

Emotional Intelligence as a Factor in Adapting to Global Assignments: The Disorienting Dilemma as a Catalyst for Learning

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Abstract

This study explores the role of emotional intelligence in adjustment to international assignments. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning was used as a framework of inquiry. Mayer and Salovey (1997) in their seminal work on emotional intelligence provide a lens for examining the role of emotional intelligence in the expatriates' experience. Hofstede's model provides a framework to identify differences between the Japanese and U.S. cultures. The qualitative design of the study utilized Seidman's in-depth phenomenological interview method with eight American expatriates who had lived and worked in Japan. The data were analyzed using Moustakas's phenomenological approach to develop the essences of the phenomenon. This study concluded (1) that the expatriate context distinctively and intensely influences the content that expatriates learn and the strategies they employ to adapt to their new environment, and (2) the need to build networks relationships to attain emotional and intellectual knowledge was a constant in the expatriates' experience (3) that dialogue, discourse and reflection played an important role in the expatriates experience (4) cultural discomfort served as a catalyst for learning (5) that learning about one's self and underlying structures of culture may prove as important as, or more so than, learning about the new culture.

Introduction

This study explores the role of emotional intelligence in adjusting to overseas work assignments. International assignments are important to the survival of global companies in the twenty-first century, and their numbers will continue to increase despite their high financial and human capital costs. The research examines the experience of eight Americans who lived and worked in Japan. Research has suggested that a gap exists in our understanding of the role of emotional intelligence as they expatriates' handle cultural differences upon being immersed in an unfamiliar country environment (Zaharna, R.S., 1989). Few studies have investigated, from the perspective of expatriates, the role that emotional intelligence plays in adjusting. Mayer and Salovey (1997) suggested that Emotional Intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotions and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. P.10

Over recent years researchers within the field of human development have engendered an interest on research to examine how emotional intelligence might be developed within organizational contexts (Kunnanatt, 2004; Opengart, 2005). This interest may be particularly relevant to the experience of international assignees where there has been recognition that adjustment requires the ability to understand emotions and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Callah and McCollum (2002) suggest that emotions are a culturally based interpretation of a physiological state, which enables individuals to act.

This study examines how expatriates manage the cultural difference between their culture of origin—the United States—and the host country, Japan. The differences between the United States with the most individualistic culture in the world and Japan with a more collectivist society produced considerable challenges for the American sojourners at times resulting in cultural shock. Cultural shock is analogous to a disorienting dilemma. Furthermore, scholars have noted that upon encountering cultural novelty, expatriates experience intercultural discomfort that may be attributed to a disorienting dilemma, leading to cognitive dissonance and identity confusion (Taylor, 1994). The goal of this research is to make explicit the tacit knowledge that expatriates have gained in the course of their assignments. Seidman's (1998) phenomenological in-depth interview method was used in this study to gather data and make sense of how emotional intelligence informs the expatriates' experience. Mezirow's (1981) transformational learning theory served as a framework to examine how expatriates employed reflexivity to make sense and learn. The research design employed Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach to develop the essences of the phenomena from both textural and structural descriptions of how expatriates made sense of their experiences in their daily routines in Japan. Hofstede's (1980a) five cultural dimensions are used to identify cultural differences between Japan and the United States that create challenges that expatriates encountered. Mayer and Salovey, (1997) provided useful insights to consider in examining the role of emotional intelligence in the in the expatriates experience.

This research addresses the high failure rate of American expatriates by examining how U.S. expatriates in Japan make meaning from their experience of adjusting to international assignments and how they deal with the cultural differences between their U.S. culture and the Japanese culture in which they are immersed. The context of expatriates in international assignments was used to understand the role that emotional intelligence plays in adjusting to international assignments. The cross-cultural context in which the expatriates are immersed provides unique challenges and opportunities for learning.

