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Host country language ability and expatriate adjustment: The moderating effect of language difficulty

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Host country language ability and expatriate adjustment: The moderating effect of language difficulty

Research has shown that expatriates' host country language ability is positively associated with their adjustment. But does the advantage of expatriates' language ability depend on the difficulty of the host language? To examine this issue, data were collected from expatriates in two European countries, one with an easy, relatively simple language and the other one with a difficult, highly complex language. Consistent with Goal Setting Theory, results indicated a relative advantage of expatriates' language ability in terms of their adjustment in the host country with the difficult language as opposed to the host country with an easy language.

Keywords: Expatriate adjustment; host country language ability; language difficulty; goal setting theory; moderating effect

Introduction

Language affects almost all aspects of everyday life. We communicate and think through the words and concepts provided by language in all areas of life (Hymes, 1977). However, we do not all speak the same language and differences between the languages we master make interaction with other nationalities difficult. This is unfortunate since more and more communication and collaboration takes place across national and linguistic boundaries (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007). Besides, language differences between individuals and groups may provide the basis for informal inclusion and exclusion (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). Being excluded from everyday communication with host country nationals (HCNs) may have serious consequences for expatriates. Hence, language can be regarded as an essential instrument by which expatriates develop their understanding of the new culture (Selmer, 2006). Accordingly, research has consistently shown that HCNs are an important source of information that may facilitate the adjustment of expatriates in

the host country, both at work and outside of work (*cf.* Bochner, 1981; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Luring, 2008; Selmer, 2006; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Despite the rise of English as the *lingua franca* of the world, not all HCNs may be able to communicate much in English and few non-native English speakers can master it as well as their own mother tongue (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Yasukata, 2009). Hence, some host country language ability may ease the adjustment of expatriates. However, this may depend on the language's complexity and other difficulties associated with learning a particular host country language, such as, phonetics and available learning resources. In host countries with difficult languages, few expatriates may be able to learn much of it, but those who do may be able to use it to their advantage to promote their adjustment to the host country. On the other hand, when the host country language is easy to learn, many expatriates may quickly become proficient enough to facilitate their adjustment, and increasing proficiency in the host country language may not result in as much improved adjustment compared to their counterparts in countries with difficult languages. In other words, the benefits of language proficiency for expatriates' adjustment may be contingent on the difficulty of the host country language.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine expatriates' host country language ability, their adjustment and the absolute difficulty of the host country language. This is a relevant and important task for several reasons. Firstly, the results of this study may support the case for language training of expatriates. In the literature, language training for expatriates is pointed out as both crucial for successful adjustment as well as being badly neglected (*cf.* Aryee, 1997; Chen et al., 2006; Puck et al, 2008; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Welch & Welch, 2008). It is not difficult to envisage that ignoring language training for expatriate candidates may be acute in societies of native English speakers, assuming, often erroneously, that since English has become the *lingua*

franca of the world, there is little need to know any other language. Hence, contrary to just being a statement of the obvious, studying the link between host country language ability and expatriate adjustment could demonstrate the need for expatriate host country language training. Secondly, this study may also inform on the relative advantage of training in different languages. The findings of this investigation could demonstrate the benefits of focusing on training in difficult languages rather than in easy ones, not only due to their differential in learning obstacles, but because left to their own devices, expatriates facing difficult host country languages may not easily otherwise become well adjusted (*cf.* Piekkari et al, 2005). Besides, an obvious alternative to language training is to select expatriate candidates already proficient in the language in question (Kim & Slocum, 2008; Lester 1994). Thirdly, the findings of this study may have ramifications beyond expatriate adjustment since previous research has shown that enhanced language ability and the subsequent improved adjustment may lead to a variety of positive outcomes such as increased satisfaction and less turnover (Shaffer & Harrison, 1988) as well as better performance (*cf.* Kraimer, Wayne & Jaworski, 2001; Parker & McEvoy, 1993). Last, but not least, this is a pioneering study, since as far as is known, no previous rigorous academic study has ventured into this issue. As such, it is exploratory rather than explanatory and the findings may be regarded as tentative rather than definitive.

The rest of the paper will first delve into the conceptual parts of the study and discuss the theoretical concepts of expatriate adjustment and language ability followed by the generation of hypotheses. The method section outlines the target population, places of investigation, the studied languages, data collection, sample demographics as well as the instrument used. Results are displayed and described as well as discussed in terms of main findings, limitations, and

implications. Finally, the conclusions of the study are drawn.

Conceptualizations

While it can be difficult to distinguish between language differences and cultural differences when predicting expatriate adjustment, the two concepts have distinct characteristics. In this respect it has been argued that language is a vehicle of communication whereas culture is the social structure guiding the character and aim of the communication (Hymes, 1977).

Expatriate Adjustment

The concept of *socio-cultural expatriate adjustment* depicts to what extent expatriates are well integrated in daily life and work in the host location as expatriates' ability to "fit in" or to negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture as measured by the amount of difficulty experienced in the management of everyday situations (Ward & Kennedy, 1996). Theoretically, it is based on cultural learning theory and highlights social behavior and practical social skills underlying attitudinal factors (*cf.* Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Furnham, 1993).

Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) argued that the degree of socio-cultural adjustment should be treated as a multidimensional concept rather than a unitary phenomenon, as was previously the dominating view (*cf.* Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1962). In their proposed model for socio-cultural adjustment, Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) made a distinction between three dimensions of in-country adjustment: (1) general adjustment, (2) interaction adjustment, and (3) work adjustment. This theoretical framework of socio-cultural adjustment has been supported over the years by a

series of empirical studies of US expatriates and their spouses (Black & Gregersen, 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Black & Stephens, 1989). McEvoy and Parker (1995) also found support for the three dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment. More recently, Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. (2005) produced evidence that strongly supported Black, Mendenhall and Oddou's (1991) model, through meta-analyses using data from 8,474 expatriates in 66 studies.

Language Ability

The construct of *host country language ability* comprises various dimensions of linguistic proficiency, such as speaking, writing and comprehension of the host country language; as well as understanding and speaking the local dialect at the specific host location and being familiar with local non-verbal communication. Language proficiency, familiarity with cultural differences, values and norms are seen as cornerstones of expatriate adjustment with language itself being a crucial instrument by which expatriates develop their understanding of the new culture (Selmer, 2006). However, although research has consistently demonstrated the importance of language to socio-cultural adjustment (Beenstock et al., 2001), some languages appear to be more difficult to learn than others (Chiswich & Miller, 1998). Accordingly, there could be a link between language ability, language difficulty and socio-cultural adjustment.

Language Difficulty

For the purpose of this investigation, *language difficulty* refers to the complexity of the host country language itself as well as to the extent of difficulty with which resident adult foreign nationals may be able to learn the host country language due to some country-specific circumstances (Chiswich & Miller, 2005). For example, the former could include the degree of

intricacy of grammar, phonetics and the case system of the language. The latter may be due to the unavailability of resources to learn the language, the extent of introversion among host country nationals and restrictive social/cultural norms of interacting with strangers in the host country (Corder, 1981).

Hypotheses

Based on interviews with mainly French expatriates in Britain, Neal (1989) identified language problems as their major source of frustration, dissatisfaction and friction between them and their British colleagues. The language barrier increased their feelings of being outsiders. Usunier (1998), investigating US expatriates in France, found that oral pleasure derived from proficiency in the host country language, among other things, had a positive association with expatriate satisfaction, family satisfaction and anticipated duration of stay, which may in turn influence the extent of socio-cultural expatriate adjustment. Selmer (2006) showed that language proficiency was an important precondition for adjustment of Western expatriates to China. In a recent study Luring (2008) illustrated how language use became an important predicament for Danish expatriates' integration or non-integration in an English workplace. Similar findings that language problems can contribute to problems of interpersonal relations have been reported by others with regard to cultural encounters such as between Americans and Mexicans (Sargent & Matthews, 1998) as well as between Americans and Japanese (Wiseman & Shuter, 1994). A number of studies on language use in multinational corporations have suggested that language proficiency leads to inclusion and a sense of connectedness (Marschan et al., 1997). Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman (2007) found language fluency to be positively associated with positive inter-unit relationships. Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) demonstrated that proficiency in certain national languages was

a strong organizational principle leading to tight social networks with language groups and exclusion of individuals that were not proficient in those languages. Hence, language proficiency provides a shared social identity and the emergence of in-groups, while individuals and groups that are less skilled in a certain language risk being excluded from daily interaction, decision making, knowledge sharing and collaboration (Giles & Byrnes, 1982; Piekkari et al., 2005; Welch & Welch, 2008).

The language barrier is potentially high in situations where cultures are making it difficult for expatriates to acquire a high degree of language ability (Harzing & Feely, 2008). This will make it almost impossible for one party to understand the position of the other party or for them to reach a mutual agreement. A sustained exchange of ideas to resolve this impasse is not possible because of the poor communication capability. Instead, uncertainty within the relationship will be increased, manifesting itself in suspicion, caution and mistrust (Feely & Harzing, 2003). These observations make it likely that expatriates proficient in the host country language may be able to reach a higher degree of interaction adjustment than those lacking in host country linguistic skills (Peltokorpi, 2007). Hence, quantitative empirical studies have found a positive association between host country language ability and interaction adjustment (*cf.* Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005; Kim & Slocum, 2008).

Interaction adjustment may be the most fundamental of the three dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment since both general adjustment and work adjustment are based on interpersonal interactions (Bell & Harrison, 1996). Generally, interactions with HCNs in social settings is one way for expatriate newcomers to become aware of appropriate behaviors in the host country since

HCNs may act as sources of information and help in understanding (Puck et al., 2008). Expatriates with frequent such interactions tend to exhibit more appropriate behaviors than others. Interacting with HCNs can enhance understanding of the host country culture (Bochner, 1981). As Furnham and Bochner (1986) point out, deeper relationships with HCNs help bridge the gap between the two cultures. It facilitates an appreciation of and sensitivity of cultural differences, and fosters adjustment (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Furthermore, spillover theory suggests that work and non-work experiences will be positively correlated (*cf.* Bhagat, 1983; Kohn & Slomczynski, 1990; Staines, 1980). Accordingly, rigorous empirical research has found a positive association between host country language ability and work adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005; Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002). Consequently, expatriates' successful interactions with HCNs in the host country language are likely to have a positive effect on both their general adjustment and work adjustment. This assumption is tested by Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 1: Host country language ability has a positive association with socio-cultural expatriate adjustment.

