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Work Engagement and Intercultural Adjustment

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Work Engagement and Intercultural Adjustment

ABSTRACT

While engagement seems to have promising prospects for predicting organizational behavior in domestic organizations, few scholars have included this in cross-cultural management research. We use survey results from 640 self-initiated expatriate academics in Greater China to study the relation between work engagement and intercultural adjustment. We focus on expatriates in Greater China because in terms of economy, this is a fast growing area and because, with regard to language and culture, this region deviates substantially from the Western countries that most expatriates there come from. This is not least in relation to age perceptions. Contrary to the dominating theoretical position, we found that the different dimensions of work engagement, namely vigor, dedication, and absorption, have different effects on intercultural adjustment. Moreover, we found that the effect of job dedication on reducing time to proficiency was stronger for older expatriates.

Key words: engagement, adjustment, academics, expatriates, self-initiated expatriates, age, Greater China.

Increasing globalization has led to accelerated research in cross-cultural management. One area that in particular has caught the attention of academics is the relocation and transfer of personnel over country borders (Fee et al., 2013; Ren et al., 2014). In this research, adjustment to the new situation has been the primary focus of much scholarly work (Firth et al., 2014). Most studies have explored how expatriates that are sent by an organization's HQ adjust to the situation in foreign subsidiaries. However, recently, more focus has been directed at the large and growing number of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). A SIE can be defined as a person who is hired individually on a contractual basis and is not transferred overseas by a parent organization (Andresen et al., 2012; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Glasscock and Fee, 2015; Makkonen, 2015). In

other words, SIEs take jobs in a foreign country, often with no planned time period, and the legal employment decision is made by a new work contract partner (Inkson and Myers, 2003; Tharenou, 2010, 2013). We focus on SIE academics because their transient status could make personal characteristics and their energy level even more important for their adjustment than for traditional organizational expatriates since SIEs do not expatriate from a host organization that has known them for years and selected and trained them on the basis of that (Selmer and Luring, 2014a, b). One type of SIEs that have received increasing cross-cultural management attention in recent years is expatriate academics.

In general, academics can be characterized by their work being relatively autonomous. Moreover, it can often be conducted in a similar fashion across different countries (Froese, 2012). As such, university employees looking for work abroad can be characterized by having a high non-firm specific capital which makes them particularly mobile in the international labor market and thus likely to become SIEs (Teece, 1998). Another characterizing feature is that academics tend to be highly focused on their often narrow area of research and teaching interest. This makes work engagement an interesting concept to study in relation to expatriate academics.

Even though this field has received less attention in cross-cultural management research, expatriation of academics probably has a longer tradition than business-oriented expatriation since both students and professors have been highly mobile traveling across borders for several centuries (Kim, 2015). However, the flow of academic expatriation has increased substantially in line with university internationalization making this area increasingly important to the field of

cross-cultural management (Altbach et al., 2010).

A number of studies have recently explored expatriate academics, their adjustment (Froese, 2012; Selmer and Luring, 2009) and their motivation to relocate (Richardson and McKenna, 2002; Selmer and Luring, 2010, 2012, 2013). Another line of study has focus on the working climate of expatriate academics pointing out that the work conditions are often less than optimal for this group (Emmelhainz, forthcoming; Romanowski and Nasser, 2014). In this regard Selmer, Luring, Normann, and Kubocikova (forthcoming) found that for expatriate academics, it was easier to adjust to foreign owned university units than to local ones. Another theme that expatriate academic research has focused on is intercultural language use (Klitmøller and Luring, forthcoming; Luring and Klitmøller, 2015). Here, Selmer and Luring (2015) found academic expatriates who manage to learn a difficult host country language to adjust better than those who learn an easier host language. Finally, Luring and Selmer (Luring and Selmer, 2010, 2011, 2012) also found that the language management effort in an academic environment with a mix of host country nationals and expatriates had a positive effect on interpersonal trust, knowledge sharing, performance, and openness to diversity.

In this study we direct our attention to a concept that, although it has recently attracted substantial interest among organizational psychologists, has had little impact on the cross-cultural management literature, namely, work engagement (cf. Christian et al., 2011; Wefald et al., 2011). This construct was developed as a response to a need for a better understanding of positive organizational behavior (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008; Cole et al., 2012). In this line of

research, the aim has been to identify and measure positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities in order to effectively manage them for acquiring performance improvements (Luthans, 2002). Work engagement has been shown to contribute to the bottom line of organizations (Britt et al., 2012). For example, work engagement has been found to positively affect business unit performance (Harter et al., 2002), in-role and extra-role performance (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008), and to be negatively related to withdrawal behavior (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Finally, it has been argued that work engagement is an important concept to consider when dealing with changes on the job (May et al., 2004; Stander and Rothmann, 2010). Accordingly, work engagement may well have an impact on the adjustment of expatriates (Lazarova et al., 2010) and as such more knowledge on the concept could contribute to a better understanding of how to manage employees crossing cultural boundaries.

