Repatriation transitions: psychological preparedness, cultural identity, and attributions among American managers

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Abstract

The research examined preparedness for repatriation, cultural identity change, and attributions of causality on the repatriation experience. Forty-four American managers returning from 6 months to 4 years abroad participated in the study. In line with the predictions, preparedness for repatriation and cultural identity change predicted repatriation distress. Those repatriates who were the least prepared and had the most cultural identity change experienced more severe repatriate distress. Additionally, confirming a third hypothesis, sojourners attributed the cause of the distress more to situational locus of causality, more to external control and less to personal control. Preparedness and repatriation experience were assessed by several new author-designed measures. The repatriation preparedness scale, the psychological subscale of the repatriation experience assessment, and a scale of self-change as an outcome of overseas living were highly internally consistent.

Keywords: Repatriation; Reentry; Preparedness; Cultural identity; Attribution; Cultural transitions; Cultural adjustment

1. Introduction

The 20th century has witnessed an explosion of short-term cultural transitions for purposes of study, business, missionary, government, and economic and
humanitarian aid. Investigations of adjustment to short-term cultural transitions, known as sojourner studies, have been viewed both through the lens of intercultural communication and psychology. A logical temporal extension of a sojourn is the return to one’s country of origin, here referred to as repatriation.

It might be assumed that repatriation is simply the closure of the transition cycle, psychologically similar to cultural adjustment. Reviews of the literature (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Sussman, 1986) and repatriate anecdotes suggest otherwise. Different cognitive processes appear to make repatriation psychologically distinct from host country adaptation. However, similar to the literature on the process of overseas adjustment, findings consistently report high levels of repatriate distress upon return home.

This robust result has been reported among diverse population samples including adolescents and high school students (Werkman, 1979), college students (Brabant, Palmer, & Gramling, 1990; Rohrlich & Martin, 1991), business employees (Black, 1992; Briody & Baba, 1991), missionaries (Stringham, 1993), re-migrants (Lucca-Irizarry & Pacheco, 1992), and returned exiles (Sundquist & Johansson, 1996).

Cross-cultural research generalizes the effect of repatriation distress in at least some domains among returned foreign students at the high school (Wilson, 1993) and college level (Bochner, Lin, & McLeod, 1980; LaBrack, 1983), and among business employees (Gregersen & Stroh, 1997; Sussman, 1985).

A number of antecedent factors have been suggested to explain repatriate distress including number of years spent abroad, initial overseas adjustment, country of origin, and repatriation environment.

1.1. Expectations and preparedness

Adler (1981), Martin (1984) and Sussman (1986) have suggested that a proximal cause of repatriation distress or at least a critical mediating variable in intensifying the repatriation distress is its unexpectedness. It is counterintuitive to expect difficulties when returning to one’s home country. Unlike the now common knowledge held by expatriates that cognitive and behavioral adjustments to life overseas are a psychological process that may at times be frustrating, disconcerting, and stressful (Martin, Bradford, & Rohrlich, 1995), repatriates appear to be unprepared for the psychological distress and discomfort that accompanies a return home. Unexpectedness of repatriation distress may account for a greater portion of the variance in predicting repatriation outcomes as it does not seem immediately obvious to sojourners that returning to one’s home country should be accompanied by cognitive or behavioral discomfort. Supporting this notion, Black (1992), in a sample of US business repatriates, found that high levels of repatriate adjustment and job performance were predicated on accurate repatriation expectations.

Martin (1984) also suggests that the home country support network, composed of family and friends, is equally unprepared for repatriation transition difficulties of the sojourner. Thus, the social system’s lack of expectations for repatriation distress might exacerbate the repatriate’s experience.
Several researchers have measured the absolute discrepancy between the expectation and the experience of repatriation (Searle & Ward, 1990; Weissman & Furnham, 1987) or the direction of the discrepancy (undermet, met, or overmet expectations) (Black & Gregersen, 1990). Rogers and Ward (1993) found among secondary students returning to New Zealand, that when experiences were more difficult than expected, larger discrepancies were associated with psychological distress. However, results also revealed that realistic expectations were unrelated to psychological adjustment.