Literature Review

The expatriate employs sense making techniques to decipher daily events, as well as the behavior of others and verbal and non-verbal cues. He or she relies on the cultural frames of reference to make sense and learn. For example, initially the expatriate employs his or her own cultural frames; but when these do not produce the desired results, the expatriate may reconsider these, and this may cause the expatriate to learn about cultural differences and about him- or herself. As a newcomer to Japan, the expatriate employs reflexivity to examine cultural paradigms that guide his or her understanding of the new environment (Chikudate, 1999). Because expatriates' frames of reference are culturally derived, these frames may not provide insight into a culture different from their own. Oberg (1960) coined the term *cultural shock* to describe an "occupational disease" of people who find themselves located in a culture that is very different from their own. He suggested that culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing one's cues to social interaction. The discomfort produced by the cultural shock causes expatriates to reflect and reconsider frames of reference that are incompatible with the new setting. For example, when an expatriate who is used to functioning in an individualistic society finds that guarding her privacy produces undesirable results, she may reflect to try to understand what is occurring; and in the process she may gain a better understanding of the strong individualistic values that inform her culture and of the Japanese collectivist leanings. As expatriates address cultural discrepancies they grow emotionally and intellectually (Gabel, R. S., Dolan, S. L and Cerdin, J. L, 2005)

Transformation learning theory provides a framework to examine how expatriates handle emotions and learn to adjust to the cross-cultural experience. Transformational learning theory suggests that the process of learning to make meaning is guided by the individual's frame of reference (Mezirow, 1994). Transformational Learning Theory suggests that adults filter all of their views through frames of reference that define their world: "learning is defined as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow, 1994) p. 222). Mezirow posited that when frames of reference no longer work for the individual, a transformation occurs. This transformation occurs through reflection and examining the justification for one's beliefs (Mezirow, 1994). A *disorienting dilemma*—such as the ones expatriates may experience upon encountering cultural novelty—causes individuals to reflect on accepted assumptions and to question whether beliefs often acquired through assimilation in childhood continue to function for them as adults (Mezirow).

The disorienting dilemma is likened to culture shock that serves as a catalyst for change (Adler, 1975; Taylor, 1994; Zaharna, 1989). Similarly, Festinger (1957) posited that cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable and that, hence, individuals attempt to reduce it to achieve consonance. One way to reduce dissonance is to acquire new information and revise one's perspectives. Perspective transformation is accomplished by critically examining the origins, nature, and consequences of one's assumptions through reflection. Most reflection occurs relative to problem solving (Mezirow, 1994). One may reflect on the problem itself, on the process for solving it, or on the premise. Reflecting on the premise or content of problems is an everyday occurrence that causes one to change one's minds, meaning perspectives, and schemes (Mezirow, 1991).

Cultural novelty has an impact on the expatriates' self-concept (Erez, M., & Early, P.C., 1993). Expatriates experience a variety of challenges in adjusting both to their assignments and to environments unfamiliar to them. Isolation, homesickness, different norms, new school systems with foreign language, different cuisine, and unfamiliar housing are just a few of the aspects they may encounter. The cultural understandings and cues that help define who they are and how they should behave have changed. In the new environment, the social artifacts that the individual encounters are unfamiliar. Research has demonstrated that the greater the cultural novelty, the more difficulty newcomers have in interacting (Hofstede, 1980a). Lacking the reinforcements that affirm his or her identity and role in society, the expatriate's sense of self-identity comes into question. Berger (1966) posited that the individual's identity is "socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed" (p. 116). During the transition from one country to another, one experiences a loss of continuity in purpose and direction (Bennett, 1977). Adjustment to the host country involves the individual's routines, ego, and self-image (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992). One's ego and self-image are affected by one's experience in the host country and one's ability to establish routines that support the task of adjustment.