However, the difficulty of learning the host country language may impact on the positive effect of host country language ability on adjustment. The difficulty of speaking a new language can be measured along different dimensions. Linguistic distance refers to the relative difference between two national languages (Chiswick & Miller, 2005). Linguists have developed models of the origins of languages, 'language trees', to explain the historical relations between 'families' or 'groups' of languages being structurally relatively similar. The structural closeness of languages is often

argued to be related to the easiness of learning a language (Corder, 1981). Hence, a greater linguistic distance generally implies greater difficulty in learning the host country language, which entails a less successful expatriate adjustment. Since English has become the most used international language and part of primary school curriculum in many parts of the world (Yasukata, 2009), expatriates could be assumed to generally find it easier to learn languages that have a linguistically small distance to English. Languages that are part of smaller language families (e.g. the Fenno-Ugric language group) will in general have a greater linguistic distance to mixed groups of expatriates than greater language families (e.g. the Indo-European languages group) (*cf.* Corder 1981). While linguistic distance is generally a reasonable measure of language difficulties, other variations may also affect how easy a language is to learn. Some languages have more demanding phonetics than others (e.g. Mandarin). Other languages have a very complex or inconsistent grammar that makes it difficult for second language learning (e.g. Navajo). Yet other languages may have a very limited availability of learning resources since very few people speak the language (e.g. Icelandic) (*cf.* Crystal, 1987; Chiswich & Miller, 2005 Scherag et al. 2004).

If the host country language is difficult to learn for a non-native, few expatriates may be able to use it to facilitate their socio-cultural adjustment. While many expatriates are excluded from crucial pieces of information required for successful adjustment due to their insufficient host country language ability, those who succeed in becoming proficient in the difficult host country language may be able to use that language skill to their great advantage and thereby enjoy a considerable extent of socio-cultural adjustment (*cf.* Beal et al., 2003). Improvements in the host country language ability may result in access to more important information about the host country which

may add to their extent of socio-cultural adjustment. SanAntonio (1987) studied American expatriate managers in Japan and found that individuals with relatively high Japanese language proficiency were, as language nodes, in a more powerful position than their hierarchical position indicated. This indicates that skills in speaking a difficult language could be informally rewarded within the workgroup. Similarly, Green et al. (2005) also found that bilinguals Kurds, Chinese and Vietnamese in England assumed a high status position as skilled mediators between the host environment and the migrant community. This status was reported to lead to pride in mastering what is perceived to be a difficult language by ethnic peers. The hard achieved language skills, in this case, led to feelings of superiority and self-confidence that increased interaction with host country nationals and subsequent integration. Other studies have also found the mastering of a difficult language to be associated with higher self-esteem (Portes & Hao, 2002), positive cultural capital (Bankston & Zhou, 1995) and socio-emotional well-being (Han, 2010).

This positive outcome of reaching an intricate objective has been thoroughly documented in the literature related to Goal Setting Theory (GST) (Locke & Latham, 1990). This theory predicts that the outcomes will be higher if goals are challenging yet attainable (Locke et al., 1981). Consequently, individuals' efforts will be positively associated with the level of challenge in their goals – as long as it is within their reach. In other words, when confronted with a very difficult goal, the few individuals who take up the challenge and who are actually able to achieve it will be more dedicated. Early and Ang (2003) maintained that goals are central motivational elements in successful expatriate adjustment. Gong and Chang (2007) found that expatriates setting higher socio-cultural adjustment goals were more likely to exert more intense and persistent efforts than their counterparts with lower goals. When related to host country language

acquisition, which is closely linked to socio-cultural adjustment, expatriates that make the effort of learning a difficult language could also be expected to be more committed to integrate into the community (cf. Sullivan, 1988).

These two presumptions are tested by Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Hypothesis 2: The extent of host country language ability of expatriates in a host country with an easy language is higher than that of expatriates in a host country with a difficult language.

Hypothesis 3: Language difficulty will moderate the positive association between host country language ability and socio-cultural expatriate adjustment. For a host country with a difficult language, host country language ability of expatriates will have a stronger positive association with socio-cultural expatriate adjustment than for host country language ability of expatriates in a host country with an easy language.

Method

Target Population

The data for this investigation was extracted from a larger study targeting expatriate academics. While expatriate academics may often use English as a working language, they also have to

function in many informal contexts and situations outside their job where the use of the local language could affect their socio-cultural adjustment. The larger study was based on a convenience sample of e-mail addresses of academics in science faculty departments in universities in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands. Foreign-sounding names, as compared to those common in respective host country, were selected for the data base (cf. Harzing, 2001). Academics in science was judged as a suitable group to target since science as an academic discipline may be less constrained by cultural, social and institutional factors than, for example, humanities and social sciences. The discipline content of science may be relatively easy to transfer and apply globally. Accordingly, academic scientists may without much difficulty cross national borders in search of employment making them a suitable target group for our investigation.