Martin et al. (1995) tested, among American students studying overseas, the relationship between expectations for overseas living and overall evaluation of the sojourn experience. A somewhat weak correlation indicated that when expectations were unmet but in a positive direction, the sojourn was evaluated more positively. However, most expectations of pre-departing sojourners regarding overseas living were accurate.

Conceptually, the expectations a sojourner has regarding returning home are not equivalent to being psychologically prepared for repatriation. Past research has measured only sojourner expectations and not the degree to which the sojourner was affectively, behaviorally or cognitively prepared for the process leaving the host country and returning home. This study assessed preparedness for repatriation on a newly designed measure, the repatriation preparedness scale (RPS). Hypothesis one predicts that those scoring low on the RPS would experience more severe repatriation distress as compared to those scoring high on preparedness.

1.2. Theoretical explanations for repatriation

Theoretical explanations for repatriation distress are notably absent. One school of thought, the “reductionists”, considers all transitions, adjustments and adaptations as variants of the same processes such that the underlying mechanisms for overseas transitions, repatriation transitions, or domestic geographic transitions are the same. Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall (1992) suggest, for example, prevalence of this notion among investigations of corporate relocation. A variation of this reductionist theme is espoused by those theorists who consider cultural transitions reflective of any stressful environment in which psychological adjustments and coping strategies emerge (Anderson, 1994). This approach, for instance, might lump cultural repatriates with first year college students.

A second perspective allows for the distinctiveness of cultural transitions from all others but views overseas and repatriation as similar. The emphasis here is the response to changing environments and the socio-cultural contexts. Storti (1997) exemplifies this paradigm with his discussion of the changing nature and meaning of home. The repatriation experience, as with overseas transitions, becomes a response to an unfamiliar environment, the loss of social cues, new communication system, and different relational rules. Support is ample from overseas transition theories regarding the negative response to new cultural environments and the lack of social support (Harris & Moran, 1979), the importance

No clear evidence is available for applying this cultural environment model to repatriation. Could the home environment have changed so radically as to plunge the repatriate into reverse culture shock? For several well-defined repatriation populations, this perspective may in fact predict repatriation experience. In the case of lengthy sojourns (20 years, for example) and return to a dramatically altered home country (post-apartheid South Africa, for example), perhaps so. Or for repatriate children for whom substantial segments of their social context change quickly, repatriation distress may be a response to home which is now an unfamiliar socio-cultural environment.

However, for the thousands of adult sojourners who move between countries for moderate periods of time, the unfamiliar cultural environment model which predicts overseas psychological and socio-cultural adjustment may not be sufficiently explanatory for the repatriation experience.

A third perspective recognizes the unique qualities of the repatriation process. Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall (1992) proposed a broad theory of repatriation based on control theory (Bell & Straw, 1989 as cited in Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992) in which repatriates make both anticipatory and in-country repatriation adjustments. However, anticipatory adjustments assume that expatriates are aware of and prepared for the repatriation process, an assumption not supported by the literature. Additionally, while the four variables which they propose as informing anticipatory and in-country (home) adjustment cover several domains, none focus on psychological or socio-cultural factors. Their theory does acknowledge the complexity of the repatriation and allows for multiple indices of repatriation adjustment which include general, interpersonal, and work-related readjustments.

1.3. A cultural identity model of repatriation

Lewin (1948), in an early observation, commented that individuals need a firm sense of group identification in order to develop a sense of well being and Tajfel (1981) later expanded this notion in which identification with a social group adds to one’s positive self-concept. Collier and Thomas (1988) have suggested that cultural identities involve identification with and acceptance into groups with shared significant symbols, meanings, and rules of conduct. Finally, Smith (1998) has speculated that “if living in another culture causes change, we can expect part of that change to be identity-altering” (p. 306).

It is against this foundation of cultural identity formation and change, as a result of cultural transitions, that this author proposes a new paradigm (Sussman, 2000) in which the repatriation experience is predicted in large measure by the intersection of three variables: two psychological constructs, cultural adaptation and identity change and one situational variable, cross-cultural differences in tolerance for cultural identity variability.
On the individual psychological level, the type and intensity of the repatriation experience is predicated in part, on the level of adaptation to the host culture. Those who become most effective in the host culture have often experienced the more difficult adjustment (Hawes & Kealey, 1981) and most critically to the proposed model, experienced the most disruption in their cultural frame of reference (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985). Thus, the more the sojourner has successfully adapted overseas, the more difficult the repatriation experience.

