

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

1997 Conference Proceedings (Stillwater, OK)

Antecedents of intercultural adjustment of American expatriates in the People's Republic of China.

Hallet Hullinger
Oral Roberts University

Robert Nolan
Oklahoma State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Hullinger, Hallet and Nolan, Robert (1997). "Antecedents of intercultural adjustment of American expatriates in the People's Republic of China.," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1997/papers/25>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Antecedents of intercultural adjustment of American expatriates in the People's Republic of China.

Hallet Hullinger
Oral Roberts University

and

Robert Nolan
Oklahoma State University

Abstract: A greater understanding of the antecedents of intercultural adjustment of Americans working in China can assist organizations in selecting, training and supporting employees who work in this country. Interviews with forty Americans and seven Chinese living in Beijing yielded seven categories of adjustment factors labeled as personality, expectations, prior overseas experience, motivation, language skills, intra- and intercultural relationships, preparation and training. Four categories could be classified as endogenous, that is originating within the person, and three could be considered exogenous, that is originating within the environment.

Background and Purpose of the Research

The growing reality of a world economy shapes the futures of many U.S. organizations including universities. In 1991 the U.S. had more than 3500 multinational corporations, 55,000 companies with regular international involvement, and 40,000 firms that carry out periodic operations abroad (Harris & Moran, 1991). American companies have responded to the trading potential of other countries. China, in particular, provides a source of inexpensive manufacturing and a market for U.S. goods and services. China has the "fastest growing economy on earth" with an annual growth of over ten percent from 1991 - 1995 (Zhang & Liu, 1995, p. 3). The total foreign trade between the U.S. and China in 1992 was nearly 17.5 billion (China Statistical Yearbook, 1993).

The success of expatriate businessmen, university professors and exchange students assumes increasing importance if the United States is to further cultural, scholarly, and economic exchanges with China. Yet, despite the recent flurry of exchanges, Hofstede (1991) maintains that organizations sending representatives abroad have yet to understand those factors which facilitate adjustment to host countries and host cultures. The purpose of this research study was to clarify, define and describe the antecedents of intercultural adjustment for American expatriates living in Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China.

Theoretical Perspective

Pratt (1989) maintained that one of the difficulties in adaptation for U.S. citizens living in China related to the divergent concepts of the self deeply imbedded in each respective culture. Such differences in cultural assumptions often result in early terminations which Caudron (1991), speaking of foreign assignments in general, judged to be between 18 and 68%. Yet, failure in an overseas assignment has rarely been due to lack of technical expertise, but rather reflected an inability to adapt to cultural differences (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Marquardt & Engel, 1993). Black and Gregerson (1991) used an in-depth analysis of prior literature on cross cultural adjustment, with special reference to Pacific Rim nations, to develop a model which distinguished between 'anticipatory' factors of adjustment from 'in-country' factors of adjustment. This study attempts to further clarify those 'anticipatory' factors of adjustment by exploring the expatriate's own experience of preparing for life and work in China.

Methodology

It was decided, given the complexity of the adjustment process, that the best way to understand this process was from the expatriate's own perceptions. Although qualitative approaches are typically associated with exploratory research, qualitative methods can be used to clarify and enrich areas that have previously been the domain of quantitative methodology (Merriam, 1988). The particular qualitative method chosen was to conduct in-depth interviews. Collecting data by means of in-depth interviews allowed for more complete, freer expression of ideas in the context of a one-to-one personal encounter and the ensuing authentic dialog. The interview approach to data collection, as contrasted to the survey approach, also allowed for observations of nonverbal cues and other manifestations of affective aspects of the subject's adjustment process.

A semi-structured interview guide was chosen for collecting data because of its ability to elicit important information from the viewpoint of the subject interviewed rather than the interviewer (Merriam, 1988). The interview guide was developed based on the antecedents of expatriate adjustment first identified by Black and Gregerson (1991). Additional questions relating to self-efficacy (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985) and motivation (Furnham, 1987) reflect themes that emerged during the pilot interviews. Pilot interviews were conducted with twelve expatriates living in Beijing six months before the data collection phase of the research on a separate trip to China with subjects unrelated to the study sample.

