or managers; and child care and dual-career conflicts, which may lead to more difficulty in cross-cultural adjustment than males.

This counter-intuitive finding presents an interesting research question. This paper will consider several possible answers to this question and present research propositions for future testing.

International Socio-cultural Adjustment

Success on expatriate assignments has been found to be related to adjustment to the new work setting (Kraimer, Wayne & Jaworski, 2001). Three types of adjustment relevant to cross-cultural expatriate assignments have been identified – general adjustment, work adjustment, and interactional adjustment (Black & Stephens, 1989). *General adjustment* relates to the general living conditions and culture of the foreign country, such as climate, health facilities and food. *Work adjustment* refers to the expatriate's psychological comfort with respect to the job tasks of the foreign assignment, their performance standards, and their job and supervisory responsibilities. *Interactional adjustment* relates to interacting with the host-country nationals. Adjustment has been found to be related to supervisor-rated performance (Kraimer et al, 2001). Specifically, work adjustment has direct positive effects on task performance and interaction adjustment has direct positive effects on contextual performance. In addition, interaction adjustment has direct positive effects on general adjustment.

Female expatriates have been found to have the same general adjustment as male expatriates, but higher levels of work adjustment and better interaction adjustment (Selmer &

Leung, 2003). This is an important finding, since the primary reason for assigning business expatriates abroad is to perform certain work tasks.

One question that has not been addressed in the literature is why female expatriates have better work adjustment and better interaction adjustment. This is an important question because it is critical to assign the most competent human resources to manage global business activities.

Self-transcendence

One potential answer to this may be found in a study focusing on expatriate adjustment, or 'fitting in', and the role of surface–level and deep-level cultural differences (Van Vianen, de Pater, Kristof-Brown & Johnson, 2004). *Surface–level cultural differences* relate to variations in general living conditions, everyday customs, health care facilities, available quality and types of goods, climate, general housing conditions, transportation systems, recreational activities, and cultural/arts opportunities. *Deep-level cultural differences* relate to beliefs and values that are not immediately visible and may only be revealed to expatriates after extended interactions with host country nationals. Deep-level cultural differences include variations in openness to change, in need for conservation (security, conformity and tradition), in self-enhancement (power and achievement), and in self-transcendence (tolerance and benevolence) (Schwartz, 1992).

The study found that general adjustment increased as surface-level cultural differences decreased. The results also showed that work and interaction adjustment increased as differences in the deep-level cultural value of self-transcendence decreased. Neither surface-level differences, nor the other deep-level cultural differences, were related to work and interaction adjustment. In other words, expatriates whose values related to self-transcendence were similar to the self-transcendence values of their host country coworkers had better work and interaction adjustment than expatriates whose self-transcendence values were very different than their host-country coworkers. These results suggest that expatriates have less difficulty adapting to a new environment if they perceive that others in that environment share values such as helpfulness, protection, loyalty, equality, and social justice in the same way that they do.

The self-transcendence value dimension is comprised of universalism and benevolence. Universalism encompasses understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature. It also is associated with broadmindedness, wisdom, social justice, equality, a world at peace, a world of beauty, unity with nature, and protecting the environment. Benevolence encompasses preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact. It is associated with being helpful honest, forgiving, loyal, and responsible (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000).

Thus it has been found that:
- (i) female expatriates have higher levels of work and interaction adjustment, and
- (ii) higher levels of work and interaction adjustment are related to smaller differences in self-transcendence between the expatriate and the host-country coworkers.

These two findings suggest that female expatriates may not be as affected by differences in self-transcendence as males. One simple reason may be related to the fact that, as with almost all research studies on expatriates, most (86 percent) of the participants in the Van Vlianen et al, 2004) study were male. Thus a limitation of the study is that the results may not apply to female expatriates to the extent that they do to males. It is possible that female expatriates may not have their work and interaction adjustment affected as much by differences in self-transcendence as male expatriates do. A replication of the study using a female expatriate sample would clarify this situation.

Why do Female Expatriates Exhibit Better Work and Interaction Adjustment?

At this point, there is still no explanation as to why female expatriates have greater work and interaction adjustment than male expatriates. Three potential explanations will be reviewed in this paper, and research propositions will be proposed.

Female Expatriates: Higher Self-Transcendence?

First, given the nature of self-transcendence, it would seem that people with high levels of it may be so understanding and broadminded that they can work quite effectively with coworkers that have low self-transcendence. If female expatriates have higher levels of self-transcendence than males, this may provide some explanation for their higher work and interaction adjustment compared to male expatriates.