The model posits, though, that a mediating variable would serve as the repatriation explanatory mechanism, that is, the amount of cultural identity change experienced while overseas. A preliminary test of this proposition in this study leads to Hypothesis two: the less repatriates identify with their home culture (or the more the cultural identity has changed as compared to a pre-departure level), the higher the repatriation distress.

Finally, cultural identity change is also perceived and evaluated against the background of the home culture’s perspective on cultural heterogeneity and multiple cultural identities. This is conceptually similar to Pelto’s (1968) and Triandis’ (1994) notion of loose and tight cultures in which cultures vary in their level of adherence to cultural norms. Thus, a third variable effecting the repatriation experience is the cultural dimension of tolerance for cultural identity change.

The key dimensions in this model are the emerging salience of home culture identity when overseas, socio-cultural adaptation, change in cultural identity, salience of cultural identity change upon repatriation, and the normative level of flexibility for cultural identity variances within the home culture. A fuller description of the theory can be found in Sussman (2000).

1.4. Attributions of causality among repatriates

Observations have revealed that one critical behavioral consequence of the repatriation transition among business returnees is resignation from the sending corporation and the repatriation job (Black, 1989, reports that 25% of corporate repatriates leave their jobs). Why would this occur? What would account for this significant departure from the job?

Past literature indicates both that repatriates experience stress and dissatisfaction upon return home and that for most repatriates, they are unprepared for the repatriate experience. It is suggested here these unprepared repatriates search for an explanation for their feelings of stress and arousal. Attribution theorists indicate that a search for causality is triggered when an unexpected or unusual event occurs (Kanazawa, 1992; Wong & Weiner, 1981) or an event is negative or unpleasant (Bohner, Bless, Schwartz, & Strack, 1988). Causal attributions can determine our feelings and behavior according to Weiner (1986). He reported that anger results when something negative happens to us and we perceive it as being under someone else’s control. Following the classic study by Schachter and Singer (1962) on cognitive labeling of emotion, Nisbett and Schachter (1966) indicated that anxiety or arousal could be misattributed to less threatening sources. However, extensive research on therapeutic applications of misattributions of
emotion found only weak to modest support (Slivken & Buss, 1984). Olsen and Ross (1988) suggested that misattributions would be made to a neutral source only when the actual source of arousal was ambiguous. Further, in the search for an explanation of arousal, cognitive processing is often simplified to overreacting to salient stimuli.

Among repatriates, the process of repatriation causes arousal and stress (Stringham, 1993). We suggest that those repatriates who are psychologically unprepared for repatriation and unaware of its social and cognitive consequences will search for an explanation for this arousal, the actual source, repatriation, being unclear and ambiguous. A salient stimuli and possible source of misattribution would be the repatriation job/company. Perceiving that the work is controlled by superiors, repatriates might further feel anger toward the misattributed sources of arousal.

Thus, among those who experience substantial repatriation adaptation difficulties and further, who are unprepared for the repatriation experience, the source of their stress is ambiguous and unclear. In searching for causality of the repatriation effect, hypothesis three predicts, more attributions to external control and fewer attributions to personal control will be made. Additionally, we anticipate those unprepared, distressed repatriates will be more dissatisfied with their reentry jobs, have more thoughts of leaving or have left their companies.

In summary, this study proposes three hypotheses which attempt to clarify the relationship between the predictor variables of psychological preparedness, cultural identity change, and attributions of causality on repatriation distress, the criterion variable.

**Hypothesis 1:** Unprepared repatriates will experience more severe repatriation distress than those who are better prepared for the repatriation experience.

**Hypothesis 2:** The less repatriates identity with their home country (or the more the cultural identity change), the more severe the repatriation distress.