While the direct effect of work engagement is interesting to assess, there could also be indirect effects worth exploring. Although there are a number of possible personal characteristics that could potentially moderate relationships between engagement and intercultural adjustment, the biographical marker of interest in this study is age. Generally, work engagement does not necessarily have the same effect on all age groups (James et al., 2011). The experiences of older expatriates could make engagement more fertile in relation to adjustment efforts (Black and Gregersen, 1991). More specifically, the location of this study is Greater China where old age has a traditional positive significance (Selmer et al., 2009). This may carry over to expatriates which could contribute more to reinforce the benevolent effect of engagement on the adjustment

of older expatriates than that of their younger counterparts. Accordingly, examining the role of age may be important for understanding the effect of work engagement on intercultural adjustment, especially in Greater China.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between work engagement and SIE academics' adjustment and how this is affected by age. This seems to be a worthwhile endeavor. One reason why this is important is that while research on engagement has provided promising results for understanding organizational behavior, the concept has been largely ignored in cross-cultural management research, and, needless to say, also in studies of expatriates where it could play an important role for overcoming intercultural challenges. This is acknowledged in a review article by Lazarova et al. (2010) where calls are made for empirical research on the relation between engagement and intercultural adjustment. Since the early days of research on expatriation, adjustment has been a central theme and used, more or less, as a proxy for intended expatriate performance and other essential work outcomes of various kinds (e.g. Thomas & Lazarova, 2006). Unfortunately, later meta-analyses have not found any consistency of such relationships (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003). Hence, introducing work engagement in order to understand adjustment of expatriates could result in important new knowledge. As another reason to study engagement among expatriates, it has been argued that even though much work has been dedicated to identify correlates of engagement (e.g. Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), few empirical studies account for the role of engagement as a means through which organizations can create competitive advantages (Sonnentag et al., 2012; Wefald and Downey, 2009).

Understanding the effect of work engagement on expatriates' adjustment could assist in improving the effectiveness of cross-cultural management efforts.

Literature Review and Conceptualizations

Work Engagement

Work engagement has spawned a great deal of interest and activity since it was introduced in the organizational behavior literature by Kahn (1990). It has been argued that engaged workers feel positive about their situation, but beyond mere satisfaction they are motivated to expend energy on a task. In a comprehensive review, Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2011) found a growing consensus that engagement can be defined in terms of high levels of energy and high levels of involvement in work.

From Kahn's (1990) perspective, work engagement is a multidimensional concept reflecting the simultaneous investment of an individual's physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in active, full work performance. By including three dimensions, this construct provides a more complex and thorough understanding of individuals' relationships with their work, over and above concepts such as organizational commitment, workaholism, job satisfaction, job embeddedness, or job involvement (e.g. Bakker and Bal, 2010; Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008; Stander and Rothmann, 2010). Herein lies that engagement has to do with enthusiasm for the work itself and that engagement connotes activation (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001). Based on Khan's and other's work, three dimensions of work engagement were distinguished by

Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2002); absorption (cognitive dimension), dedication (emotional dimension), and vigor (physical dimension).

Absorption can be described as full concentration on the job and as the experience of being happily engrossed in one's work. Individuals highly absorbed in their work can be so immersed that they lose all track of time and have difficulty detaching. Dedication is characterized by strong involvement in work, enthusiasm, and a sense of pride and challenge. Vigor can be seen as being energetic, mentally resilient, and able to persist when difficulties arise at work.

Even though work engagement has day-level variations, it is generally a relatively stable and enduring state (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Wefald et al., 2011). For example, in a longitudinal study Mauno et al. (2007) found that over a two year period intra-individual engagement levels did not show much variation. While work engagement is mainly conceptualized as positive attitudes (e.g. Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002), engagement can in some situations also have a negative effect on organizational outcomes (e.g. Britt et al., 2012; Hallsten, 1993; Kühnel et al., 2009; Vinje and Mittelmark, 2007). In this regard Kahn (1990) argues that engaged workers are motivated to expend energy even in the face of difficulties and threats to their well-being. Accordingly, engagement could have negative as well as positive implications for intercultural adjustment – not least for academic SIEs.

