Case Study on the adaptable social identity of expatriates and the effect of the local culture of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

Saudi Arabia has been undergoing social and economic reform as part of the 2030 Vision. The expatriate nature within Saudi Arabian organizations has been impacted by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The impacts of human resource management and development in Saudi Arabia have created a flowing back of expatriates to their home countries. However, a large crowd had stayed back amidst the issues. This research focuses on exploring expatriates' social identity in the context of cross-cultural adaptation, identity transformation.

Purposiveness narrative analysis was to understand expatriates' impact in Saudi Arabia and cross-cultural adaptation and identity transformation perspectives. Ten participants were purposively sampled and selected. Based on the case studies, the expatriates' life stories were developed by narrative analysis. The experiences of expatriates provided a comparable narration on the social identity of expatriates. Cross-cultural adaptation and identity transformation were discussed in the frame of a narrative profile. The effect of the Saudi Arabian culture on expatriate's life is also discussed in the research work. The study results concluded the complexities of expatriate adaptation.

Keywords: expatriates, cross-cultural adaptation, Social identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the research

The new situation has many implications in management and organizational processes. Cultural diversity has increased, and cultural competence is recognized as one of the key management skills. Cultural knowledge and appreciation, combined with technological professionalism, have become the keystones of intercultural business activity (O'Hara-Deveraux & Johansen 1994). Hofstede (1991) and Trompenaars (1994) claim national cultures constrain management theory and practices. However, the cultural reality is changing, and national cultures are in the process of transformation (Hofstede 1991). Sparrow and Hiltrop (1998) suggest a more dynamic International Human Resource Management (HRM) framework is needed. HRM should incorporate a broader cultural understanding, an appreciation of international competitive forces, and multinational corporations' role. Similarly, Harris, Brewster, and Sparrow write HRM has to develop a more global mindset, where the

significance of cultural factors is integrated into global HRM processes (2003).

As part of the global system, individual employees are increasingly being transferred and traveling from one place to another. International assignments challenge the HRM practices by the number of expatriate failures, poor performance and require a critical approach in all the stages of international assignments (Harris, Brewster & Sparrow 2003, Hiltrop & Janssens 1995). Many studies on expatriate careers, overseas effectiveness, and expatriate failure confirm these challenges (Storey 1996; Kauhanen 1997; Gudykunst & Hammer 1984; Suutari 2003; Harris, Brewster, Sparrow 2003).

The investigators also worked in Saudi Arabia in a vocational establishment for the past year in 2019-2020. Working abroad had implications for the investigator's personal life and family. Together with discussions with other expatriates and members of the host society, the personal experiences and observations motivated the investigation to explore international careers' complex situations. The study prompted

questions concerning expatriate adjustment, success, failure, preparation, training, and family issues, e.g., adjustment of spouse and children. In daily work in vocational education, international cooperation has become part of everyday work. The investigators were prompted to study intercultural matters more systematically.

1.2 A brief review of the research on expatriation

Cross-cultural management literature has increased since the 1970s. The research has focused on cultural differences and cross-cultural adaptation from culture shock (Holden 2002; Mendenhall et al. 2002). Living in cross-cultural settings, communication is usually the first distinct difference people face, and the literature suggests communication challenges are common in cross-cultural interchanges (Alban, 2013). The recent approach to expatriation emphasizes the perspectives of career and personal development (Peltonen,1998). Before introducing a brief review of the research areas' focus in the field, it is crucial to look at the term "expatriate."

The traditional definition of expatriate "refers to employees who are transferred out of their home base into some area of the firm's international operations" (Dowling & Welch, 2004, 7). Traditionally, expatriates work in multinational enterprises (Inkson, 1997; Brewster & Scullion, 1997; Suutari &Brewster, 2000). Inkson et al. (1997) discuss two models of expatriation: (1) Expatriate Assignment (EA) and (2) Overseas Experience (OE). The research claims the initiative for leaving originates from the employer in the case of expatriation in EA (Inkson, 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000). In EA, the international assignment goals are derived from the company's objectives, e.g., to work in the subsidiary or a particular project of the company. The company funds EA, which is usually part of a person's corporate career (Inkson et al. 1997).

1.2.1 Cross-cultural issues in expatriation

1.2.1.1 Cultural distance

Studies have shown general patterns of behavior consistent in some cultures and emphasize some features of interactions with people. Many scholars have presented lists of cultural dimensions. These dimensions have been studied chiefly in survey-type quantitative studies and used to explain and describe communication difficulties between people from different cultures.