Hofstede's model provides a framework to identify differences between the Japanese and U.S. cultures. Hofstede (1980a) defined *culture* as "the collective mental programming of people in an environment" (p. 21). This collective mental programming is transferred to people who share a common time and place through socialization from an early age (Erez & Early, 1993). Nations serve as collectives through which culture is transmitted and sustained. From a very early age, children are reared to internalize culturally accepted social norms, and these are reinforced by the society at large. Hofstede's five dimensions of culture provide insight into how societies handle (a) power relationships, (b) individual versus group roles, (c) ambiguous situations, (d) gender roles, and (e) action in the present versus planning for the future. These dimensions inform challenges and opportunities that U.S. expatriates encounter in their daily lives in Japan.

The expatriate's inability to comprehend the system of knowledge results in ambiguity that produces discomfort. This causes the individual to question his or her values, norms, and basis for acceptable behavior. The state of not knowing results in a shifting sense of objectivity caused by experiences that show the expatriates that they cannot rely on thinking as usual (Schutz, 1964). Expatriates come to understand that things that are routine, unquestioned, and not reflected on by the in-group are potentially problematic for them. The ability to understand and manage emotions caused by the state of not knowing becomes an important part of the expatriates' adjustment. Sanchez, Specter, and Cooper (2000) posited that the expatriates' conflicting feelings about identifying with their culture of origin versus that of the host country may exacerbate already existing role conflict. Fearing identity loss and inability to cope with other stressors have been suggested to cause 40% of American expatriates to return home early. Research has also suggested that learning about oneself is critical to success in the new environment (Adler, 1975; McCaffery, 1986; Sanchez, 2000).

Research demonstrates that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in the adjustment and success of managers on international assignments (Gabel, R.S., Dolan, S. L and Cerdin, J.L, 2005). Psychologists have sought to understand the concept of emotional intelligence since the eighteenth century. Emotional intelligence is a psychological concept that aims to define the role of emotions for intellectual performance (Gardner, 1993, Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence is concerned with the individual's ability to function in everyday life. For healthy individuals emotional intelligence conveys knowledge about that is used in their interaction in the world. Gardner suggests that intelligence exist on the basis of their cultural significance. Salvoey and Mayer suggest that it is important to consider cultures and subcultures in viewing emotional intelligence. For example individuals from a culture with a collectivist orientation such as that of Japan may place more importance on the group in making decisions than Americans may from an individualistic culture, which place more emphasis on the needs of the individual.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) identified four branches of emotional skills proceeding from more basic to psychological to higher more complicated psychological processes. The lowest branch: *Perception, Appraisal and Recognition of Emotion* designate the accuracy with which one can identify emotions and emotional content. The next branch in succession: *Emotional Facilitation of Thinking* concerns emotional events that assist in intellectual processing. The next two branches are examples of more sophisticated efficient thoughts, for example, the ability to consider multiple perspectives. The third branch: *Understanding and Analyzing Emotions* deals with the ability to understand and analyze emotions. For example this branch would deal with the ability to recognize and analyze conflicting emotions. The fourth and highest branch: *Reflective Regulation of Emotions to Promote Emotional and Intellectual Growth* involves the conscious regulation of emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. An example of this would be when expatriates confronted with cultural differences between Japan and the United States feel incompetent in a new culture but are able to acknowledge, analyze and deal those emotions, to produce emotional and intellectual growth.

Research has identified significant cultural differences between the United States and Japan (Hall, 1987; Hofstede, 1980). The scores obtained by Hofstede (1980a) for the United States and Japan on each of Hofstede's cultural dimensions demonstrated cultural differences between the two countries. The United States, as the most individualistic of the countries studied, was found to differ from Japan, which was found to have a more collectivist orientation. While individualist societies accept and encourage speaking one's mind, collectivist cultures view confrontation of others as rude and undesirable. Research has suggested that while Americans tend to ask more questions and involve themselves more in heated debates, the Japanese avoid confrontation (Kim, 1994). The value that Japanese place on listening as a part of the communication process is apparent in an interviewee's comment in Kim's study: "the most important thing in communication is to listen to the other person. Americans think talking is communication. I think the Japanese feel communication begins with listening to other people" (Kim, 1994, p. 126). Harmony is a pervasive value in collectivist cultures such as the Japanese culture.