Intercultural Adjustment

Adjustment has traditionally been one of the most important themes of expatriate research. The

concept of intercultural adjustment depicts to what extent individuals are well integrated in daily life and work in the host location as their ability to fit in or to negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture (Davies et al., 2015; Salamin and Davoine, 2015). This is often measured by the amount of difficulty experienced in the management of everyday situations and is argued to increase the individual's effectiveness (Hemmasi and Downes, 2013; Isakovic and Whitman, 2013; Ward and Kennedy, 1994). To this concept of adjustment, one can also add the time it takes for the expatriate to become proficient at the job as an important element (Pinder and Schroeder, 1987). The shorter the period is before one is fully proficient at the job, the more efficient the transition into the new job or work role (Shaffer and Harrison, 1998).

The concept of intercultural adjustment is generally understood from a social learning perspective where adaptation to a foreign culture can be thought of as a sense-making process in which expatriates make their world more predictable (Caligiuri, 2000). In this theory, experiences shape learning and future behavior so that the observation of behavior, the consequences associated with that behavior, and the modeling of that behavior will result in better adjustment (Littrell et al., 2006). The link between social learning and modeling of behavior may be useful when explaining the effect of engagement on intercultural adjustment. This link is well documented because engagement has since long been connected to learning in educational research (e.g. Marks, 2000).

When arriving in a new country, norms for behavior are unclear and there is therefore a greater tendency that behaviors which determine adjustment will be shaped by personal resources and attitudes (Shaffer et al., 2006). Therefore, the expatriate's adjustment could to a high extent rely on

his or her level of engagement. The adjustment process is argued to be guided by three basic human needs: 1) the need for predictability and order (finding general meaning), 2) the need to be accepted and liked (getting along in interactions), and 3) the need for status and power (achieving job objectives) (Shaffer et al., 2006). This is commensurate to the three-dimensional framework of intercultural adjustment suggested by Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991); General adjustment, interaction adjustment and job adjustment. Hence, engagement may facilitate social learning that could affect intercultural adjustment in general life, in interactions, and on the job. Moreover, engagement could affect how quickly the individual adjusts – the time to proficiency.

Hypotheses

Work Engagement and General Adjustment

Expatriates who are engaged in their job could be argued to focus their physical effort on the pursuit of role-related goals as well as being cognitively attentive and emotionally connected to the job and their colleagues (Sonnentag et al., 2012). This makes them faster learners and thus better able to adjust to the host country context. In other words, engaged expatriates can be expected to invest themselves more fully in their adjustment to the new situation, and they should be more willing to step outside the bounds of their normal routines and take part in new ways of living (Bakker et al., 2012). This not only relates to the job context but may well also have a spillover effect into non-work activities (cf. Takeuchi et al., 2002).

One of the reasons that engaged expatriates could be predicted to generally adjust better to the

host country situation is that engagement and the positive view of life that follows seem to broaden individuals' momentary thought-action repertoire. They simply draw on a greater variety of personal resources, thoughts, and actions that come to mind, for solving problems in daily life (Fredrickson, 2001). These resources may include psychological, social, intellectual, and physical resources (Bakker et al., 2012). Hence, engagement fosters a mental frame in which the expatriate includes a wider array of behaviors that could ultimately benefit the general adjustment process (cf. Sonnentag et al., 2012). Accordingly, we present the first set of hypotheses.

Hypotheses 1a-c: Work engagement, in the form of absorption (1a), dedication (1b), and vigor (1c), is positively associated with general adjustment.

Work Engagement and Interaction Adjustment

There could be several arguments for why engaged expatriates could adjust better to interactions with locals than non-engaged workers. One of the most important reasons is that engaged employees often experience happiness, joy, and enthusiasm and that this makes them pleasant and good company (Bakker et al., 2012). Engaged individuals are described as being psychologically present, fully there, attentive, connected, and integrated (Sonnentag et al., 2012). Kahn (1990) argued that engaged employees are more interpersonally collaborative, more open to others and bring their complete selves to perform. They are thus more willing to learn about their foreign colleagues and how they function themselves in the new situation.

Engaged employees do not only foster positive emotions in themselves. Some research has also shown that engaged employees facilitate a positive climate around them by being responsive and helpful to others (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Cropanzano and Wright, 2001). Thereby engaged employees often create a positive team climate, independent of the demands and resources they are exposed to, and thus influence their colleagues positively (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). The increased contact between expatriates and locals that can result from positive attitudes should lead to better adjustment to the new forms of interactions. Based on the above arguments, we propose the next set of hypotheses.

