

Review of: "Beyond culture shock: entering the complex world of Global South expatriates' adaptation"

Kevin Delany¹

¹ University of East Anglia

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

The wording of the abstract, in particular "The expatriate literature is often biased towards Western expatriates, ignoring the situation of psychological insecurity caused by psycho-social factors that hamper Global South expatriates' integration", implies that the challenges listed are not as problematic for expatriates outside the Global South. The reality is that the expatriate experience is always a personal one. For example: there will be better or worse working environments; more or fewer family problems; more or less-welcoming colleagues; better or worse housing and transport arrangements; and possibly a safer or more dangerous environment.

Introduction

There is potential for confusion regarding the paper's consideration of 'expatriates'. It would help to clarify if the intention is to focus on employees on 'international assignments' sponsored by their employer to work on overseas projects, or if the focus could also address the interests and needs of individuals who have moved to take up permanent positions with an organisation in a different country, and who would also be classed as expatriates albeit that their roles, terms and conditions would be the same as those for home country nationals.

There is more detail on this potential confusion in the next section of the paper but the authors could be clearer from the outset.

Perspectives on expatriation and Global South expatriates

Having explored a wider range of expatriate working, this section returns to a message/theme about expatriates in global roles. There will be many non-home country nationals working in permanent roles; an Indian or South African IT specialist is found so often that is almost a stereotype. These will be individuals who applied for a specific role.

Culture distance/culture shock

There are no surprises here. In selecting candidates for international assignments organisations will often be mindful of the possible challenges. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory evolved from his work at IBM and provides a useful, if crude, guide to assist in selection and matching.

There are two aspects which may be under-represented in the academic literature to date. First, there is the culture of the

organisation itself. Expatriate appointments to host countries will increasingly carry a responsibility to promote and embed that culture, but the organisational culture may not always be 100% acceptable to the local environment.

Second, in my own research on remote working I found several examples where individuals making decisions on expatriate selection had no personal experience of overseas working. They assumed that their expatriates could be just as successful in the host country as they had been 'at home', putting pressure on expatriates to move at a pace that local culture and conditions would not permit.

Race and prejudice

It would be beyond naïve to ignore the possibility of racial/gender prejudice. It is important to consider why this may be a particular problem for expatriates on international assignments. One universal consideration is that there may be a view that the expatriates are 'taking local jobs'. A second is that there is history of an expatriate lifestyle which is detached from the realities of locals: large houses; staff; the best cars; etc. The evidence suggests that things are moving on but there are still many countries where there are company compounds offering a range of benefits, and where local staff provide the basic services.

Family issues

The article rightly draws attention to the challenge for 'partners and family members'. It is no surprise that in many expatriate families the partner is a doctor, nurse, teacher, or experienced in a similar role with universal attractiveness to local employers. Government bodies typically get around this by offering partners roles in the consulate.

Homesickness

There is no doubt that homesickness, often generated or exacerbated by family tensions is an issue. Selection decisions need to take account of the resilience of the expatriate and their partner/immediate family. People need to know the reality they will face on assignment.

This is an issue not simply for the individual/family but for the people they work with. Having someone in a senior role who is clearly unhappy with their lot in your country does not encourage their acceptance and support in the local community.

Internal organisational (in) capabilities

The paper rightly draws attention to the importance of effective people management policy and practice. One challenge to perceived wisdom is that in (too) many organisations the home country HR staff expend considerable time and effort to select and prepare individuals for an overseas posting but then effectively hand over that individual to host country managers and support services. The next involvement for home country HR teams might be when the individual returns at the end of their overseas posting.

The more experienced organisations ensure close and continuing contact with home country (or Regional) managers and

support services.

Discussion

The paper raises a number of important themes, ones that can relate to expatriates from any country going to any other country.

One point to question/clarify relates to the perceived case for overseas assignments as promoting 'expatriate intellectual capital transmission'. There will be a number of expatriate roles where this may not be the priority. For example:

- management trainees in a global organisation may be given the opportunity to experience different cultures and to observe, and learn from, local practice;
- senior executives may be offered an international assignment to improve their language skills and/or extend their experience into a different stream, for example from production into HR or Marketing. This could be a stage in preparing for a more senior role;
- governance roles where the home country wants to ensure that local practice is consistent with expectations – it is not surprising that many organisations (including Tata and Samsung) will have a home country 'expatriate' in a managerial and/or financial role.

Conclusion

The key thing here is the recognition that factors will run together. In addition, local perception that an 'expatriate', possibly benefitting from enhanced terms and conditions, is struggling may reinforce any local concerns or ill feeling.

Implications and further research

The emphasis on good people management practice is welcome. However, the key is to have that good practice in place throughout, and following, an international assignment. It would be interesting to seek the views of Tata, Samsung, etc on good practice.

The idea of a pre-visit may appear attractive but what happens if the individual decides not to take up the assignment, looking to be moved to a more attractive location/role? It certainly will not endear the host organisation to the next (potentially second-choice) candidate.

The opportunity to speak with an existing in-country expatriate is always very welcome, as is the classic pre-assignment briefing programme for the expatriate and family, with an introduction to cultural, political, and other relevant background.

A final point is that the exposure to the local environment must be relevant. For example, there is little value providing briefing on US practice with a focus on New York or similar locations if the expatriate will be working in the Mid West or Texas.