Places of Investigation and Languages

For the purpose of this exploratory study it was deemed preferable to analyze two host countries with unique languages; the Nordic countries Finland and Norway. Conceptually, this is a straightforward comparison of one host country with a difficult language with another host country with an easy language. Nordic countries have since long developed close collaboration culturally, politically and institutionally and both Finland and Norway are modern welfare states (Lister, 2009). In that respect, except for the language, Finland and Norway have a lot in common, ensuring comparability. Furthermore, host countries with English as the official language would create problems as English is spoken as a second language in many countries. Neither host country language Finnish nor Norwegian are the second language of any country, although expatriates may differ in the extent to which they learn those languages prior to

expatriation.

The data extracted for this investigation comprised 64 expatriate academics in 7 universities in Finland and 73 expatriate academics in 7 universities in Norway. Finnish belongs to the Fenno-Ugric language group, which is very different from the Scandinavian languages, and originates from central Asia. Even among Finns themselves, Finnish is known as “the most difficult language of the world” (Laatoma, 1998). This may be due to the fact that Finnish is unrelated to Germanic or Indo-European languages. Hence, Finnish could be considered being of substantial linguistic distance from the English language which is the international language in business and academics which most expatriates speak relatively well. Furthermore, the Finnish language is complex in many ways. It is an agglutinative, morphologically particularly rich language (Kettunen, 2008). A total of 15 cases exist in the language, of which 13 are in active use. Moreover, the grammar lacks future tense and gender but has a large number of endings and changes since Finnish is a synthetic language, which makes words appear very long to a learner. Additionally, colloquial (spoken) Finnish could be very different from the written variety (Laatoma, 1998). In a large scale ‘Hardest language to learn’-survey, ‘Language Learning Advisory.Com’ found Finnish to be one of the five most difficult languages to learn (<http://www.language-learning-advisor.com/hardest-language-to-learn-survey.html>).

Furthermore, Finnish people are known to be taciturn and timid socially (*cf.* Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), which could make communication and social contacts with them difficult for foreigners.

Norwegian is a North Germanic language often referred to as one of the Scandinavian languages

along with Danish and Swedish. As a Germanic and Indo-European language the linguistic distance between Norwegian and English is considerably smaller than that between Finnish and English. In fact, in a large-scale survey using statistical material from almost 500,000 immigrants to the United States and Canada, Chiswick and Miller (2005) found that Norwegian was among the three languages (along with Swedish and Afrikaans) with the smallest linguistic distance to English. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US Department of State has compiled approximate learning expectations for a number of languages based on the length of time it takes to learn it. It places Norwegian in the easiest category for English speakers (<http://www.nvta.gov/lotw/months/november/learningExpectations.html>).

Data Collection

A central required characteristic of expatriate academics is that they indeed are *academics*, i.e. include professors and non-professorial staff that are part of the research and teaching profession (Karpen, 1993). However, defining the expatriate status of these academics could be difficult since there may be several overlapping concepts involved, such as sojourners and immigrants (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). For example, to exclude sojourners who may be foreigners only visiting for short periods of time, such as foreign PhD students or foreign staff from universities abroad on sabbatical leave or on secondment, a requirement of *regular employment* was applied. To leave out immigrants, only *foreign nationals* could be considered as being expatriate academics, indeed working 'ex-patria'. Admittedly, this is not an ideal definitional requirement since the issue of citizenship may be contingent on a host of factors and circumstances bearing little relationship with the status of being an expatriate academic, such as rules and regulations in host and home country regarding citizenship, benefits and rights afforded citizens and non-

citizens in host and home country, as well as personal preferences and idiosyncrasies. Hence, foreign citizenship does not guarantee expatriate status, but may well be a useful rule-of-thumb. Additionally, since academics pursuing an international career typically initiate their foreign academic employment themselves (Richardson, 2006), a requirement of *self-initiated* expatriation was included in the definition of expatriate academics.

The data of the larger study was collected electronically and a commercial web survey software package was used to administer the questionnaire. However, the university affiliation of the investigators was identified as the official sender and the potential respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality as usual. To ensure that only members of the target group of expatriate academics responded to the questionnaire, initial screening questions representing the requirements discussed above were applied. Since their academic title, establishing their academic status, was acquired via the respective university websites, only three screening questions were asked. If affirmative responses were given to all the three screening questions, the respondent was invited to complete the rest of the questionnaire. Otherwise, the survey was interrupted and the response was collected immediately. In the larger study, totally 1,215 academics received the survey and eventually, 653 responses were collected amounting to a response rate of 53.7 percent.

Sample

The expatriate academics in Finland were, on the average, 40.39 years old ($SD=9.58$), had spent an average of 5.47 years in this country ($SD=6.17$), and had been expatriate academics abroad for an average time of 8.96 years ($SD=6.39$), including their current employment. Table 1 reveals that the

majority of the respondents in Finland was male (82%), married (69.8%), Research Assistants or Teaching Assistants (67.2%), and from another EU country (52.5%).