Hypotheses 2a-c: Work engagement, in the form of absorption (2a), dedication (2b), and vigor (2c), is positively associated with interaction adjustment.

Work Engagement, Job Adjustment, and Time to Proficiency

One way that work engagement differs conceptually from many other attitudes is that it is closely aligned with task-specific motivation which helps to explain why it is often found to be related with performance (Christian et al., 2011). The energetic focus on the task enables expatriates to adjust to the best way this is performed in the new context. It has also been argued that engaged employees care very much about performance outcomes (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Therefore, they make sure they are attuned to learn aspects of the work environment that will either increase or decrease their possibility for performing well. For example, Schaufeli et al. (2002) argue that engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work activities and see themselves as able to deal completely with the demands of their job.

Accordingly, Britt et al. (2012) argue that engaged employees will actively search for the presence, and especially the absence, of features in the work environment that facilitate successful performance. That kind of energized performance-oriented searching and learning behavior will motivate the expatriate to choose the best functioning practices in the new context and thus adjust their work routines to this as fast as possible. Supporting this, in a study of expatriate academics in Singapore, Luring and Selmer (2015) found positive effects of vigor on work performance and of dedication on job satisfaction. Therefore we hypothesize:

Hypotheses 3a-c: Work engagement, in the form of absorption (3a), dedication (3b), and vigor (3c), is positively associated with job adjustment.

Hypotheses 4a-c: Work engagement, in the form of absorption (4a), dedication (4b), and vigor (4c), is negatively associated with time to proficiency.

The Moderating Role of Age

Today's workplace includes workers of all ages from young adulthood to the retirement eligible and beyond, all of whom are in different stages of their careers. This is also the case for SIEs (Selmer and Luring, 2010). The life-span perspective would suggest that there might be differences among these employees on the basis of different norms and expectations about work at different points in their career cycle. Not only may different age groups have different levels of engagement, the effect of engagement could also function differently for these groups (James et al., 2011).

A general argument has been, that, due to greater experience, older expatriates report more favorable organizational outcomes in terms of job satisfaction and adjustment (Black and Gregersen, 1991). This experience of older expatriates may also make the energy associated with work engagement more effective in assisting the adjustment process. In other words, while older employees may not have the same energy as younger employees, they often have experiences from different contexts of their work life. Accordingly, if older expatriates hold a high level of energy together with a high level of experience applied to a task, then it is likely that they could adjust better and quicker to the same situation than their younger counterparts. The specific cultural context of Greater China may also facilitate the effect of work engagement on the adjustment of older expatriates as opposed to their younger counterparts. Compared to many Western cultures, where youth is glorified and the age of people with whom one works is typically not even considered (Vasil and Wass, 1993), there may be a positive relationship between age and perceived possession of high quality personal resources in Chinese dominated societies (Ho, 1996; Hwang, 1987; Ikels, 2002). Elders in Chinese culture are highly respected and obeyed and older people may also be appreciated for their wisdom and kindness and are therefore sought after for counsel and guidance (cf. Liu, 1996; Yang, 1994). The positive attitudes towards old age may carry over to expatriates living and working in countries dominated by Chinese culture. There is a possibility that, at least visibly older expatriates, will generally enjoy more respect and be treated with more deference by host country nationals in a Chinese culture than their apparently younger colleagues (Selmer et al., 2009). This culturally-based behavior may also contribute to reinforce the benevolent effect of engagement on the

adjustment process for older expatriates over that of their younger counterparts.

Hypothesis 5: Age moderates the association between the three dimensions of work engagement and the four dimensions of intercultural adjustment so that the effect is stronger with a high age than with a low age.

Method

Target Population, Data Collection and Sample

The study targeted SIE academics residing in Greater China comprising (mainland) China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore and Taiwan. This specific area was selected because of the distinctiveness in culture and language that makes the area different from most other places in the world and therefore particularly challenging for expatriates to adjust to thus making work engagement particularly important (Peng et al., 2001). A web-based survey software package was used to administer the questionnaire. Based on information from LinkedIn and university web pages, the online questionnaire was sent to 1532 staff members employed at 69 universities in Greater China. Initial screening questions were applied to retain only SIE academics who were residents in Greater China. Eventually, 684 responses were received amounting to a response rate of 45 per cent. Of these, 640 respondents passed all screening questions suggesting that they were all SIEs currently residing in Greater China. The average age of these respondents was 46.57 years ($SD=11.24$) and, on average, they had spent 6.57 years in Greater China ($SD=6.63$) having worked as an expatriate academic for an average of 11.07 years ($SD=8.60$), including

their current job (see also Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Instrument