Methodology

This study examines how expatriates manage the cultural difference between their culture of origin—the United States—and the host country, Japan. The goal is to make explicit the tacit knowledge that expatriates have gained in the course of their assignments and to examine the role of emotional intelligence in their adjustment. Seidman's (1998) phenomenological in-depth interview method was used in this study to gather data and make sense of actual events involving expatriates. Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological approach was used to develop the essences of the phenomena.

The eight U.S. expatriates who participated in the study had worked in Japan for at least two years and had been back in the States for no more than five years. Expatriates with at least two years' work experience in Japan were selected for this study because this time period allowed for passage of the initial adjustment period and an opportunity to accumulate work and community experiences in the host country. The two-year requirement was also based on previous research, which had demonstrated that U.S. employees' assignments overseas tend to be one or two years in duration (Smith, 1992). Furthermore, Torbiorn (1982) noted that cultural novelty has its greatest impact on expatriates during the first two years of their assignments. Japan was selected as the host country to be studied because it differs considerably from the United States on Hofstede's (1980a) dimensions of culture. Specifically, Japan ranked in the mid-range on the collectivist dimension, while the United States was rated as the most individualistic country. Hofstede had also found considerable difference between the two countries in uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation indices: Japan was found to have a strong tendency to avoid uncertainty, and the United States demonstrated a higher tolerance for uncertainty.

Data were collected through three 90-minute semi-structured interviews using Seidman's (1998) model with each of the participants. The initial interview established the context of the participants' experiences of being assigned and relocating to the host country. Each participant described how he or she came to be assigned as an expatriate in Japan and provided basic information about his or her situation in Japan and how he or she adapted. The second interview allowed participants to reconstruct their experiences in the context in which they occurred. During this interview, participants were encouraged to reflect on how they adjusted to their experience in Japan and how they learned. They were asked to provide details of their experience of working in Japan and were encouraged to share experiences that presented particular challenges or that served as turning points for them. They were also asked to reconstruct a day in Japan from the time they woke up to the time they fell asleep. The third interview encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning that the experience held for them. During this interview the participants were asked to delve into their experiences and to reflect on the meaning of how they adapted. Documents such as information on the host country, orientation program manuals, and agreements that related to the expatriates' moves to the host country assignments were reviewed if they were available. The researcher employed epoche (or bracketing) to set aside her preconceived notions about the phenomena being studied. Additionally, she kept a reflective journal so that she could differentiate between her own ideas about the phenomena being studied and those of the participants. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Peer reviews were used to revise the data that were gathered, and these were taken into account in analyzing the data.

Findings

Findings from this study demonstrate that the cross-cultural setting provides unique challenges and opportunities for learning. These expatriates consistently expressed the tremendous learning that they achieved during their assignments. However, they also expounded on the challenges they encountered. Most importantly, the Japanese context created a critical need to deal with emotions and learn to decipher new cues in an unfamiliar environment and function in the new environment. There was a compelling need to resolve cognitive dissonance and to devise ways to learn the local way of life.

Cross-Cultural Context as a Factor in Learning

A key finding was the importance of considering the cross-cultural context-as a factor in learning. Mezirow (1990a) suggested that "adult learning takes place both in a social context and in the context of meaning perspective ... it is interactive and inter-subjective from start to finish" (p. 364). Mezirow (2000) suggested that awareness of one's cultural context is important in shaping assumptions. This importance was evident for many of the expatriates who, despite having learned Japanese initially, found that functioning in rural Japan required a facility with the culture as well as with the language. Additionally, expatriates learned that the ability to understand their own emotions and those of others was best learned in the cultural context of the host country. Associated with this was the ability to read the emotional signs in others. For expatriates, learning was an everyday social event, occurring through interaction with others. They learned as

they sought to make meaning in the contextual setting, comprising actions, situations, artifacts, and physical, social, and psychological environments.

