

1. Expatriates in context – expanding perspectives on the expatriate situation

1.1 Introduction

Expatriate management research has played an important role in international business and international human resource (HR) management research during the last few decades. This is not surprising given the key role expatriates often play in foreign subsidiaries, their high cost, and the challenges they may face in foreign cultures. However, since the early research on expatriate success, the definition of an expatriate and what it means to be successful have expanded (Collings *et al.*, 2007; Brewster *et al.*, 2014). While prior research has greatly increased our understanding of the determinants of expatriate success, the literature is criticized for being largely expatriate-centric, particularly focused on corporate expatriates, and with a somewhat singular focus on increasing expatriate cross-cultural adjustment (Takeuchi, 2010). This is problematic because the background, motivation, and experiences of the different types of expatriates, e.g. corporate vs self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), may vary substantially (Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013). Accordingly, organizations need to concern themselves beyond simply the adjustment of their expatriates, and look at whether the objectives of expatriation have been met – both long and short term, and the impact it has had, and may continue to have, on multiple stakeholders.

With this comes a greater imperative to broaden our research perspectives. These perspectives should account for a greater range of expatriate types and the increasing presence of women expatriates and expatriates from emerging economies (Collings *et al.*, 2007; Mayrhofer and Scullion, 2002). When defining expatriate success, our perspectives should also involve a longer time frame (including repatriation, career outcomes, and sustainability), and a wider range of stakeholders directly or indirectly implicated by the expatriation process (Oddou *et al.*, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2013). Cross-cultural contact impacts and requires adaptation of all parties involved – not simply the expatriate (Berry, 1997). A multiple stakeholder perspective is also crucial for developing sustainable expatriation management practices. We should also be interested in processes – asking what roles various stakeholders play in the expatriation process, and what effect expatriation may have on these stakeholders. We suggest that stakeholders could include, but are not limited to: the multinational headquarters and its subsidiaries, host country nationals (HCNs) within and outside of the workplace, other expatriates in the host unit or in other subsidiaries, spouse/partner, family members, and host communities and nations.

2. Papers in this special issue

The papers in this special issue are diverse in terms of topics, theories, and methodologies. The topics cover expatriate success, social support, social networks, HR policies to foster expatriate employability and HCN perspectives. In line with the diverse topics, papers draw from different theoretical perspective such as social capital, social support, embeddedness, and categorization theory. The methodological approaches range from narrative reviews, a case study, qualitative interviews, experiments, to social network analysis. Despite the variation, all the papers seek to expand our perspectives on the expatriate situation.

The first paper entitled “Success and failure in international assignments: a review and a proposed multi-dimensional model” is written by Angelo S. DeNisi and Shirley Sonesh. Based on a comprehensive review, they build a multi-dimensional model clarifying the different criteria of expatriate success distinguishing between task performance, relationship building, contextual performance, and retention. They adopt a performance management perspective to further increase our understanding of the different success criteria and their antecedents. This conceptual model is an important advancement of how we should think about what expatriate success really means and how we should manage it.

The second paper entitled “Expatriate support and success: a systematic review of organization-based sources of social support” by Paul van der Laken, Marloes van Engen, Marc van Veldhoven, and Jaap Paauwe provides a comprehensive review of social support in the expatriate context. Based on the review of 39 studies they conclude that expatriates receive support from multiple sources, e.g. supervisors, co-workers, yet the most crucial source seems to be the organization. The authors also identified several, potential moderating variables. Overall, their review presents an excellent starting point to further empirically scrutinize the role of social support in predicting various expatriate outcomes.

The third paper entitled “How and why does expatriation management influence expatriates’ employability” by Joost Bucker, Erik Poutsma, and Hananja Monster connects the employability and expatriate literature. Findings based on a case study of a Dutch international engineering firm suggest that expatriation management policies influence expatriates’ employability, though not always in the desirable way. The authors provide recommendations for how organizations can better align their HR policies with the interests of their expatriate employees. Further empirical research with different types of expatriates and in different organizations and countries could validate the results of this study.

The fourth paper entitled “Embeddedness and social support of self-initiated and assigned expatriates – the role of social networks” by Barbara Agha-Alikhani investigates the social networks of expatriates. Based on qualitative interviews and social network analysis, she found that SIEs tend to have a larger network, while organization expatriates (OEs) tend to have a denser network. Moreover, SIEs seem more closely embedded within their occupation and have more global ties than assigned expatriates. A novel feature of this paper is that it introduced social network analysis to the expatriate literature.

The fifth paper entitled “Interpersonal affect and HCN support of expatriates: an investigation in China” by Arup Varma, Pawan Budhwar, Anastasia Katou, and Jossy Matthew investigates the role of individual values and attitudes in predicting helping and support behavior by HCN employees toward expatriates. Findings based on an experimental design using professionals working in multinationals show that

collectivistic Chinese employees had a more positive affect toward expatriates and were thus more willing to provide role information and social support. Another intriguing finding was that Chinese employees were more likely to offer support to female expatriates than male expatriates.

3. Contributions and future research

By offering new perspectives on the expatriate situation, the five papers in this special issue inspire new research avenues. Drawing from the five papers we highlight four main contributions and propose related suggestions for future research.

First, given the increasingly complex situation and objectives of expatriation, the papers in this special issue help clarify the different dimensions of expatriate success. Based on a comprehensive literature review, the first paper proposes a conceptual model of expatriate success dimensions. The second paper further suggests that the positive effect of social support has a varying influence on different expatriate outcome dimensions depending on proximity. For instance, whereas supervisor support has a direct effect on expatriate job performance, organizational support has an influence on expatriate commitment. Future research may empirically investigate how the predictors differentially affect the various dimensions of expatriate success, as well as how the dimensions may relate to one another.

Second, the papers of this special issue also respond to the reality of increased diversity in expatriate types (Collings *et al.*, 2007; Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013). The fourth paper investigates differences between OEs and SIEs, and the third paper focuses on expatriate engineers. Both papers suggest differences between different types of expatriates and encourage us to further explore similarities of and differences between expatriates. In today's "global war for talent" a more nuanced understanding of global talent is necessary for organizations to better attract, motivate, and retain expatriates.

Third, as prior research has been criticized for being overly expatriate-centric (Takeuchi, 2010), the papers of this special issue greatly contribute to an increased understanding of the different stakeholders involved in the expatriation process. The second paper provides a comprehensive review of the different people, as well as the organization, expatriates can receive support from. The third paper demonstrates how the organization can design HR policies to improve the employability of expatriates. The fourth paper investigates the social network of expatriates and the fifth paper focuses on HCNs as an important source of support. All studies demonstrate the importance of different stakeholders for expatriates. Thus, more research is warranted to better understand the important role of the multiple stakeholders in predicting expatriate success.

Fourth, the papers in this special issue represent a diverse set of methodological approaches. The first two papers perform narrative literature reviews, the third paper uses a case study approach, the fourth paper employs social network analysis, and the fifth paper uses an experimental design. All studies help obtain a deeper understanding and should encourage future researchers to be open to innovative research designs.

In conclusion, the goal of the papers of this special issue is to provide useful insights and stimulate further research to advance our understanding of expatriation.

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Further reading

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