**Hypothesis 3:** Among unprepared repatriates, the greater the repatriation distress, the more the search for the causes of repatriation distress will lead to external attributions and less to personal attributions.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

Forty-four (32 men and 12 women) Americans participated in this study. Forty-one were employed in the financial services sector and 3 in insurance. The selection of companies for inclusion in this study focused on those in which large numbers of employees are transferred overseas and repatriated. The difficulty in persuading companies to participate in a scientific study of cultural transitions led to a nonrandom sample of companies. Nearly all the sojourners departed from the northeast US and returned to the same region. No measures of racial or ethnic identity were taken. Subjects ranged in age from 25 to 65 with 75% ranging from 25 to 50.
to 45 years old. Fifty-nine percent of the sample were married yet only 48% were accompanied by family overseas; 43% lived alone overseas. Subjects lived overseas from 6 months to more than 4 years, evenly divided between the categories 1–2 years, 2–4 years, and more than 4 years. Seventy-five percent of the sample had no previous overseas work assignments. On average, subjects had been back in the US 11 months with the range from 1 to 22 months. Participants indicated that they had returned to the US for a number of reasons with 52% completing a work assignment, 20% for their own professional reasons, 15% for personal reasons, and 9% returned at the request of their family.

2.2. Procedure

Seventy Americans who recently returned to the United States following an overseas work assignment were identified as repatriates by the international human resource office of three international corporations. Repatriates were each sent an identical packet of information, either by the investigator or by their companies’ personnel department, requesting their voluntary participation in a study of repatriation. Participation in the study consisted of completing a 4 page questionnaire and mailing it to the investigator. The cover letter indicated that all responses would be confidential and anonymous. While their home companies would receive a summary of the study results, findings would be aggregated. Further, repatriates were assured that their company would not know which of its repatriates participated in the study. A postcard was provided, to be mailed separately from the questionnaire, in which the participant could indicate that they had mailed the questionnaire, request a copy of the results and provide their name and address. Three weeks later a reminder was sent to all participants who had not returned the postcard and, presumably, the questionnaire.

Of the 70 questionnaires distributed, 45 were returned resulting in a 64% response rate. One participant was not American and was not included in the analysis.

2.3. Materials

A four-page questionnaire was employed in this study. In addition to several demographic items (including gender, age, marital status, nationality, geographical location in US), information regarding the participants’ overseas experience was requested (with whom did they live overseas, length of last assignment, total time spent living overseas, assessment of overseas experience, reason for return to the US, job-related changes since return). For the central research variables, assessments were made of: psychological preparedness for repatriation, repatriation training, repatriation experience, attributions as to causality of repatriation distress, self-change as an outcome of the overseas experience, and cultural identity.

Repatriation experience: The criterion variable, repatriation experience, was assessed through an author-designed Repatriation Experience Assessment Scale. Three sub-scales measured the repatriates general psychological distress during repatriation, work-related distress, and family adjustment. The scale included
behavioral, affect and cognitive items. The psychological sub-scale of 4 items included such items as “I have trouble concentrating at work” or “I am more anxious and irritable since I returned home”. The work-related scale was composed of 6 items such as “I feel that I have been able to fit easily back into my company”. Family adjustment measured respondents’ perceptions of both spouse and children’s adjustment. All items were evaluated by the participants on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Several items were reversed scored. A composite score for each sub-scale was calculated. The higher the score, the more difficult the repatriation experience. Two additional single items measured repatriation job satisfaction and for those participants who had more than one international assignment, they were asked to compare the repatriation experiences. Finally, assessment was made of the length of the repatriation adjustment process by asking participants to indicate how long it took them to feel comfortable at work following their return.

**Psychological preparedness:** In testing Hypothesis 1, psychological preparedness was assessed using a 10-item author-designed scale, the repatriation preparedness scale (RPS). Each statement (i.e. “I spent a considerable amount of time thinking about returning to work in the US”) was evaluated on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A composite score was calculated with the lowest score indicating the least amount of psychological preparedness for returning home. An additional single item asked participants to enumerate the ways they may have been prepared for or informed about the repatriation process. This resulted in a single number; the lower the number, the less knowledge the repatriate had about the process.