Compared to the respondents in Finland, the expatriate academics in Norway had a similar background. They had an average age of 42.51 years ($SD=11.01$) and on the average, they had spent 5.88 years in Norway ($SD=7.70$), and they had worked abroad as expatriate academics for 11.21 years ($SD=10.58$), including their current employment. As displayed in Table 1, like their colleagues in Finland, most of the expatriate academics in Norway were male (67.1%), married (60.9%), Research Assistants or Teaching Assistants (56.2%), and from another EU country (57.1%).

Analyses of variances (ANOVAs) of the background variables confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups of expatriate academics in Finland and Norway.

Insert Table 1 about here

Instrument

Background variables were estimated through single direct questions to the respondents. The three concepts of socio-cultural expatriate adjustment and the construct of host country language ability were measured by multi-item scales.

Socio-Cultural Expatriate Adjustment

The three dimensions of socio-cultural expatriate adjustment were measured using scales developed by Black and Stephens (1989). Although this widely used scale has been criticized for being merely a statistical construct with elements that are not well-defined or discrete, this measure has been consistently validated (*cf.* Bhaskar-Shrinivas, *et al.*, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr & Christiansen, 2003, Shaffer, Harrison & Gilley, 1999). Furthermore, it has been found to be structurally equivalent with a good fit when applied on culturally dissimilar samples providing evidence of its construct validity (Robie & Ryan, 1996). The scale is designed to measure all three dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment: General adjustment, interaction adjustment and work adjustment.

General adjustment was assessed by a seven-item, seven-point scale (Black & Stephens, 1989). The respondents indicated how well adjusted they were to their host location on a scale ranging from 1="very unadjusted" to 7="completely adjusted", sample item: "Food" ($\alpha=.87$).

Interaction adjustment was gauged by a four-item, seven-point scale (Black & Stephens, 1989). The same response categories applied as for general adjustment, sample item: "Speaking with host nationals" ($\alpha=.91$).

Job adjustment was measured by a three-item, seven-point scale (Black & Stephens, 1989). The same response categories applied as for general adjustment, sample item: "Supervisory responsibilities" ($\alpha=.87$).

Host Country Language Ability

Host country language ability was assessed by a five-item, seven-point scale adapted from Selmer

(2006). The scale ranged from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”, sample item: “I cannot manage a conversation in the local language” (reverse polarity) ($\alpha=.95$).

Control

Time in current location was applied as a control variable since adjustment may be regarded as a process over time following a learning curve (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). This variable was assessed by a direct single question to the respondents: “How long have you had your current academic job in the host location?”.

Potential for Common Method Biases

Common method biases could be a potential problem of this study. Language difficulty was determined by archival means, but all data on socio-cultural expatriate adjustment and host country language ability were self-reported and collected cross-sectionally. Although the general condemnations of self-report methods have been found exaggerated (cf. Crampton & Wagner, 1994; Lindell & Whitney, 2001; Spector, 2006) to the extent that the automatic criticism of cross-sectional self-reports has assumed the proportions of a methodological urban legend (Spector, 2006), some procedural methods were implemented in this study to lessen that kind of potential bias. Firstly, the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents were assured. Furthermore, the items measuring socio-cultural expatriate adjustment were entered early in the questionnaire and the items assessing host country language ability were placed toward the end of the questionnaire at another page. Some of the items also had reverse polarity. Additionally, the electronic questionnaire also prevented respondents to go back to previous pages and edit answers once a new page had been entered. These procedures may all have contributed to control for effects of common method biases

(Podsakoff et al., 2003). To investigate the potential for remaining biases of this type, Harman's single factor test was applied (cf. Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Aulakh & Gencturk, 2000). The exploratory factor analysis of the items, corresponding to all the variables of the study, resulted in a four-factor, unrotated solution. This may suggest that common method bias was not a serious problem in this study (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Results

Sample means, standard deviations and zero-order Pearson correlations of all variables are provided in Table 2. Not surprisingly, there is a positive association between *time in current location* and *host country language ability* ($r=.22, p<.01$) suggesting that the longer the expatriates stay in the foreign location, the better they can learn the host language. There were also significant relationships between *time in current location* and two of the three socio-cultural adjustment variables, *general adjustment* ($r=.22, p<.01$) and *job adjustment* ($r=.20, p<.05$) supporting the use of *time in current location* as a control variable. A one-sample t-test found the mean score for *general adjustment* ($t=15.13, p<.001$), *interaction adjustment* ($t=6.76, p<.001$), and *job adjustment* ($t=17.82, p<.001$) to be significantly higher than the mid-point of the scale indicating that the expatriates in general perceived themselves as well adjusted in socio-cultural terms to their respective host countries.