All main variables were measured by established multi-item scales. Work engagement was measured with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale which includes the three subscales of vigor ($\alpha=.81$), dedication ($\alpha=.89$), and absorption ($\alpha=.84$). Response categories ranged from (1) strongly agree to (7) strongly disagree. This scale has been validated in many different contexts by many different researchers (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Intercultural adjustment was assessed by the commonly used three dimensional scale developed by Black and Stephens (1989). This measure has been found to be structurally equivalent with a good fit in culturally dissimilar samples providing evidence of its construct validity (Robie and Ryan, 1996). Although this widely-used scale has been criticized for being merely a statistical construct (e.g. Brewster, 1993), Shaffer et al. (2006) have argued that the scale has in fact a sound theoretical foundation. Moreover, this measure has been replicated in a large number of studies (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Hechanova et al., 2003). The scale is designed to measure all three dimensions of adjustment: General adjustment ($\alpha=.89$), interaction adjustment ($\alpha=.92$), and job adjustment ($\alpha=.88$). Response categories ranged from (1) very unadjusted to (7) completely adjusted. Added to this, we used a four items scale by Pinder and Schroeder (1987) to measure time to proficiency ($\alpha=.77$) as another indicator of intercultural adjustment.

As a moderator, age was assessed through a direct question to the respondents: “How old were you on your last birthday?”. Time in current location was applied as a control variable since adapting to a new location and job abroad can be regarded as a process over time following a learning curve (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). This variable was estimated by a direct question to the respondents: “How long have you had your current academic job in the host location?”. Also Time as an expatriate academic was applied as control since there may be some similarities between how academic work is undertaken in different foreign locations, and the longer the experience of the respondents, the greater could be the likelihood that they have acquired useful ways how to organize and discharge their work in Greater China. This variable was also measured as a direct question: “How long have you worked abroad as an academic expatriate, including the current job?”

Data Analysis Techniques

Sample means, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlations were computed for all variables of the study. The hypotheses were formally tested by way of hierarchical multiple regression. To reduce multicollinearity, the variables used in the interactions were standardized prior to analysis and the interactions that emerged were plotted, one standard deviation above the mean as the high mean, and one standard deviation below the mean as the low mean (Aiken and West, 1991). We also tested whether the simple slope was statistically significant.

Results

One-sample t-tests showed that the mean scores for three of the criterion variables depicting intercultural adjustment; general adjustment ($t=42.44$, $p<.001$), interaction adjustment ($t=26.90$, $p<.001$), and job adjustment ($t=40.08$, $p<.001$) were all significantly higher than the midpoint of their respective scales. This indicates that the respondents, on average, felt that they were well adjusted to general life in the host location, to interactions with locals, and to their job. The significant relationships between the proposed control variables and three of the four criterion variables (please see Table 2) support the use of these variables as control in the regression analyses.

Insert Table 2 about here

The hypotheses were formally tested by way of hierarchical multiple regression (Table 3). The control variables were entered in Step 1. As presumed, this resulted in significant associations with the criterion variables. There was a positive association between time in host location and job adjustment ($\beta=.15$; $p<.01$) as well as positive relationships between time as an expatriate academic and general adjustment ($\beta=.24$; $p<.001$) and interaction adjustment ($\beta=.19$; $p<.001$). In Step 2, the work engagement variables were entered. This produced significant relationships with all the criterion variables. There was a negative association between absorption and job adjustment ($\beta=-.10$; $p<.05$). Dedication had a positive relationship with job adjustment ($\beta=.21$; $p<.001$) and a negative relationship with time to proficiency ($\beta=-.12$; $p<.05$). Vigor had positive associations with general adjustment ($\beta=.18$; $p<.001$), interaction adjustment ($\beta=.13$; $p<.01$), and job adjustment ($\beta=.22$; $p<.001$) as well as a negative

relationship with time to proficiency ($\beta = -.23$; $p < .001$). In Step 3, the moderator variable, age, was entered but this did not result in any significant relationship with the criterion variables. In Step 4, the interaction terms were entered. This only resulted in a significant relationship with one of criterion variables. There was a negative association between dedication x age and time to proficiency ($\beta = -.11$; $p < .05$). Most F values were statistically significant, indicating a proper fit between the regression model and the data.