Population Selected for the Study

Following Patton (1990), a purposeful sample was chosen to provide the maximum amount and the best quality of information. The sample was selected from a population of U.S. expatriate professionals working and residing in Beijing, People's Republic of China. They included professionals working in the fields of business, education and government. To achieve a degree of triangulation interviews were also conducted with Chinese nationals who had worked extensively with U.S. expatriates. In qualitative research, a sample is judged to be adequate when additional cases appear to add no new information to the phenomenon under investigation. This level of saturation was reached when forty U.S. expatriates had been interviewed. Seven additional interviews were conducted with Chinese nationals who had worked extensively with U.S. expatriates and who were relatively fluent in English. The sample was also selected because of accessibility and the willingness of each subject interviewed to spend the necessary time with

the researcher. Additional criteria for selection included the following: the subjects were assigned to live and work in China for at least one year and the subjects had lived in China for at least four months prior to the time of the interview. The forty subjects interviewed included 15 females and 25 males, exactly half of whom were married and half single at the time of the interviews. Subjects ranged from 25 to 60 year of age, with a mean age of 38. Types of employment varied: 22 subjects worked in private business, 15 in education and 3 in U.S. government foreign service. Time spent as an expatriate working in China ranged from 6 months to 9 years with a mean time of just over 3 years.

Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer. In addition to the tape recording, the interviewer maintained a log of comments regarding each interview. The interview logs were written after the interviews. The logs included the date and time of each interview and observations of the subject such as nonverbal behaviors and any perceptions of the researcher that were descriptive of the context. The interviewer had previously spent a year and a half working in Beijing as a teacher of English to Chinese nationals. All interviews were conducted by one person within the period of six weeks. The interviewer's training for the data collection phase of the study consisted in having read various books on qualitative methods including several dissertations which used qualitative methodology and having conducted the pilot study in which he tested both his interview schedule and his own skills as an interviewer.

Results of the Study

American expatriates participating in this study turned out to be a diverse group with wide differences as to their levels of exposure to Chinese life and culture. At one extreme, expatriates with the U. S. Embassy or with large corporations lived relatively insulated from everyday life in China. They often viewed China as but another assignment in their rotation or another stop in their respective careers. At the other extreme, some interviewees lived close to the people and were immersed in the Chinese language and culture- their personal and professional futures appeared to be in China. Between these extremes many who were both short and long term workers demonstrated varying degrees of insight, interest and commitment.

Most expatriates in the business area led tightly circumscribed, single focus lifestyles. They expressed little time or energy for exploring the culture, studying the language or establishing friendships with Chinese nationals. Long workdays and grueling schedules were common. Like business people, U.S. Embassy personnel lived relatively independently of the local economy and culture. Since U.S. government employees are also subject to a policy of non-fraternization that requires them to report significant contact with Chinese nationals, they may have artificially limited their interactions with Chinese nationals. As perpetual outsiders, they may have seen only negative aspects of Chinese society and may not have been inclined to pursue more personal relationships. In comparison, the teachers interviewed were most often seen as immersed in Chinese daily life. They lived in Chinese neighborhoods; their relatively low pay in comparison with business and State Department personnel denied them access to western amenities and diversions available to business and foreign service employees. On the other hand teachers seemed to enjoy more relaxed work schedules and more opportunities for developing friendships with Chinese students and fellow teachers. Many teachers demonstrated a desire and an effort to learn the language and the culture.

Interviews generated remarkably consistent data despite the marked variations in work schedules and standards of living. What emerged from their comments was the portrait of the expatriate who is well-adjusted and effective in China, regardless of occupational assignment or level of language fluency in Chinese. Several major themes emerged from these interviews.