**Cultural identity:** To test Hypothesis 2, two items assessed changes in cultural identity. “In some ways, I feel less “American” than I did before my international assignment” and “I feel that I am a more global or international person now”. Both were evaluated on 7-point scales from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Attributions of causality:** In testing Hypothesis 3, measurement of attributions as to the causality of repatriation difficulty was assessed via the revised causal dimension scale (CDSII) (McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992). Participants rated their repatriation adjustment on a 7-point scale ranging from very easy to very difficult, the higher the number the more difficult the repatriation. They then responded to 12 items in which they evaluated the cause of their adjustment experience on 7-point scales. The endpoints reflected one of four subscales: locus of control, external control, personal control, and stability. For example, on the locus of control subscale, the participant indicated whether the cause of their repatriation distress was “Inside of you” (1) or “Outside of you” (7). On the external control subscale, one item opposed “Over which others have control” (1) with “Over which others have no control” (7).

**Repatriation training:** Four categorical items assessed the degree to which the sending company prepared the repatriate. Items requested information about both mentoring the overseas employee and formal training.

**General self-change and behavioral change as an outcome of living overseas:** A scale composed of 4 items measured behavioral and cognitive change as a consequence of
living in another culture. Examples of these items are “I felt as though I changed while living and working overseas” and “I have incorporated cultural aspects of my host country into how I think and act”. A second 4-item scale focused on behavioral change in particular. These items included “I am able to use the cultural skills that I learned overseas” and “I still try to use the language of my host country”. Respondents used a 7-point scale to rate their agreement/disagreement with these statements.

Other measures: Assessments were made of future interest in living overseas, changes in work responsibilities since repatriation and attitude towards home company.

3. Results

Preliminary analysis consisted of testing the internal reliability of the scales using Cronbach’s $\alpha$. The RPS was highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.75$) and response scores ranged from 10 to 70, the lower the score, the less prepared the participant was for repatriation. Each of the three repatriation experience assessment (REA) subscales were reliable to varying degrees: general psychological repatriation distress (PRD) ($\alpha = 0.80$), work-related distress ($\alpha = 0.34$) and family adjustment ($\alpha = 0.63$). The response scores for the PRD subscale ranged from 4 to 28, the higher the score, the more distressing the repatriation. The general self-change scale was highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.87$); the behavioral change scale, however, produced low reliability ($\alpha = 0.44$). Due to the low reliability of both the REA work-related distress sub-scale ($\alpha = 0.34$) and the behavior change scale ($\alpha = 0.44$), neither were used in any subsequent analyses. In this study, therefore, the measure of repatriation experience is confined to the general psychological dimension as measured by the REA psychological distress sub-scale (PRD). As repatriation distress may well be manifest in the workplace, it is suggested that attempts be made to construct a more reliable scale in the future.

Concurrent validity for the REA psychological subscale was examined by intercorrelating the subscale with the general item “It is difficult being back in the US”. They were strongly associated ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$).

Participants from the three corporations were compared and there were no significant differences in responses. Therefore, participant responses were pooled for subsequent analyses.

One of the study’s primary objectives was to elucidate the relationship between preparedness for repatriation and the repatriation experience. The low reliability of the work-related distress subscale led us to question its validity and it was not used for further analyses. Unless otherwise noted, all the following analyses used the PRD subscale as a measure of repatriation experience. Support for hypothesis one was tested in two ways. Preparedness (RPS) was significantly correlated with repatriation distress (PRD) ($r = -0.28, p = 0.03$, one-tailed test) such that the less the preparedness, the more distressing the repatriation experience. In an attempt to construct a predictive model of repatriation distress, a multiple regression analysis
was performed. In addition to the primary research variable of psychological preparedness for repatriation, other variables were included which prior research has indicated may also be predictive of repatriation distress. These variables included gender, total time spent overseas, and difficulty living overseas. A multiple regression analysis revealed only preparedness as a significant predictor ($\beta = -0.45, p = 0.006$).

As only one participant indicated involvement in any formal repatriation training, no analyses were conducted which looked at training as a predictor of distress.