To explore the character of the moderating relationship detected, the significant interactions were plotted in Figure 1. This figure shows that age moderates dedication. For a high age, dedication has a stronger negative association with time to proficiency than for a low age. In other words, the moderating effect of age is stronger for older than for younger SIEs, irrespective of whether the extent of dedication is low or high. Tests of the simple slope indicated that the linkage between dedication and time to proficiency was significant both when the age was low ($t = -2.12$, $p < .05$) and high ($t = 2.04$, $p < .05$). These findings provide support for hypotheses 1c, 2c, 3b, 3c, 4b and 4c while hypothesis 3a was rejected. Hypothesis 5 was partly supported since age moderated the effect of dedication on time to proficiency.

Insert Table 3 about here

Insert Figure 1 about here

Discussion

Main Findings

The different dimensions of intercultural adjustment seem to be affected differently by the three work engagement variables. Vigor has strong beneficial associations with all adjustment variables. Dedication had a strong positive relationship with job adjustment and a less strong negative association with time to proficiency. Absorption only had a negative association with job adjustment. This negative effect contradicted our prediction that was based on the general perception of engagement as a positive, often unitary, organizational variable (Bakker et al., 2012; Christian et al., 2011; Schaufeli et al., 2002). From that perspective, we anticipated all work engagement dimensions to influence the intercultural adjustment process positively. While this has been the general presumption, ours is not the first study to find negative aspects of work engagement (Britt et al., 2012; Kühnel et al., 2009) and in particular regarding absorption (Hallsten, 1993; Vinje and Mittelmark, 2007). However, it came as a surprise that absorption had a negative association with job adjustment since being happily immersed in one's work may appear to be an advantage. However, it may also be interpreted in the way that since the individual is so engrossed in the work task, he or she will continue previous work practices from the home country without taking the time and effort to adjust them to the new context. In other words, the cognitive energy applied to the job context could in some cases be damaging to the adjustment to general life and work in a foreign country if it removes attention from anything but the job task. Related to the case of SIE academics, if cognitive resources are depleted by one's academic work, then less energy will be used in dealing with the foreign environment instead of a conscious search for information of what would be the appropriate way to handle a given

situation. In other words, if the academic works too focused on his or her research area, there is a danger that this person will not be able to adapt to other aspects of the job simply because almost all attention is directed to the immediate task and only little to the surrounding work context. This result is similar to a study by Luring and Selmer (2015) where absorption was found to reduce job satisfaction among expatriate academics in Singapore. On the other hand, in this study, dedication had a *positive* association with the same variable, and vigor was positively associated with work performance. However, while absorption seems to be negative for academics working internationally, more research is needed on this theme.

The finding that absorption had a negative rather than positive effect on job adjustment also supports domestic studies that has been skeptical about absorption as being solely a positive organizational variable (Hallsten, 1993; Vinje and Mittelmark, 2007). When the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale was developed, only vigor and dedication were included from the inversion of the original Maslach Burnout Inventory (Schaufeli et al., 2002) on which the construct is based. Absorption was only added after a series of qualitative interviews. Even though the construct has been replicated and validated in many different contexts, none of those have been international or have dealt with adjustment. Based on the findings of the current study, some caution may be appropriate when applying the three-dimensional work engagement construct as a unitary scale measuring positive organizational behavior in international contexts.

We also found that age had a moderating effect on the relation between dedication and time to proficiency. This indicates that the dedication of older expatriates is more effective in facilitating

a quick adjustment process than the dedication of young expatriates – possibly due to more experience. But the specific cultural context of Greater China, with its predominant positive attitudes towards old age, may also have reinforced the influence of dedication on time to proficiency (Selmer et al., 2009). Among the adjustment variables, job adjustment was most related to work engagement since all engagement dimensions had significant associations with job adjustment. This could be explained by work engagement being indeed a work-task related motivational concept. Hence, it is not surprising that work engagement is more associated with job adjustment than with general or interaction adjustment.

To conclude, a picture seems to form that vigor is most positive and absorption least positive for intercultural adjustment with dedication being of medium importance. Nonetheless, since the work engagement construct affected all intercultural adjustment dimensions, our study indicates that work engagement could be an important but overlooked variable in cross-cultural management.