The preeminence of personality. The single most consistent theme to emerge could best be categorized as personality traits. Although preparation and prior experiences were seen as relevant, virtually all subjects focused on the notion of 'personality.' When discussing their own successes and failures and those of fellow expatriates, subjects used words such as flexibility, tolerance, open-mindedness, independence, risk-taking, curiosity, patience, stability and sensitivity to other values. Subjects made statements such as, "Personality is definitely most important;" "I think it completely depends on the personality." And "...if he has the wrong kind of personality he is not going to make it here." This theme was also supported by the seven Chinese nationals who provided a degree of triangulation as informants.

Appropriate expectations. Appropriate expectations were deemed critical in adjusting to the culture. On the other hand, inappropriate expectations were frequently cited as a primary cause of failure both by subjects and Chinese national informants. High expectations were associated with poor adjustment. Subjects repeatedly described adaptive expectations as lower than or equal to both living conditions and work accomplishment. In fact, several subjects insisted that a primary benefit of training and overseas experience prior to their present assignment was the effect these experiences had of lowering expectations as to what could be accomplished during the time limits of their assignments.

Prior overseas experience. Overseas experience did not have to be related to expatriate career assignments, but could have included tourism. As a matter of fact, the majority of those interviewed had such prior experiences. During the early stages of data collection, prior overseas experience did not seem to be important in the minds of those interviewed, but later, as the interviews progressed, these prior experiences took on a larger role in the shaping of attitudes and the realistic alignment of expectations to actual lived circumstances. Prior overseas experience appeared to impart not only specific knowledge about non-verbal and cultural cues, but a heightened sensitivity to cross-cultural issues, a greater tolerance for differences, and a greater flexibility and openness to new experiences.

The effect of having well defined goals. Having well defined personal and professional goals emerged as another dominant theme. Unless one had well defined personal and professional goals, motivation often seemed to be a problem. No questions in the interview guide were directed to the issues of motivation and professional goals, yet the majority of the interviewees made both direct and indirect reference to their importance in adjusting to China. Some subjects actually felt that motivation formed by explicit goals was the most important issue of all. According to one such subject, "People who really want to be here will be all right. If they don't want to be here, they won't adjust, they won't be able to handle it." Yet, motivation linked to clear goals alone was not viewed by the interviewees as sufficient. Some motives stemming from clear goals relate to successful adjustment, according to the subjects, while others did not. Even the most highly paid business people rejected financial gain as a sufficiently strong motivating force for an assignment in China. The preponderance of testimony supported goals such as

"learning," "personal growth," "service," and "making a contribution to world understanding," as the most motivating goals.

Chinese language ability. The researchers, both with extensive backgrounds as modern language teachers, were surprised that this category did not have the greatest degree of saturation. Interviewees distinguished between having basic language skills and more advanced skills. If one had basic language skills, one could use public transportation and shop which allowed one to participate more fully in daily life. More advanced skills brought cultural understanding and an ability to relate to a broader cross-section of Chinese society. Language skills were proportionate to the length of assignments, as well as the nature of assignment and the subject's personal goals. Complete lack of language skills severely limited expatriates' options and personal freedom, thus negatively affecting their attitudes toward adjustment. Those who learned at least the most basic expressions which allowed them to engage in the daily tasks of living, of using routine services appeared to be the ones who adapted more successfully. attitudes.

Interpersonal relationships. This category was comprised of three levels of interpersonal relationships and included relationships with other Americans as well as with Chinese nationals. One could describe this category as working outward from a small circle beginning with one's nuclear family. The well-being of spouse and children were closely linked to the expatriate's success and effectiveness. Family problems were cited most often as the reason for unhappiness or the inability to complete an assignment. This finding parallels what is found in the literature.

A second level of interpersonal relationships extended to other American expatriates. These relationships appeared to be a critical source of practical and emotional support. However, subjects noted that these relationships were beneficial only if their fellow countrymen were themselves adapting successfully to life in China.

A third level of interpersonal relationships extended to Chinese neighbors and fellow workers. This level of interpersonal relationships describes those who have been most successful at adapting to life and work in China. In this regard, virtually none of the expatriates in business or government had close Chinese friends, but teachers who lived on the economy, so to speak, reported that their Chinese friends played an important part in their adjustment to life in China.