A second hypothesis suggested that cultural identity change would predict repatriation distress. Cultural identity was measured by two items. The primary item, “In some ways, I feel less ‘American’ than I did before my international assignment(s)”, was supported in a correlation analysis. It was highly correlated ($r = 0.48, p = 0.001$) with repatriation distress, such that the more the identity change, the more the distress. A second item measuring identity change, “I feel that I am a more global or international person now” did not correlate with distress, yet behavioral intentions supported this notion with 89% of the sample indicating that they would accept another overseas assignment.

The inclusion of these cultural identity change items in the investigation were intended as a preliminary test of the cultural identity change model (Sussman, 2000). One item appears to reliably measure this construct.

Not only is specific cultural identity change related to distress, but a more general change in self as a consequence of an overseas experience is marginally correlated ($r = 0.23, p = 0.06$) with repatriation distress. The more sojourners think they have changed as a result of their international experience, the more distress they experience as a repatriate. The behavior change subscale revealed no such relationship to repatriation distress.

Hypothesis 3 explored the ambiguity of the repatriation distress and attributions of causality. A modified attribution of causality scale, causal dimension scale (CSDII), was used (McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992) to assess four attributional factors: external control, personal control, locus of causality, and stability. McAuley, Duncan and Russell (1992) indicated that internal consistency for all four scales, measured by Cronbach’s $\alpha$, ranged from 0.60 to 0.92. Psychological repatriation difficulty was measured by a single item assessed on a 7-point scale. As mentioned above, this item is highly correlated with the PRD subscale ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$). As

<table>
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<th>$SE \times B$</th>
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<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-2.71</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total time spent overseas</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.28</td>
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<td>Difficulty living overseas</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.21</td>
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* $p = 0.006$.  

Table 1  
Multiple regression analysis: predictors of psychological repatriation distress ($N = 44$)
predicted, the more difficult the repatriation adjustment, the more the causality is attributed to external control \((r = 0.45, p < 0.01)\), the less the causality is attributed to personal control \((r = -0.48, p = 0.001)\) and the more situational is the locus of causality \((r = 0.4, p < 0.01)\). In addition, difficult repatriation experiences are seen as more variable or unstable \((r = 0.38, p < 0.01)\).

However, contrary to predictions, difficult repatriation experience is not significantly related to the single item measuring job dissatisfaction. A closer analysis of the issue of job dissatisfaction, however, does indicate that 21 of the participants have considered leaving their company. Comparing this group to those who are not considering a change on the PRD subscale, indicates that the average distress score of the former group is higher \((M = 14.38)\) than that of the latter group \((M = 11.74)\). While these means are not significantly different they are in the predicted direction.

4. Discussion

Three major objectives informed this research study. The first was to explore the relationship between psychological preparedness for a repatriation experience and the actual experience itself. In particular, it was predicted that those sojourners who had the least preparation for repatriation and therefore presumably the least understanding of what was about to transpire when they returned home, experienced repatriation more distressfully than for those who had a better understanding of the repatriation process. The second objective of this research focused on changes in cultural identity. It was predicted that those repatriates who felt less American following an overseas experience would find repatriation more difficult. The third objective was to highlight the attributional process of those repatriates for whom repatriation was unexpected and difficult. It was hypothesized that these sojourners would incorrectly attribute the cause of their repatriation distress situationally, under external as compared to personal control and more unstable.

All three hypotheses were strongly supported. Two major predictors of repatriation distress were preparedness for the experience and cultural identity change.

It is important to note that the identity change result was carried on a single item with corroborative evidence from categorical questions. Future research testing Sussman’s (2000) cultural identity change model of cultural transitions needs to include additional items measuring this construct. While there are several scales measuring ethnic identity, few measure cultural identity (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Ward & Searle, 1991) and we are aware of none which measure identity change.

One goal of this study was to better understand why repatriates returning from overseas work assignments leave their home companies. Results here add some support to the notion that repatriates may misattribute the repatriation distress they experience to their companies or their reentry jobs. Feeling uncomfortable, repatriates might leave or wish to leave their companies. There may be other
interpretations which should be explored, though. Returning workers may find they are more attractive to other companies, their new “international skills” being more acknowledged and rewarded outside their home companies. A larger sample of repatriates who have left their companies needs to be assessed. In addition, the work-related subscale of the REA needs to be revised and validated with additional samples.