People with high levels of self-transcendence are very understanding and broadminded (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). It seems possible that these characteristics may predispose them to accept the fact that coworkers from other cultures may have quite different values. It may also predispose them to realizing that it will not necessarily be easy to work with people with different values. It may further predispose them to seek out information on the values that their new coworkers will have and to think about and plan ways in which to deal with the impact of these differences in the workplace so as to minimize their effects on working relationships. These actions would pave the way for adjustment to the new work setting and for adjustment to novel interactions with coworkers.

People with high levels of self-transcendence are loyal and forgiving (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). These characteristics may lead them to be more tolerant and accepting of differences in values, attitudes and behaviours of others who are not similar to themselves. They are focused on the preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom they are in frequent personal contact (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). Thus the fact that their coworkers have different values may not be as salient as the focus on enhancement of the welfare of coworkers, particularly when the expatriate is a manager. These actions would lead to enhanced interaction adjustment.

Thus there are several possible reasons that expatriates with high self-transcendence may be able to work quite effectively with coworkers that have low self-transcendence.

Proposition 1a: Expatriates with higher levels of self-transcendence will have their work and interaction adjustment affected by differences in self-transcendence less than expatriates with lower levels of self-transcendence.

Proposition 1b: Female expatriates have higher levels of self-transcendence than male expatriates.

Female Expatriates: Already More Experienced at Fitting-In?

Second, it seems possible that the work and interaction adjustment of female expatriates could be affected by their experience in adapting to the 'male' world of business in their own country. The female experience of 'fitting in' to their male-oriented domestic work environment may prepare them better to 'fit in' to an international work setting, and result in higher levels of work and interaction adjustment than male expatriates.

The extant literature on women in management has documented very well the difficulties that face women in the male-dominated business environment (Schein, Mueller, Lituchy & Liu, 1996). Attitudinal barriers to women's advancement, led by the persistent stereotype that associates management with being male, have resulted in occupational sex discrimination (women are segregated in clerical and other low paying jobs), the wage gap (men earn more than women despite similar qualifications and responsibilities), and the glass ceiling (women are under-represented at executive levels in organizations). Women around the world are still working toward equality in their role in their domestic business context, and are still dealing with people with different attitudes and behaviours regarding the female role, based on deep cultural and societal values that are discrepant with their own. Therefore, they face significant challenges in work and interactional adjustment in their domestic work situations.

Linehan & Scullion (2004) summarized the specific problems and pressures identified as unique to female managers in the following manner:
> "…burdens of coping with the role of 'token' woman; being a test case for future women; lack of role models and feelings of isolation; strains of coping with prejudice and sex stereotyping; and overt and indirect discrimination from fellow employees, employers, and the organizational structure and climate…isolation imposed by males at work… the task of breaking into this male-dominated 'club' can prove difficult, and she can be denied policy information, opportunities, contacts, and social support…" (pg. 436)

Many of these challenges are present in international settings as well. The Schein et al (1996) study of attitudes to female managers in North America, Europe and Asia concluded that "Overall, the results lend strong support to the view that 'think manager – think male' is a global phenomenon, especially among males." (pg. 39) A study of senior female international managers found six themes regarding challenges faced by female managers both in their home-country organizations and while on international assignments, including the glass ceiling, lack of mentors, exclusion from male influence networks, lack of female role models, difficulties in choosing between a male or female managerial style, and basing career paths on the male linear model of career development (Linehan, 2002).

Almost all cultures differentiate between male and female roles, and thus women around the world have had to face many adversities when working in their own domestic business context. The development of approaches to manage these difficult realities may have prepared them for whatever additional negative attitudes, diverse viewpoints, discrimination, or other challenges awaiting them in the international arena of business. There may be little difference between domestic and foreign contexts in the realities that (i) they often have to strive harder to prove their worth and (ii) they have an ongoing burden of managing their gender identity in the male-dominated environment of management (Linehan, 2002). The techniques that women use to manage these domestic challenges may serve them well in adjusting to work and interactional challenges abroad.

Proposition 2:   The techniques developed by women to manage work and interactional challenges experienced as women in the domestic business context has resulted in greater interactional and work adjustment for female expatriates in the context of global assignments.

Female Expatriates: 'Female' Style Contributes to Fitting-In?

