

Executive Summary
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Expatriate Adjustment in Germany

To briefly summarize, the goal of this study was to examine the impact of general coping and comfort with cultural differences on the adjustment of American expatriates in Germany.

This report will briefly outline the coping strategies, cultural differences, and adjustment measures/definitions used in this study. The results of the study will then be presented as well as some conclusions and suggestions for future training.

Background

Coping Strategies

Based on past research, we know that there are three types of general coping typically utilized: problem-focused, problem-reappraisal, and avoidance. A person using problem-focused coping deals with a problem that is causing stress by either eliminating or managing it. When using problem-reappraisal coping, the person is apt to manage the evaluation of the situation's stress level. In other words, they will focus on the effort they are putting forth. Finally, avoidance coping typically results in attempting to reduce stress by avoiding the problem or stressor completely. As you might expect, problem-focused and problem-reappraisal coping have typically been seen as positive methods of coping with stress while avoidance has been seen as negative.

Comfort with Cultural Differences

There are several differences in the culture of Germany and the United States. In this study we focused on six different dimensions of culture. Each of these dimensions assesses the comfort with the differences that exist. First and potentially most obvious is language. In addition to this obvious difference is the sense of time. In Germany, for example, meetings start precisely on time, whereas in the United States this is not always the case. The third dimension is managerial differences. Among other things, this dimension focuses on comfort with inequality among people. Comfort with societal customs and governmental differences are also assessed. Finally there is a measure of overall comfort with the cultural differences that is not focused on any one dimension, but instead is an umbrella assessment. These facets have not been examined in previous research and therefore offer a potential method of predicting expatriate adjustment.

Adjustment

This study utilized a well-established scale of expatriate adjustment. The measure assessed general adjustment to such facets of life as living conditions, shopping, cost of living, etc. Work adjustment was also examined. This included adjustment to specific job responsibilities and expectations. Finally, interactional (social) adjustment was assessed. This encompassed speaking and socializing with host nationals outside of the work setting.

Results

Participants

Over a period of 8 months, we were able to collect 77 responses to our online survey (<http://www.ioresearch.net/expatgermany.php>). These participants were recruited through a variety of on-line expatriate forums as well as various companies who utilize expatriates. The expatriates had been in Germany an average of 1.5 years and had been with their respective company for an average of 8 years. As we expected, the participants were 70% male and the majority (78%) had a bachelor's degree or higher.

Over 50% of the participants saw the assignment as a promotion, had requested the assignment, and were willing to take the assignment. Given these facts, it is easy to understand why 91% of the expatriates personally felt the assignment was important to complete and 81% perceived that the assignment was important to the company.

Pre-departure Training

In addition to the coping strategies and adjustment, we also assessed the types of training and information the expatriates received and sought out prior to beginning their assignment.

- Approximately half of the expatriates felt that they received adequate information on the branch they would be traveling to and the culture/customs of Germany.
- 75% of the expatriates sought out information in these areas (branch & culture/customs) as well as information on the assignment (75% felt the company provided enough information).

Control Variables and Adjustment

This study contained many control variables assessing different aspects of the assignment.

- General Adjustment: The more willing the expatriate was to take the assignment, the better able they were to adjust
- Interactional Adjustment: When the expatriate felt they had to take the assignment to avoid negative job consequences interactional adjustment was significantly lower. Interactional adjustment, however, was higher when the assignment was personally important.

Coping Strategies and Adjustment

We found several interesting results when looking at how the coping strategies were related to adjustment.

- As the use of avoidance coping increased, both interactional and work adjustment decreased significantly.
- Problem-reappraisal coping is more strongly related to work adjustment when avoidance coping is low rather than high

These findings support previous research stating that problem-reappraisal may be more beneficial to adjustment than avoidance coping.

Cultural Comfort and Adjustment

Again, we found some interesting relationships between comfort with cultural differences and general and interactional adjustment.

- Both overall cultural comfort and comfort with sense of time differences significantly predicted general adjustment. More specifically, as comfort increased in both facets, general adjustment increased.
- As sense of time, societal, and language comfort increased, we also saw an increase in interactional adjustment.

As with the general coping strategies, we found several elements that help to predict expatriate adjustment to an assignment in Germany. More importantly, these facets actually predict beyond the level offered by coping strategy use. This simply means that by combining a measure of general coping strategies with this comfort measure, you may be able to more accurately predict expatriate adjustment while overseas.

Conclusions

Coping Strategies

As mentioned earlier, avoidance coping acted similarly to past research in this study. It had a negative impact on interactional and work adjustment. Based on these findings, expatriate managers may want to assess preferred coping strategies prior to departure. With this assessment, training could then be offered helping the expatriate to identify more appropriate and beneficial coping strategies. It is unlikely that the expatriate's coping strategies can be changed, but with training the expatriate may be able to recognize when they are using avoidance strategies and attempt to implement a more acceptable form of coping.

Cultural Comfort

Comfort with cultural differences lead to better prediction of adjustment above what is offered by the general coping strategies. Although we didn't find significant results for all of the facets we examined, this may simply be due to the small number of participants. Given that the cultural comfort facets were effective in predicting adjustment, in the future it may be beneficial to train and potentially select expatriates on these facets of comfort. By providing information on the cultural differences to the expatriates, they may be more comfortable with the differences and therefore better able to adjust to the new culture.

In conclusion, we now have a better understanding of what is necessary for successful adjustment and how we may want to structure future expatriate training programs. It is also important to note that when expatriates had to seek out vital information on their own they did not adjust as well. This suggests that basic information on the branch, assignment, and culture at the very least should be provided to the expatriates prior to departure.

A PowerPoint presentation of the information, technical report, and full manuscript is available upon request. For further information regarding this project or future expatriate projects that your company would like to pursue, please contact Moira Hanna at mmhanna@clemson.edu or 864-884-4243.