Hofstede (1984) carried out the most comprehensive study in the field of cultural distances and dimensions. Hofstede and other research (Mendenhall, Punnett & Ricks 1995) claim the more immense the cultural distance between the expatriate's home culture and the host society's culture, the more complex the adaptation. Concerns have been expressed regarding the survey instruments and his study's validity (Ward, Bochner, Furnham 2001). The concern arises from the fact Hofstede's results are based on employees within one big multinational company. The critics claim a specific type of organization or industry may attract certain individuals with similar value systems, suitable to the organizational culture and the specific type of industry. One source of criticism arises from national, geographically framed cultures have transformed enormously since Hofstede's study (Holden 2002).

1.2.1.2 Cross-cultural adaptation

The earliest research on cross-cultural adaptation arose from studies on migration and mental health. In the beginning, the research was clinically oriented. This type of research was later questioned for its data collection and assumptions, and consequently, broader theoretical perspectives such as stress, coping, and adaptation, emerged. As the number of foreign exchange programs increased in international education, student adjustment became an important field of study. Studies on students were clinically oriented and highlighted the problems arising from intercultural contact. The culture shock was seen as a medical problem and difficulties and failures in the adaptation as an inability to cope or a personality weakness, requiring therapy or counseling (Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001). In this research, culture shock itself has no negative or positive connotations. Although many people experience culture shock during their international career, culture shock is not a prerequisite for successful cross-cultural adaptation (Harris & Moran 1979).

Coping with cross-cultural anxiety, disturbance and questions on adaptation are vital in the light of expatriate failure rates and expatriate

performance. However, it seems cultural distances are diminishing, and subsequently, it is difficult to apply previous theories emphasizing cultural differences and similarities to modern transitions. New directions in expatriate research attempt to combine cross-cultural adjustment with career perspective (Peltonen 1995; Peltonen 1998; Derr & Laurent 1989).

2.1 Purpose of the study

This study aims to increase and expand the understanding of expatriates' experiences of cross-cultural transitions and intercultural interactions during their careers in Saudi Arabia.

The study aims to increase and deepen the understanding of expatriates' experiences of cross-cultural transitions and intercultural interactions and the effect of the local culture of Saudi Arabia on the social identity of an expatriate. International experience is approached from the perspectives of cross-cultural adaptation, identity transformation, and learning. Based on the research task, the specified research questions can be formulated as

1.   How do expatriates in Saudi Arabia narrate their work and life?

2.   How can cross-cultural expatriate experience be understood from the perspectives of cross-cultural adaptation and social identity, and what are the effects of local Saudi culture on expatriates' social identity?

3.1 Literature Review

3.1.1 Black et al. model on cross-cultural adaptation and its applications

Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou present a comprehensive theoretical framework for international adaptation, referred to as the BMO model in this research (1991). Adjustment is a multifaceted combination of work, interaction with host nationals, and adjustment to the general environment. The BMO framework is presented in the following chapters as a combination of their articles and the work of Kauppinen (1994). Black et al. define adjustment as anticipatory adjustment and in-country adjustment. The research suggested when anticipatory adjustments are made, the actual in-country adjustment are more effortless. Anticipatory adjustment is dealt with from individual and organizational points of view. Organizational influence on the anticipatory adjustment comes mainly from selecting its employees and their training. The individual point of view of anticipatory adjustment refers to the previous international experience and pre-departure cross-cultural training. Three situational factors are essential in choosing the appropriate training methods. These include culture novelty, degree of interaction between the host culture, and job novelty. The training content is determined as a direct function of the three dimensions and is rather mechanistic.

The factors connected to in-country adjustment are divided into individual, job, organizational, and non-work. Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou present three categories of individual factors. The first category is skills related to self-efficacy or self-orientation. Self-orientation is understood as an ability to believe in oneself and to deal effectively within foreign surroundings. It is related to stress reduction and technical competence. The second category consists of skills related to interacting with host nationals. This category is composed of different skills for relationship development and willingness to communicate. The third category is related to cognitive skills. It helps the individual create a correct perception of the host environment and its social systems and select, organize and evaluate the environment and turn this into meaningful experiences (Black, Mendenhall, Oddou 1991; Kauppinen 1994).