The experience of learning in context began with previous cross-cultural experiences and continued once the expatriates entered Japan. Several expressed an irritation at experiences that left them feeling that their personal space was being violated, but they also reflected on Japanese space requirements. George commented on how his hosts managed to create personal space for themselves:

I had heard that it was a really crowded country, but I was shocked to see how crowded it actually was. When I got there, the first place I arrived was Tokyo, which is the most densely populated place on Earth, as I understand. So I had read about this, but it didn't really register until I was there actually experiencing it. Being from Kansas, where there are still open spaces, I found the crowding particularly jarring, and I concluded that Japanese have limited space requirements because it simply isn't available; but in actuality they create a psychological bubble for themselves.

Building Relationships and Networks to Facilitate to Learning

The data demonstrate that the participants' learning-in-context was facilitated by the participants' readiness to delve into the experience through participating in local activities and building relationships. Participants learned that space is not just a physical element, but that it can exist as a mental phenomenon and in language. Additionally, the expatriates learned that information pervades the Japanese environment and that their hosts seemed to attain the information they required in an informal manner: through long-term relationships, consensus building, and social networks that extended beyond the workday. Participants noted that their ability to speak Japanese contributed to their ability to gain access in the Japanese cultural context. All of the expatriates had studied Japanese for a number of years and had credentials verifying their language competence. Yet the complexity of the Japanese language, which is only spoken in Japan, presented unique challenges to expatriates' functioning in Japan.

Mezirow (1994) emphasized that learning is profoundly social and suggested that social norms are sometimes changed through support groups, heightened awareness and emotional reinforcements. Intuitively, all of the expatriates sought to gain insights by building relationships. Some seemed to be learning by reflecting, as Jane summarized: "From the get-go, without giving it much thought, I was building relationships with these teachers and students. I started to hear their side of me or their impressions of their own teachers, and I guess I started to see myself not as an outsider but as someone in a specific context." Jane's context was informed by her readiness to go to Japan and learn, by her ability to read, write, and speak Japanese, and by her commitment to stay a year longer or more. She noted that establishing the specifics of her situation freed her to give up some of her "America-ness" without trying to pretend to be Japanese. Sandra shared how she combined discourse and reflection:

I guess I'm going to say that it was through building personal relationships with my Japanese colleagues as well as with other foreigners that I would begin to—over a period of time—hear how they were deciding things or how they had come to think of something and their process; and I guess that my own realization took a long time because I would think about things that were happening and engage in long probing discussions, and that gave me new insights to consider—with some issues, this was an ongoing process that lasted weeks, months, or for the duration of my time in Japan.

George also noted that relationships made a difference in his learning:

The first few months, I got a little down, and I think talking to Fuki-san and Mori-san was the remedy for that, because they would say, “Oh, no, it's not you, it's, you know, they're uncomfortable because they're having a hard time accepting that you speak Japanese as well as you do, and because they don't speak English and they don't know what to say to you”—You know, this helped, because I was able to delve into what was happening and to understand what was really going on. It also helped me to get ideas about how I could handle it.

Importance of Dialogue, Discourse and Reflection

The expatriates revisited their writings, reconsidered their meaning schemes and meaning perspectives, and continued to learn both during their stay in Japan and upon their return. After the first interview, Jason shared,

I went back and read my journal and noticed that in a number of instances there were situations that I did not agree with but that I could not change, and I thought of an important concept that I internalized while in Japan: *shogune*, which means “it can't be helped, oh well ... that's life, that's the way the cookie crumbles.” This is the way Japanese people approach life, so it was significant to my survival that I understood and accepted this concept. But being back home, *shogune* is still important to me. My time in Japan taught me to let things go, to be less judgmental, to forgive and not to place blame. I guess the Japanese experience will stay with me for a long time.

Paul summed up his experience:

So by my own definitions, that would first look to accomplishing my assignment and being able to stay on in Japan and work as a consultant ... I was successful... beyond that, learning about myself, unpacking some emotional things ... learning about my limitations, my skills, my talents, learning about another culture, another language, and it was financially rewarding ... so by that definition it was wholeheartedly successful.