Limitations

As always, this study may have a number of potential shortcomings that could limit to what extent it may be generalized. First, a potential problem of this study could be common method variance (CMV) since all the data were collected by cross-sectional self-reports. However, the general and automatic condemnation of cross-sectional self-report methods have been found exaggerated to the extent that it may have achieved the status of a methodological urban legend (Spector, 2006). Nevertheless, to investigate the potential for biases of CMV, Harman's single factor test was

applied (Aulakh and Gencturk, 2000). The exploratory factor analysis of the items, corresponding to all the variables of the study, resulted in a seven-factor, unrotated solution where none of the factors accounted for the majority of the covariance among the factors. Additionally, it has been argued that moderation effects, commensurate with the one we have found, cannot be caused by CMV (Chang et al., 2010). Finally, the fact that we obtained different results for the different work engagement dimensions cannot be explained by any method bias. Hence, while CMV could have had some effect on the study, we estimate that it was not a serious problem.

Secondly, we used self-report measures of work engagement and adjustment. While this is the most common way of using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, data from supervisors or peers could also have been applied. However, since engagement is related to well-being, it is to a high extent a subjectively felt state. In other words, the precise physical, emotional, and cognitive energy applied to a work task that can be observed by others may not accurately describe the work engagement level of a person since different persons have different physical, emotional, and cognitive resources to invest in a task. Regarding adjustment, adding peer ratings could have improved the reliability of the findings. This, however, presents other methodological problems such as low response rates.

Thirdly, our sample consists of SIE academics. This could limit the generalization of our findings. The respondents in our study have chosen to become expatriates as they may have sought out opportunities in Greater China because of their research and teaching interests. That could make them quite different from traditional, assigned expatriates. On the other hand, similar to other types of organizations, the university sector has become increasingly international and academics all over

the world are now part of an international labor market (Mamiseishvili and Rosser, 2010). Moreover, the gap between work relations in the private sector and those in academia is diminishing (Krejsler, 2006). Hence, the effect of work engagement on intercultural adjustment of SIE academics may not be particularly different from that of other SIEs relocating to, for example, an international marketing department or a global research and development department of a large prestigious multinational corporation.

Finally, since this investigation used a cross-sectional research design, causality cannot be determined with certainty. However, most researchers acknowledge that even though an individual's work engagement level may vary from day to day, it is also a relatively stable state with high interpersonal variation (Mauno et al., 2007; Wefald et al., 2011). While it is likely that some dual causality does exist, one result that suggests that the main argument for the causality of this study should not be reversed is the finding that absorption is negatively related to job adjustment. Although it can easily be explained that too much absorption into one's work will remove focus from adjusting to the job context, it is difficult to imagine that being well adjusted to the job will lead to low levels of cognitive energy. This direction of the causality is in line with the general argument in much psychological research (Macey and Schneider, 2008; Mauno et al., 2007; Sonnentag, 2003) but contradicts the predictions of a conceptual management article (Lazarova et al., 2010). Nonetheless, based on ours and others' findings, we find it reasonable to understand work engagement as an independent variable influencing intercultural adjustment although we acknowledge that adjustment could also to some extent influence work engagement.

Implications for Theory

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on expatriates as well as to studies on work engagement in general. The introduction of the work engagement concept to empirical expatriate research is timely since the construct has already had an important impact on organizational behavior research in domestic organizations. As the findings of this study show, work engagement has an important effect on one of the key variables in expatriate research, namely intercultural adjustment. Accordingly, the work engagement construct should have a more central position in models depicting antecedent and results of expatriates' organizational behavior and the management of their human resources – not least in the case of SIE academics. Also, since our study supports research that predicts varying outcomes of different work engagement dimensions and negative outcomes of absorption, in some cases, it may also have theoretical implications for engagement research in general.

Managerial Relevance

Based on our results, it can be recommended that organizations ensure a high degree of vigor and dedication among its international staff while being more careful to promote exceeding work absorption.

According to our results, expatriates that show high levels of dedication and vigor, in the tasks that they will be performing, should preferably be selected for the job while recruiters should be more careful with highly absorbed individuals. Moreover, our findings also indicate that organizations should not avoid older expatriates as the dedication has a greater effect on the speed of adjustment.

While focusing on selection is one way to deal with this issue, existing work engagement levels could also be increased by certain managerial initiatives. For example, several studies have revealed that challenging, resourceful work environments facilitate work engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Bakker et al., 2012; Kühnel et al., 2009). This implies that organizations employing expatriates should offer their employees sufficient job resources, including feedback, organizational support, and development of skill variety (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007; Sonnentag et al., 2012). While pre-departure organizational support in terms of training is rarely possible for SIEs, post-arrival assignment training could be applied to ease intercultural adjustment even for individuals that do not have so high vigor and dedication. This could also assist individuals with very high job absorption to focus more on intercultural adjustment issues and not only on the job. This type of training could be valuable as it has been argued that post-arrival training is more effective than pre-departure training (Selmer et al., 1998).