Aycan (in Ward et al. 2001, 181) presents a more recent and comprehensive cross-cultural adaptation model. He distinguishes three forms of adjustment: psychological, sociocultural, and work adjustment. In most studies, only two types of adjustment are specified: psychological and sociocultural. Work adjustment is usually included in these two types. Psychological adjustment includes maintaining mental and physical well-being. Sociocultural adjustment means a sojourner becomes effective in the new host environment, can handle non-work problems, and maintains interpersonal relationships with the host society members. Work adjustment includes competent work performance, commitment to organizational and

work goals, and the ability to reach the goals. Compared to the BMO framework and the modified BMO framework by Kauppinen, Aycan's model includes the same elements, only grouped differently.

4.1 Research Methodology:

Data was collected using the interview method from ten expatriates residing in Dammam, Al Khobar, and Dhahran regions of Saudi Arabia. The expatriate was interviewed, and narratives were collected from each respondent. Based on the narrative, the expatriate experiences were categorized to analyze cross-cultural adaptation and identity changes by living and working in Saudi Arabia.

Participants answered eight open-ended survey questions to address the study research questions.

1. How do you find your way of living here compared to your home country?

- environment –climate- infrastructure

- ethnic aspects

- food

- other things

2. Does the political and religious situation in this area have any effect on your life?
3. Do you feel that you are received here as you are, an individual, or have you a feeling of trying to be changed somehow?
4. Have you found some professional differences in keeping up with your work challenges? Can you define them? Are they more technical or social or what?
5. Is your work new to you, or have you worked in the same field earlier? Do you like it?
6. Do you manage in the language spoken by host members of the society? Which language?
7. Have you recognized any symptoms of culture shock during your stay here?
8. Do you think that Saudi Arabian society is open to strangers?

3.1.1 Data Analysis and Findings of the Study

There were six female and four male interviewees in the study. The age distribution of the interviewees was from 32 years to 45 years. The interviewees had lived in Saudi Arabia, in general, for a relatively long time. The interviewees' experiences seemed to arise were similar in many aspects, suggesting there might be some typologies of expatriates to be found. For this purpose, the data was systematically reduced from each interview so all the interview texts would be reduced according to the same principles. There were four types of emphasis: emphasis on personal career, emphasis on the balance between career and personal matters, emphasis on the ideology behind the work, and the fourth type of interviewees were unstable in their relation to their career. Narrative profiles of the interviewees were framed and based on the profiles, three factors were identified and evaluated, namely:

- Adaptation

- Social Identity

- Impact of local Saudi Arabian culture

3.1.1.1 Adaptation

The findings of this study suggest cross-cultural adaptation is a broad and dynamic process, which involves various processes of individual change and transformation, and learning. Culture shock seemed to have very little relevance to the subjective experiences of interviewees' adaptation. The findings of the study did not indicate any linear connection between culture shock and adaptation.

3.1.1.2. Social Identity

The findings of this research argue identity transformation had taken place in Saudi Arabian expatriates. All interviewees confirmed they had changed their identity.

McAdams (1993, 94) claims there are tensions in the identity commitment of a person. For him, the most important commitments are ideological, occupational, and interpersonal commitments. Further, he claims these commitments are made to the future and the past, and a healthy identity affirms both change and continuity.

This research suggests the expatriates require more support in offering new options in their

career building and support in balancing the challenges arising from their work and private lives. There is a need for "tailor-made" training and development programs to support a healthy transformation and multiple identifications during the international assignment.

3.1.1.3 Impact of Saudi Arabian Culture on expatriates

The findings of this research state Saudi Arabian culture positively influences most expatriates. The expatriates could live a comfortable life and adjust to the Saudi Arabian culture and respect the local culture. Expatriates living in Saudi Arabia describe their relationships with friends and colleagues in Saudi Arabia in the warmest terms. There is a difference between the experiences of a Western expatriate and an Asian expatriate. The experiences between Western and Asian expatriates are entirely different, and these differences must be evaluated in detail in future research papers. Some of the expatriates were able to talk in Arabic, but the majority were either having a basic Arabic level or not at all able to talk in Arabic. The majority of the respondents believe the Saudi Arabian culture is open to strangers as they have a history of immigrants for centuries. But all the respondents were participating with the host members of the country.

6.1 Conclusion

This study contributed by exploring the phenomenon of cross-cultural adaptation of expatriates in Saudi Arabia. This area needs to be studied further. Research on different organizations in Saudi Arabia and their policies on salary and work-related benefits may be useful. The impact of organizational culture on individual expatriates needs further investigation in a complex and changing cultural context. The relation of organizational context to the nature of expatriation in the non-profit sector also needs further research. The study identified the social identity of the expatriate's changes due to cross-cultural adaptation.

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