Cultural Discomfort as Catalyst for Learning

One of the most consistent themes to emerge from the data was that these expatriates were motivated to learn as a reaction to cultural shock. The cultural shock they experienced is analogous to Mezirow's (1990) disorienting dilemma:

any major challenge to an established perspective ... [such as] an accretion of transformed meaning schemes resulting from a series of dilemmas or in response to an ... externally imposed epochal dilemma such as a death, illness, separation or divorce ... or from efforts to understand a different culture with customs that contradict our own previously accepted presuppositions. (p. 168)

Expatriates in this study experienced cultural shock when they encountered loss of perceptual reinforcements from their own culture, cultural stimuli that had no meaning for them, or new and diverse experiences that they misunderstood. Expatriates noted that early in their sojourn they felt a sense of wonder and excitement. However, this honeymoon period was followed by feelings of isolation and loss of individuality and control. The data demonstrated that the expatriates were using emotional knowledge to analyze their emotions and those of others and decide courses of action to function in the host country. As expatriates dealt with their insecurities, their discomfort produced reflection, discourse, and learning.

The participants expressed feelings of frustration and insecurity. For example, in one of his interviews, Paul stated,

There were so many things I didn't understand—language, culture, mannerisms, things which appeared contradictory to me in terms of how people behaved in various situations ... and I wanted to understand because basically I have a hard time with contradictions, but obviously there was something about the situation, that the Japanese people either didn't see the same contradictions I did or the contradictions didn't bother them in the way they puzzled me. So that fascinated me. I craved a resolution to these contradictions, so I thought about them a lot, trying to figure out what was going on, and then I would bounce my ideas off other people.... I was not satisfied until I reached an understanding.

Paul shared how disconcerted he felt by his situation in Japan:

I felt as though I had lost total control of my life. I was truly not accepted as part of any of the groups that I participated in, and yet I was expected to be available to participate in activities day and night. I had no privacy; people would ask questions about my personal life that would have been considered rude in the U.S.... as I reflected and discussed my frustrations with my Japanese friends I realized that I was not being singled out. In Japan groups tend to have a very long life, and it is hard to break into them. I noticed that Japanese persons were also excluded from some groups. I gradually learned how to gain the trust of some groups and made choices about aspects of the culture that I would or wouldn't incorporate into my own life for the sake of fitting in.

These descriptions of how expatriates managed the anxiety they experienced when faced with situations they didn't understand show how their discomfort turned into reflection and discourse that helped them to analyze their emotions and learn. They quickly found that using U.S. socio-cultural paradigms to interpret and react to situations in Japan produced undesired results. They felt frustrated, lonely, and insecure and this caused them to search for meaning and for ways to bring equilibrium into their lives. Festinger (1957) suggested that when individuals are faced with incongruent situations, they feel a need to resolve the inconsistencies to bring balance into their lives. The need for equilibrium likewise motivated these expatriates to seek to decipher the cultural cues in their environment and to make meaning. This practice repeated itself frequently when the participants dealt with situations, behaviors, and symbols that they didn't understand.

The disorienting dilemma of cultural shock served as a catalyst for learning, as the expatriates attempted to make meaning and discovered that their preconceived cultural meaning schemes and/or perspectives were not useful in the new environment. They learned as they took stock and came to understand that in Japan things are done differently. Amanda noted, "I was constantly comparing how things were done. I would think, 'in America we do it this way, but in Japan the acceptable way is ...'." While the expatriates spoke Japanese, they were functioning in the Japanese context using American *meaning schemes*.