Third, it may be that the 'female' work style is effective in helping women to make the work and interactional adjustments required of expatriates on global assignments. Considerable evidence exists to show that women are as successful as men on global assignments, regardless of the cultural values and cultural responses towards women (Adler, 1987, 1993; Caligiuri & Tung, 1999; Cagliuri, Joshi & Lazarova, 1999; Taylor & Napier, 1996). Thus characteristics of foreign cultures do not appear to be related to the success of female expatriates. In some cases, female expatriates reported difficulty in making the adjustments necessary to success in foreign assignments. However, they do make these adjustments, and are able to perform successfully (Caligiuri & Tung, 1999). Therefore, it seems possible that 'female' management styles may be of value in a wide variety of foreign contexts throughout the world.

There is considerable evidence of behavioural differences between men and women in domestic contexts. Two areas of significant gender differences are leadership style and communication style.

Leadership Style As leaders, females have been found to exhibit more consideration behaviour, cooperation and interdependence (Lewis & Fagenson-Eland, 1998; Leung & Clegg, 2001). They have been observed to be more relationship oriented and nurturing than males (Rosener, 1990; Van Velsor, Taylor & Leslie, 1993). A meta-analysis showed that women lead with a democratic/participative style, whereas men lead using an autocratic/directive style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

It has been suggested that this interactive 'female' leadership style may be particularly well-suited to the versatile and dynamic business environment of today, and to cultures where business is based on personal relations, such as *guangxi* in China (Rosener, 1990; Selmer & Leung, 2003). Interaction adjustment may be heightened by a participative leadership style as opposed to an autocratic one. Interaction adjustment is critical to work adjustment in these

situations because work outcomes depend on personal relationships with customers, suppliers and coworkers. However, this style may require some modification in contexts influenced by Confucian values, which include authoritarianism and stress hierarchies and status differences (Selmer, 2001).

Women stress cooperation over competition (Tannen, 1990). In a global economy that emphasizes strategic alliances and the use of global networks, this 'female' style may enhance work adjustment, as global business partners may be more comfortable with this approach than a competitive one.

Proposition 3a: The democratic/participative leadership style commonly exhibited by women will result in better interaction adjustment and work adjustment compared to the autocratic/directive style more commonly exhibited by men.

Communication Style Another well-substantiated area of gender difference is communication style. Gender differences in verbal and non-verbal communication have been clearly documented. Men are often directive, hierarchical and task-oriented; whereas women tend to be expressive, supportive, facilitative, cooperative, personal and social-emotional (Aries, 1987). Females have been found to surpass males in attentiveness to visual, auditory and tactile social stimuli; to be better listeners and to have greater responsiveness to variation in others. They also more accurately interpret the content of emotional messages and are more effective in communicating emotional-social messages (Burke & McKeen, 1988).

It seems possible that female expatriates may be more sensitive in their ability to 'fit in' with cultures that are different from their own because they are more adept at reading non-verbal cues. Their non-verbal attentiveness may also be very useful when language barriers are present. Interaction adjustment is likely to be enhanced by this proficiency in non-verbal communication. Non-verbal competence may be particularly advantageous to work adjustment in cultures where, as opposed to many Western countries, business is based on personal relations.

Tung (1995) argued that women's indirect communication style (Tannen, 1990) makes them more suitable for overseas work. Seventy percent of the world's population has indirectness in communication is the norm. Thus the female style may enhance interaction adjustment in a wide variety of global settings. It has also been noted that women have an ability to put others at ease socially, which may enhance interactional adjustment in global settings (Jelenik & Adler, 1988).

Proposition 3b: The communication style commonly exhibited by women will result in better interaction adjustment compared to the communication style more commonly exhibited by men.

Conclusion

Women's greater tendency to use more democratic, inclusive, participative, interactional and relational styles of managing have been judged by many scholars as reasons why women's approaches will bring more value than men's to today's organizations, especially those that compete globally (Fondas, 1997; Helgeson, 1990; Rosener, 1997). One anthropologist concluded that women may have exceptional faculties for managing internationally, including a preference for cooperating, reaching consensus, and leading via egalitarian teams; an ability to work on several tasks simultaneously; emotional sensitivity and a talent with words (Fisher, 1999). Labelled the *female advantage*, this style reflects those of successful men and women in most parts of the non-Western world (Adler, 2002; Helgeson, 1990).

Yet few global companies have fully leveraged this female advantage to its full benefit. Few women have as yet had the opportunity to use all of their strengths consistently in global positions (Adler, 2002). Empirical testing of the propositions presented in this paper will enhance knowledge regarding why female expatriates have greater interaction and work adjustment, and provide further knowledge pertinent to decisions regarding the use of female expatriates.

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