An active disagreement among sojourn researchers focuses on the relationship between the overseas transition and the return home. The culture/social learning model predicts that during the overseas adjustment period, new general adjustment skills are learned. Those same skills could be engaged during the repatriation adjustment process and ease the usual distress. In opposition, an identity change model (Sussman, 2000) suggests that successful adaptation to the host culture presages a significant change in one’s behavior, cognitions, and as this author has suggested, cultural identity. The effect of successful adaptation overseas would result in a more difficult repatriation period. A single item in this study (“Living overseas was difficult”), rated from 1, strongly disagree to 7, strongly agree) assessed the above-mentioned relationship and found no significant correlation between overseas difficulty and repatriation distress. However, some support for the identity change model is garnered when participants who had more than one overseas experience were asked to compare each repatriation experience. Of the 11 experienced sojourners, 8 reported that subsequent repatriations were as difficult or more difficult than the first; that is, social/culture learning is not easing the repatriation transition. Perhaps, the research item used in this study, “Living overseas was difficult” was not sufficiently precise in its wording. In fact, in re-examining the item, it can be proposed that difficulty in living overseas is not necessarily related to successful cultural adaptation but to the process of cultural adjustment.

Difficult overseas living might result either in adaptation or in withdrawal from the cultural environment. Likewise, indicating that living overseas was easy might indicate isolation from and little interaction with host culture (and therefore no cultural adaptation) or it may indicate an intense and successful adaptation. In testing the overseas-repatriation relationship, subsequent research might include a more appropriate measure of the overseas experience that taps the outcome of the experience (adaptation) and not the process (adjustment/difficulty).

As reported above, findings in this study provide substantial support for the research hypotheses. However, three methodological issues should be highlighted which adds a cautionary note to the interpretation of these results. The first issue relates to the response rate of the participants which in the current study is 64%. Although this rate is considerably higher than typical for mailed questionnaires (30%) (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1994), there is still some concern about the possibility of nonresponse bias. It is important to note, however, that nonresponse to mailed surveys in and of itself does not indicate bias, even when the response is very low (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998). A general finding in regard to mailed surveys indicates that response rates to mailed surveys appears to be on a decline (Schwarz, Groves, & Schuman, 1998). In this investigation, there are no obvious reasons for assuming that nonresponders differ in any significant way from responders.
However, careful administration of assessment materials in the future should include strategies for detecting nonresponse bias.

A related second issue is the small sample size upon which the hypotheses are confirmed and its effect on the power of statistical analyses. In particular, the relatively small number of participants may have weakened the internal consistency of some of the measures. Returned sojourners are a challenging research population to assess and there is an increasing reluctance on the part of international corporations to provide access to their employees. Other repatriate populations have idiosyncratic access problems as well. Future research needs to draw on a wider pool of participants and on innovative methodology to increase repatriate participation.

Finally, the correlational nature of the research limits the interpretations of the direction of causality. Although it seems unlikely, for instance, that repatriation distress causes cultural identity change, rather than the predicted opposite direction of effect, the nonexperimental methodology demands prudence in interpretation.

Research data such as these may provide insight to both international human resource management specialists and to intercultural trainers. International HR who develop policies regarding the selection of employees for international assignments may find it informative that for example, gender played no role in predicting ratings of difficulty of living overseas nor in repatriation distress. This would allow for broader recruitment of employees for overseas work. Likewise, it is important for expatriate planning policies and practices to recognize the crucial role of preparedness for repatriation on subsequent distress and the large number of repatriates who consider leaving their home companies during stressful repatriation periods.

Intercultural trainers, too, might find the results of this research helpful in the design of repatriation workshops. Contrary to oft-quoted U-shaped curve of adaptation (Lysgaard, 1955) and its counterpart, U-curve of repatriation, the data reported here indicates little effect of time on severity of repatriation distress. While most repatriates report being comfortable again in the United States after 12 months, it is not a curvilinear relationship and approximately 15% remain uncomfortable past one year. Finally, trainers should note the importance for repatriates in recognizing changes in cultural identity and its consequences for self-concept and work satisfaction.

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