The expatriates responded to cultural shock by attempting to understand their environment and the people they encountered. As expatriates examined the Japanese culture, they made comparisons between the Japanese culture and the American culture. This caused them to delve further into the American culture and to consider aspects of this culture that they had never thought about before. As they learned more about both cultures, they compared and contrasted and questioned why things work in one culture and not another. They noted that perhaps Americans would benefit from considering Japanese values and mores. In addition to considering the norms that they felt they needed to adapt to function effectively during their Japanese assignment, they also examined and adopted norms that agreed more with their personal natures. As they did this, they turned inwardly and did a lot more self-exploration. Thus, in the process of learning about a new culture, they learned about themselves.

Learning About Self

Mezirow (1994) suggested that the most significant learning involves learning about oneself, and that this often involves a critique of assumptions and beliefs acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood in order to determine if they remain functional for one as an adult. When individuals face significant life changes, they examine their meaning schemes and perspectives and in the process often learn a great deal about themselves. As the expatriates negotiated their new lives in Japan, they attempted to learn about the local culture and expectations. However, they indicated in interviews that they also dealt with confusion, frustration, loneliness, and feelings of self-doubt. Erez (1993) suggested that the self is a composite of internal thoughts and feelings that are shaped to a great extent by what it means to be human in a particular culture. Emotions influence the

expatriates' self concept and reciprocally emotions influence the development of the self concept. Hence, as American expatriates attempted to negotiate the Japanese culture, their very selves came into question. In their interviews, they described how they reflected on their self-doubts. Several noted that they had set out to learn about Japan but that their most important learning concerned themselves. As they reflected, they learned about their strengths and weaknesses and their capacities to learn, and they developed a deeper awareness of their personal values. George, for example, expressed frustration at not being able to make progress at meetings he attended:

I would prepare an agenda and jot down questions I needed to have answered, but there never seemed to be an opportunity to raise them. On the few occasions when I did manage to ask my questions, people either seemed flustered or reacted by saying, "We'll give consideration to that." This drove me crazy, and at one point I thought I may not be the right person for this job.

He did a lot of soul-searching and came to understand that in Japan, building relationships is very important:

For a long time I have been driven by the need to succeed, and I haven't made time for my family, let alone colleagues. Japan challenged me to reconsider my approach to life. That's not to say that I stopped working long hours, because they worked long hours and I had to do likewise, but I became conscious of the human element.

Along a similar vein, Jason examined his constant need to get positive feedback and rewards and concluded, "This is a part of my middle-class American paradigm that pushes me to constantly strive to achieve a successful career, even if it means neglecting personal relationships."

These descriptions suggest that for many of the participants, the sojourn triggered self-examination. The expatriates noted that a positive aspect of discomfort in the new culture was heightened self-awareness. As they repeatedly encountered situations that didn't make sense to them, the expatriates did a lot of soul-searching. These attempts to understand the Japanese culture caused them to reflect on their own behavior and to seek ways to make this experience work for them. They examined their own values, assumptions, and customs. As they handled the differences between the two cultures, they did a great deal of introspection. They became aware of personal strengths and weaknesses, values, and learning styles that they had not previously considered.

Implications of the Study

The findings from this study derive some important conclusions that may contribute to devising strategies to enhance expatriate's effectiveness in cross-cultural settings. Expatriates noted that once they overcame the emotional difficulties of comprehending a considerably dissimilar cultural milieu, they learned a great deal and grew intellectually and emotionally. For the expatriates, learning was an ongoing activity that supported their ability to survive and thrive in the new environment. Self awareness and understanding underlying structures of culture was mentioned frequently as an important aspect of making sense of the Japanese culture. The implication of these findings for practice is that while language training and information about the host

country are beneficial, there are other more subtle types of learning that are not easily taught but that are important parts of the expatriates' successful adjustment. International assignments provide a special opportunity for professional development, and human resources management practitioners are uniquely positioned to promote learning that is valuable to individuals and organizations. Organizations can positively impact the expatriates' experience by helping them to (1) develop self-awareness, (2) gain insights into underlying structures of cultures (3) develop the capacity to understand and analyze their emotions (4) increase their capacity for observation, reflection, and discourse.