Insert Table 2 about here

Hypothesis 1 was tested by way of hierarchical multiple regression applied on the combined sample of respondents from Finland and Norway (Table 3). The control variable, *time in current*

location, was entered in Step 1. As seen in Table 3, there was a significant positive association with one of the three socio-cultural expatriate adjustment variables. The control variable had a positive relationship with *job adjustment* ($\beta=.19, p<.05$). In Step 2, the predictor variable, *host country language ability* was entered. This produced significant effects on two of the three criterion variables, explaining 11 percent of the variance in *general adjustment* and 18 percent of the variance in *interaction adjustment*. There was a positive association with *general adjustment* ($\beta=.33, p<.001$) as well as with *interaction adjustment* ($\beta=.44, p<.001$). This provides partial support for Hypothesis 1. All F values for the socio-cultural expatriate adjustment variables were statistically significant, indicating a proper fit between the regression model and the data.

Insert Table 3 about here

Hypothesis 2 was tested through a one-way ANOVA. The results showed a significant between-group difference for the mean score of *host country language ability* ($F=8.94; p<.01$) between the expatriates in Norway (4.67; $SD=1.88$) and Finland (3.66; $SD=2.04$). This finding supports Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 was also tested through hierarchical multiple regression. The data on the expatriates residing in the two countries Finland and Norway were now separated and analyzed independently. The results based on the expatriates in Finland are displayed in Table 4. Entering the control variable did not produce any significant effect. In Step 2, the predictor variable, *host country language ability*, had a significant positive association with all of the socio-cultural expatriate

adjustment variables; *general adjustment* ($\beta=.49$, $p<.001$), *interaction adjustment* ($\beta=.49$, $p<.001$) and *job adjustment* ($\beta=.30$, $p<.05$), explaining 24 percent, 24 percent and 9 percent of the variance in these variables respectively. The findings from analyzing the expatriates in Norway appear in Table 5. Again, the control variable did not have any significant effect. In Step 2, entering *host country language ability* only produced a weak positive association with *interaction adjustment* ($\beta=.29$, $p<.05$), explaining 7 percent of the variance in this variable. The results displayed in Tables 4 and 5 support Hypothesis 3.

In summary, H1 was partially supported while H2 and H3 were fully supported.

Insert Table 4 about here

Insert Table 5 about here

Discussion

Main Findings

Generally, as could have been expected, since this is part of a learning process, the longer the expatriates in the combined sample had stayed in their respective host locations, the better their *host country language ability* was. The finding that this variable also had positive associations with *general adjustment* and *interaction adjustment*, but not with *job adjustment* for the academic expatriates in the combined sample, may also be easy to explain. Much of the

communication at work may be directed in English (*cf.* Kim & Slocum, 2008; Tietze, 2008) and the ability to understand and speak the host language may be of less importance for adjusting to the foreign work environment. That also goes for the modest difference in the association between *host country language ability* and *job adjustment* between Finland and Norway, since English may be the language preferred at work in the studied academic departments in both countries. Besides, there may be little variation in how work is executed in academic science departments over the world making the extent of *host country language ability* less relevant to *job adjustment* than in the case of the other two modes of adjustment. The finding that the respondents in Norway had a higher mean score for *host country language ability* than those in Finland provides support for the presumption that the extent of *host country language ability* of expatriates in a host country with an easy language is higher than that of expatriates in a host country with a difficult language. Finally, for the expatriate academics in Finland, *host country language ability* had a positive association with all of the socio-cultural expatriate adjustment variables whereas for their colleagues in Norway, this was only true in the case of *interaction adjustment* in which case only a weak such relationship was detected.

Consequently, the findings of this exploratory study provide support for the main proposition that language difficulty will moderate the positive association between host country language ability and socio-cultural expatriate adjustment in such a way that for a host country with a difficult language, *host country language ability* of expatriates will have a stronger positive association with socio-cultural expatriate adjustment than for *host country language ability* of expatriates in a host country with an easy language.

While such research findings have not been published before regarding expatriate adjustment, they are in accordance with GST (Locke et al., 1981; Sullivan, 1988). GST provides a motivational explanation for why individuals with a similar point of departure have notable variations in their level of socio-cultural adjustment due to the challenges of the objective (Locke & Latham, 1990; Gong & Chang, 2007). Although GST mainly explains adjustment from an internal motivation perspective, the increased level of skills and subsequent enhanced self-esteem may also spill over into relations with the surrounding community as an external factor. In consequence, there could be a positive feed-back between the personal achievement of speaking a difficult language and assuming a key position in the work community due to acquired rare language skills (e.g. Green et al., 2005; SanAntonio, 1987), which could accelerate the level of adjustment.

In conclusion, academics choosing to expatriate to a country with a difficult language may find that if they learn that language well, they may become well integrated mediators between their local community and the academic community in their home country (*cf.*; Marschan-Piekkari, 1999). Studies have shown that even though academics often need to write and speak in English during their daily work tasks, language mediators can still assume a special role. Lillis and Curry (2006), for example, found that Hungarian and Portuguese academics to a high extent were dependent on language brokers in their local environment when publishing their research results.

Limitations

This exploratory investigation may have a number of potential shortcomings restricting its generalizability as well as making its findings tentative. Firstly, the potential for common method

biases have been discussed above in the Method section.