Conclusion

Very few prior cross-cultural management studies have focused on the role of work engagement. This is unfortunate since work engagement could be important for the adjustment to a new culture. This study examined work engagement among SIEs in Greater China. Contrary to the general conception, we found different dimensions of work engagement to have different effects on adjustment. Vigor had a beneficial relationship with all adjustment variables. Dedication was positively associated with job adjustment and negatively related to time to proficiency. On the other hand, absorption was negatively associated with job adjustment. This result is important because it suggests that work engagement may have a different effect in international

organizations than in domestic organizations. Our findings that age had a moderating effect on the relation between dedication and time to proficiency for SIEs in Greater China support the presumption that the importance of personal characteristics may be contingent on the specific cultural context of the expatriate host location.

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TABLE 1: Background of the Sample (N=640) ¹

Background Variables	Frequency	Per cent
Gender:		
Male	485	75.8
Female	155	24.2
Married:	431	67.3
Position:		
Tutor/Teacher/Instructor	68	11.0
Research/Teaching Assistant	20	3.2
Assistant Professor	219	35.3
Associate Professor	185	29.8
Full/Chair Professor	128	20.6
Academic Field:		
Natural Sciences/Engineering	116	18.2
Humanities	195	30.7
Social Sciences and Education	169	26.6
Business, Law and Communication	127	20.0
Health Sciences	28	4.4
Nationality Group:		
Greater China	8	1.3
Other Asia	54	8.4
Non-Asia	578	90.3

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	6	7	8	9	10
1. General Adjustment	5.75	1.04	1.00									
2. Interaction adjustment	5.42	1.34	.64***	1.00								
3. Job Adjustment	5.74	1.10	.51***	.45***	1.00							
4. Time to Proficiency	.02	.78	-.16***	-.17***	-.26***	1.00						
5. Absorption	5.15	.98	.08*	.13***	.13**	-.10**	1.00					
6. Dedication	5.78	1.01	.17***	.18***	.31***	-.24***	.52***	1.00				
7. Vigor	5.38	1.05	.22***	.21***	.33***	-.28***	.50***	.66***	1.00			
8. Age	46.57	11.24	.14***	.20***	.16***	-.10*	.05	.07	.09*	1.00		
9. Time in Host Location	6.57	6.63	.19***	.25***	.21***	.02	.03	.01	.05	.43***	1.00	
10. Time as an Expatriate Academic	11.07	8.60	.26***	.29***	.20***	-.03	.05	.01	.07	.54***	.69***	1.00

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

¹ 637<n<640 due to missing values

TABLE 3: Results of Hierarchical Regressions for Work Engagement on Intercultural Adjustment Moderated by Age ^a

	Intercultural Adjustment			
	General Adjustment	Interaction Adjustment	Job Adjustment	Time to Proficiency
	β	β	β	β
Step 1 (Control)				
Time in Host Location	.03	.09	.15**	.09
Time as an Expatriate Academic	.24***	.19***	.07	-.04
R ²	.07	.09	.05	.00
F	23.04***	30.19***	16.97***	1.33
Step 2 (Work Engagement)				
Absorption	-.06	.02	-.10*	.08
Dedication	.07	.08	.23***	-.14*
Vigor	.18***	.13**	.22***	-.23***
ΔR^2	.04	.04	.13	.09
R ²	.11	.13	.18	.09
ΔF	10.71***	10.35***	32.07***	19.87***
F	16.07***	18.82***	27.02***	12.50***
Step 3 (Moderator)				
Age	-.01	.05	.02	-.08
ΔR^2	.00	.00	.00	.01
R ²	.11	.13	.18	.10
ΔF	.14	.91	.54	4.26*
F	13.40***	15.83***	22.59***	11.18***
Step 4 (Interaction)				
Absorption x Age	.02	-.00	-.02	.03
Dedication x Age	-.02	-.02	.07	-.11*
Vigor x Age	-.03	-.02	-.03	.08
ΔR^2	.00	.00	.00	.01
R ²	.11	.13	.18	.11
ΔF	.27	.40	.59	1.73
F	9.00***	10.66***	15.23***	8.06***

^a All standardized regression coefficients are from the last model of the analyses.

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

FIGURE 1: Moderation of the Effect of Dedication on Time to Proficiency by Age.