Prior training. Although this theme was often mentioned in the interviews, it was not regarded as the most important factor. As a matter of fact, the majority of interviewees had not participated in a formal training program prior to their arrival in China. Yet most felt that some type of preparation was needed. It should be noted that the researchers, both experienced cross-cultural trainers, fully expected training to be the primary issue related to successful adjustment of Americans to China. Training played a far less important role in the experience of the expatriate than was anticipated. A common response to questions about the value of training prior to expatriation was, "Nothing can prepare you for China," followed often with a chuckle intimating a large gulf between cultures. Many interviewees doubted whether any form of preparation conducted outside the country could ready one for life in China. Some comments of subjects implied the opposite, that training could actually decrease the sense of urgency in attending to cultural differences. A positive effect of training was to bring expectations in line with reality, rather than to impart specific skills.

Discussion

Endogenous and exogenous factors emerged as a second order of categorization that includes the themes addressed above. Endogenous factors in adjustment describe those which originate within and are a function of the person, such as personality traits and motivation. Exogenous factors are those factors found in the environment external to the person, such as interpersonal support, work environment and circle of friendships. Exogenous factors also include training and prior international experience. This distinction between endogenous and exogenous factors may have implications for a more inclusive model of intercultural adjustment. This study gives more weight to endogenous factors. Antecedents of intercultural adjustment of Americans in China were found to be primarily characteristics of the individual expatriate, such as personality, mental models, expectations, attitudes, motivation, and knowledge rather than environmental or exogenous factors. Environmental factors such as prior training, prior overseas experience and social support can enhance effectiveness and even shore up weaknesses, but cannot replace basic personality characteristics.

Rather than put technically competent individuals into expensive training programs, this study suggests that psychological testing may be a more effective way to use resources. Rigid personalities with high expectations of themselves may be ill suited for work in China regardless of professional and technical expertise. The most illustrative example of the influence of personality traits on adaptation from this study was the case of a Chinese-American assigned to work in Beijing who did not successfully adapt to life in China because of her high expectations of herself, her job and what she supposed life in China would be like.

Recommendations for future research. With the growing importance of China as a trading partner, continued research on successful adaptation for the purpose of scholarly and commercial exchanges should be advocated. There should be continued emphasis on qualitative methods to generate descriptors and concepts related to cultural adaptation to China. Although Black and Gregerson's (1991) model did not include career and personal goals and this study did not originally focus on goals, in-depth interviews revealed their importance in the process of adaptation. A longer ethnographic study should be conducted with a similar population of American expatriates working in China both to develop additional factors influencing adaptation and to conform or challenge the results of this study.

References

Black, J. & Gregersen, H. (1991). Antecedents to cross-cultural adjustment for expatriates in Pacific Rim assignments. *Human Relations*, 44, 497-515.

Black, J., Gregersen, H. & Mendenhall, M. (1992). *Global assignments*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Caudron, S. (1991). Training ensures success overseas. *Personnel Journal*, 10, 27-30.

China statistical year book 1993 (1993). Beijing: China Statistical Information and Consultancy Service Center.

- Furnham, A. (1987). The adjustment of sojourners. In Y. Kim & W. Gudykunst (Eds.) *Cross-cultural adaptation: Current approaches*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Harris, P. & Moran, R (1991). *Managing cultural differences*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. London: McGraw Hill (Europe).
- Marquardt, M. & Engel, D. (1983, May). HRD competencies for a shrinking world. *Training & Development*, 59-65.
- Mendenhall, M. & Oddou, G. (1985). The dimensions in expatriate acculturation: A review. *Academy of Management Review*, 10, 39-47.
- Merriam, S. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. (1991). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pratt, D. (1989). Culture and Learning: A comparison of western and Chinese conceptions of self and individuality. *Proceedings of the 30th Annual Adult Education Research Conference*, 248-253. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Soloman, C. (1994, January). Staff selection impacts global success. *Personnel Journal*, 88-101.
- Zhang, R. & Liu, J. (1995, October 4). Annual economic growth slightly over ten percent in 1991-1995. China News Digest [On-line]. Available: cnd-editor@cnd.org.