Secondly, this study has employed an indirect way of establishing the moderating effect of language difficulty. This is a limitation of the investigation since the predominance of the effect cannot be quantified as in the procedure recommended by, for example, Baron and Kenney (1986). To support the analysis undertaken, archival evidence was collected suggesting that the language in Finland is indeed more difficult to learn than that in Norway. To a certain extent, the finding that the extent of *host country language ability* was higher among the respondents in Norway than in Finland may indicate that the Finnish language really is more difficult to learn than the Norwegian language.

Thirdly, the cross-sectional data collected only allowed for a measure of the average level of socio-cultural expatriate adjustment for the investigated group(s) of expatriate academics at a certain point in time, although expatriate adjustment is considered to be a process over time (*cf.* Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Church, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Consequently, causality cannot be inferred. For example, there may be an endogeneity problem between language acquisition and cultural adjustment. It is not difficult to imagine that language acquisition may occur after cultural adjustment has taken place. Hence, language acquisition can be regarded as an antecedent of adjustment instead of the other way around.¹ A longitudinal approach may have been able to solve this problem and could have produced a more rich data source. On the other hand, longitudinal studies pose other serious methodological challenges (*cf.* Menard, 1991).

¹ This point was suggested by an anonymous reviewer on an earlier version of the manuscript.

Fourthly, other potential concerns about this exploratory study involves aspects of the sample, the data and the collation of expatriates into one group. Attempting to find expatriates based on their family names could be problematic in certain national contexts (cf. Harzing, 2001). For example, in Norway, some Danish or Swedish expatriates could have remained un-identified and hence not included in our sample. Also, we merely assessed participants' linguistic capabilities in the respective host language and adding everybody together regardless of their other linguistic capabilities may have been problematic. For example, good proficiency in English and/or in other Indo-European languages could have facilitated learning Norwegian (but probably not Finnish). Furthermore, speaking several (similar) languages may make it easier learning another (similar) language (Jessner, 1999).

Fifthly, the way socio-cultural adjustment is measured in this exploratory study may be problematic. Although not measured directly, host country language ability could be an implicit ingredient in all three dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment as measured by the scales of Black and Stephens (1989). This is potentially a confounding factor.

Last, but not least, the target group of expatriate academics only includes academics within the science disciplines from two North European host countries. Although selected for good reasons, as discussed above, this sample may not represent all expatriate academics.

Implications

The findings of this study may give rise to a number of implications, both theoretical and practical as well as implications for future research.

Theory. From a theoretical point of view our study has brought attention to the currently understudied relation between language difficulty and socio-cultural expatriate adjustment. We found that if one manages to learn a difficult local language, one would be better adjusted compared to individuals learning an easier and thus less rare language. The positive effect of achieving a difficult objective indicates that GST could be relevant for explaining adjustment efforts within the expatriate community. Extant expatriate literature has only to a very limited extent included GST and more work could be done in this area (Gong & Chang, 2007). GST may not only allow us to understand more about how socio-cultural adjustment is related to language use, but also about the impact of acquiring other difficult types of skills and knowledge that could improve interaction with the local community. Finally, our results are consistent with the observation that perfect English language skills (as the *lingua franca*) may not always be sufficient. Even in a country where English language skills are generally known to be very good (as in Finland), knowledge of the local language may still amount to a considerable advantage for expatriates (*cf.* Louhiala-Salminen, et al., 2005).

Practice. Firstly, an obvious practical implication is that language training can help expatriates to adjust, especially in host countries with difficult languages. Unfortunately, language training is typically identified in the literature both as being essential for successful adjustment as well as being badly neglected (*cf.* Aryee, 1997; Puck et al., 2008; Lauring, 2007; Welch & Welch, 2008). Secondly, the findings of this study underscore the literature on corporate language training as part of expatriate preparations as well as other human resource management responses by international organizations. Although it is not possible to claim that all expatriates

should undergo pre-departure language training, strong theoretical arguments have been offered for sequential cross-cultural training, combining pre-departure and post-arrival activities (Selmer, Torbiörn & de Leon, 1998; Peltokorpi, 2007), and it is possible that also language training would benefit from the same time schedule (*cf.* Chen et al., 2006; Puck et al., 2008). However, a myriad of other considerations will likely determine the specific details of such training. The cost-effectiveness of expatriate language training is just one of the many criteria organizations may want to apply (Hayet, 2000). Thirdly, the difficulty of achieving high levels of proficiency, especially in difficult host languages, should not be underestimated (Bloch, 1995). Organizations may take the position that training high-level employees in a difficult foreign language does not make much sense since it is a large investment with high front-end costs, not to mention the required sacrifice in time and effort by the individual (Weber, 2004). However, consistent with GST, the effort of learning a difficult language may have positive personal side effects. Moreover, GST posits that individuals' commitment to learn a difficult language could be increased by making the goals attainment seem important and by enhancing individuals' belief that they can reach the goal (Locke & Latham, 1990). Hence, the management of an organization may be able to contribute constructively to the socio-cultural adjustment of selected individuals by active involvement in the struggle to acquire difficult skills.