This study demonstrates that self-awareness is an important element of the expatriates' learning. The implication of this finding is that expatriate's ability to acclimatize to a new culture is affected by the individual's sense of self. Erez (1993) suggested that the self serves as an interpreter of the external world, which consists of cultural values and behaviors. Erez's self-representation theory could be applied to develop approaches to help expatriates understand how the self is affected by entry into a new culture. Additionally, prior to departure, expatriates could participate in focus groups or similar activities that would help them to delve into their individual selves to assess their ability to deal with ambiguity and to identify strengths and weaknesses that would contribute to their ability to negotiate new cultures. Expatriates noted that learning about culture in general and about their own culture in particular contributed to the ability to settle into a new culture.

The expatriates all demonstrated that their capacity for observation, reflection, and discourse contributed to their successful sojourns. Several noted that the interviews for this study contributed to their reflection and learning. HRD practitioners can develop courses, units, or modules to enhance the capacity for reflection, observation, and discourse. Marsick (1990) and Marquardt (1999, 2004) suggested that action learning can be achieved by combining projects to work on real-life problems with reflection seminars. This approach could be combined with discourse and observation to encourage expatriates to utilize reflection strategies in order to examine challenges they encounter during their assignments. Prior to departing for the host country, expatriates could attend reflection seminars, which could be augmented with additional developmental activities during the sojourn. Mezirow (1990) suggested an approach to encourage reflection that employs Socratic questioning to assist learners in examining contradictions in the ways they deal with real-life problems. This type of approach could be employed with international assignees both before departure and while in country. They could be encouraged to combine observation, reflection, and discourse to sort out their own internal contradictions as well as those they encounter during their assignments.

Osland and Bird (1990) presented a cultural sense-making model that encourages participants to think like anthropologists. The model focuses on helping students to become skilled at observing and decoding other cultures by giving them practice in honing observational and interpretive skills. The goal is to help students to develop the behavioral flexibility needed to adapt to unanticipated situations. HRD practitioners could use one of the aforementioned approaches or a combination. Consideration should be given to providing expatriates with developmental experiences prior to departure and while in country.

The expatriates in this study consistently demonstrated that the disorienting dilemma was recursive when expatriates encountered items that they didn't comprehend or that were incongruous. Developmental experiences involving expatriates while in the host country could optimize the learning produced by the recursive disorienting dilemma during overseas assignments. These events provided an opportunity for ongoing learning that could be enhanced by setting up action-learning teams (Marquardt, 1999, 2004) that would meet regularly to address real-life work projects and problems during the foreign assignment through reflection seminars. Frequently there will not be enough expatriates in any one geographical location to participate in this type of activity in person however with the use of modern technology this could be accomplished through telephone conferences or by **electronic means**. The work of these teams could be shared with the home office to produce organizational learning. This approach could encourage the expatriates to learn from each other and to share their learning with others throughout the company.

Conclusion

This research is significant because it addresses an important gap in our understanding of how expatriates learn and handle cultural differences between their culture of origin and the Japanese culture. Globalization and cultural diversity within the United States have increased the need for U.S. workers to deal with individuals from many different cultures. Research has suggested that understanding the learning process of expatriates is essential to developing more effective strategies to aid sojourners during intercultural experiences (McCaffery, 1986; Taylor, 1994). Much of the research on expatriate assignments has concentrated on reasons for failure and on the expatriation and repatriation stages of international assignments (Yan, 2002). This research instead focuses on how expatriates learn as they handle problems, emotions and opportunities *during* the tenure of the assignment. It provides insights from the perspective of expatriates who have been on international assignments. Because this study was conducted from the perspective of expatriates, it yields findings that can be used by future expatriates to prepare for overseas assignments and by those who are developing approaches to assist future expatriates in adjusting to a new culture once in the host country. Human resources professionals could use findings derived from this research to develop unique approaches to prepare individuals for overseas assignments. As demographics in U.S. organizations become increasingly diverse, data from this study may also be used to create innovative methods to address workforce diversity within the United States.

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