Future Research. Obviously, this exploratory investigation can both be replicated and extended. Firstly, to gauge the validity of these findings, future research may replicate this study selecting other countries representing easy and difficult host languages. Secondly, at the same time, potential weaknesses with the current investigation should be avoided. Data from other sources could complement self-reports, data allowing a direct measurement of the moderating effect may

be collected, a longitudinal approach may be considered, and other target populations than expatriate academics in other locations than Europe could be included. Thirdly, researchers may also want to extend the scope of this study to differentiate between different types of language ability, as for example speaking, reading and writing as well as different degrees of these abilities, such as mastery vs. survival skills. Fourthly, also other dependent variables such as work performance may be studied. After all, expatriates relocate abroad to perform certain work tasks and the purpose of the hiring organization is for their expatriate staff to discharge their work duties in a successful way.

Conclusions

This exploratory investigation provided some preliminary evidence of the relative advantage of expatriates' language ability in terms of socio-cultural adjustment in a host country with a difficult language as opposed to one with an easy local language. Since previous research has not provided such evidence, the findings of this study make a contribution to the literature. Controlling for the time they had spent in the respective host country, expatriates' language ability in a host country with a difficult language had a positive association with all the studied socio-cultural expatriate adjustment variables, whereas expatriates' language ability in a host country with an easy language only had a positive association with one of the investigated adjustment variables. Unfortunately, there seems to be no single solution to alleviate the language problems for expatriates in host countries with difficult languages. Despite the fact that enhanced language ability and the subsequent improved adjustment in such cases may lead to a variety of positive outcomes such as increased satisfaction and less turnover (Shaffer & Harrison, 1988) as well as better performance (*cf.* Kraimer, Wayne & Jaworski, 2001; Parker & McEvoy,

1993; Puck et al., 2008), organizations and expatriates alike may find training in difficult host languages expensive, tiring and time consuming. The best way forward may be to try to match the language training to the specific context and organizational demands (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Welch & Welch, 2008).

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TABLE 1: Background of the Sub-Samples (n=137) ¹

Background Variables	Finland (n=64)		Norway (n=73)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Gender:				
Male	50	82.0	47	67.1
Female	11	18.0	23	32.9
Married:	44	69.8	42	60.9
Position:				
Full/Chair Professor	13	20.3	31	42.5
Associate Professor	7	10.9	1	1.4
Assistant Professor	1	1.6	-	-
Research/Teaching Assistant	43	67.2	41	56.2
Nationality Group:				
EU	31	52.5	40	57.1
Non-EU	28	47.5	30	42.9

¹ Frequency totals may be less than the stated n due to missing values

TABLE 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among the Variables¹

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. General Adjustment	5.42	1.09	1.00				
2. Interaction Adjustment	4.84	1.44	.44***	1.00			
3. Job Adjustment	5.69	1.09	.29***	.36***	1.00		
4. Host Country Language Ability	3.80	2.02	.36***	.45***	.12	1.00	
5. Time in Current Location (months) (Control)	68.27	83.95	.22**	.14	.20*	.22**	1.00

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (2-tailed)

¹ 132 < n < 135 due to missing answers.

TABLE 3: Expatriates in Finland and Norway: Results of Hierarchical Regression for Effects of Host Country Language Ability on Socio-Cultural Expatriate Adjustment ^a

	General Adjustment β	Interaction Adjustment β	Job Adjustment β
Step 1 (Control)			
Time in Current Location (months)	.16	.05	.19*
R^2	.05	.02	.04
F	7.06**	2.67	5.88*
Step 2			
Host Country Language Ability	.33***	.44***	.08
ΔR^2	.11	.18	.01
ΔF	16.02***	29.22***	.89
R^2	.16	.20	.05
F	11.95***	16.23***	3.38*

^a All standardized regression coefficients are from the final step in the analyses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; two-tailed

TABLE 4: Expatriates in Finland: Results of Hierarchical Regression for Effects of Host Country Language Ability on Socio-Cultural Expatriate Adjustment ^a

	General Adjustment β	Interaction Adjustment β	Job Adjustment β
Step 1 (Control)			
Time in Current Location (months)	.11	-.07	.22
R^2	.02	.00	.05
F	1.03	.16	3.27
Step 2			
Host Country Language Ability	.49***	.49***	.30*
ΔR^2	.24	.24	.09
ΔF	18.93***	18.98***	5.94*
R^2	.26	.24	.14
F	10.13***	9.59***	4.74*

^a All standardized regression coefficients are from the final step in the analyses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; two-tailed

TABLE 5: Expatriates in Norway: Results of Hierarchical Regression for Effects of Host Country Language Ability on Socio-Cultural Expatriate Adjustment ^a

	General Adjustment β	Interaction Adjustment β	Job Adjustment β
Step 1 (Control)			
Time in Current Location (months)	.23	.19	.20
R^2	.09	.09	.04
F	7.06**	6.44*	3.01
Step 2			
Host Country Language Ability	.23	.29*	.01
ΔR^2	.05	.07	.00
ΔF	3.71	5.63*	.00
R^2	.14	.16	.04
F	5.52**	6.25**	1.48

^a All standardized regression coefficients are from the final step in the analyses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; two-tailed