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## Cultural distance and expatriate job satisfaction

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## ABSTRACT

Despite its strong impact in domestic settings on job performance, organizational commitment, stress, and turnover intentions, job satisfaction has received little attention in the literature on expatriates. This paper analyzes the predictors of job satisfaction that may arise in an expatriate context. Drawing on the cultural distance perspective, we propose that the national cultural distance, supervisor's nationality, host-country language proficiency, expatriate type, and company nationality are important determinants of expatriate job satisfaction. Survey results from 148 expatriates in Japan demonstrate that national cultural distance, supervisor's nationality, and expatriate type have a statistically significant influence on expatriate job satisfaction. Theoretical and practical implications are provided.

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In an increasingly globalized world, an important component of international human resource management in multinational companies (MNCs) is the expatriation of employees to foreign countries. In line with this global trend, a stream of academic literature has evolved since the 1980s (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985), making research on expatriates an important area of research in the international business (IB) domain. A bulk of this research has focused on three cross-cultural adjustment facets (i.e., general-, interaction-, and work adjustment), showing that well-adjusted expatriates are both effective and have low turnover intentions (see Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991; Hechanova, Beehr, & Christiansen, 2003 for literature reviews).

Unfortunately, job satisfaction has received little attention in research on expatriates despite its strong, consistent influence in "domestic" settings on job performance, organizational commitment, stress, and turnover intentions (McCaughy & Bruning, 2005). The nascent research in international settings indicates that several task-related factors extrapolated from domestic research also predict expatriate job satisfaction (Birdseye & Hill, 1995; Black & Gregersen, 1990; Li, 1996; Li & Tse, 1998; Naumann, 1993a; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). However, only a few researchers have taken into account the full complexity of expatriate assignments and examined factors that exist only in international settings, such as regional location (Miller, 1975), cross-cultural training (Naumann, 1993a), and boundary spanning (Au & Fukuda, 2002). These studies show that the phenomenon of expatriate job satisfaction extends beyond task-related factors.

The present study contributes to research on expatriates in three ways. First, we test factors that affect job satisfaction and that are emerging in the international expatriate context. Second, we draw on the cultural distance perspective to show that intercultural interactions are important determinants of job satisfaction. We measure the cultural distance by multiple dimensions, including the national cultural distance, supervisor's nationality, host-country language proficiency, expatriate

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type, and company nationality. Third, reflecting changes in MNCs' staffing practices (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007), we distinguish organizational expatriates (OEs, i.e. employees that are sent by their companies to foreign countries – Edström & Galbraith, 1977) from self-initiated expatriates (SIEs, i.e. employees who work abroad on their own initiative – Suutari & Brewster, 2000). In line with the cultural distance perspective, we examine whether company nationality and employment type have an impact on expatriate job satisfaction.

In line with the above objectives, the rest of this study is organized as follows. The first section reviews the literature on job satisfaction and presents the cultural distance perspective. The second section presents the study hypotheses. The sample, control variables, measures, and statistical procedures are presented in the third section. The subsequent sections discuss the study's findings, theoretical and practical limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction, “a positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300), places an emphasis on the task environment where an employee performs his or her duties and the attitudes that are formed through interactions within this environment. From the economic perspective, job satisfaction is a unitary concept that can be explained in monetary terms (Bonache, 2005). Since people are assumed to like rewards but dislike effort, a better salary for an identical level of effort will determine the decision to quit and a higher level of satisfaction. From the psychological perspective, job satisfaction is often described to include task environment, compensation, communication, and social relations at the work place (e.g., Spector, 1997). While having several common predictors (cf. Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005), job satisfaction is a broader concept than the related cross-cultural facet – work adjustment – that measures only the degree of comfort and adaptation regarding different performance standards and expectations and work values in a new environment (Black, 1988). In domestic settings, employee personality and job-, task- and, organizational characteristics are found to determine job satisfaction, which, in turn, acts as an antecedent of internal motivation, absenteeism, anxiety, stress, organizational citizenship and commitment, turnover, and individual job performance (e.g., Hellman, 1997).

Consistent with research in domestic settings, expatriate job satisfaction is linked with lower turnover tendency (Birdseye & Hill, 1995) and withdrawal cognition (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998) and higher motivation to perform and finish expatriate assignments (Downes, Thomas, & Singley, 2002). The extrapolation of various job-, task-, and organizational factors from domestic settings is also found to predict expatriate job satisfaction. In a study of expatriates in US MNCs, job-, task- (autonomy, skill variety, role ambiguity, task identity, and significance) and organizational factors (participation and career advancement) predicted both intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction (Naumann, 1993a). Further, two studies of expatriate hotel managers in the Asia-Pacific showed that role clarity, participation in decision making, and skill variety were positively related with job satisfaction (Li, 1996; Li & Tse, 1998). In addition, a study of US expatriates in Japan indicated that work-role clarity and surpassed expectations about job discretion (i.e., the ability to do the job as one wishes) had a positive impact on job satisfaction (Black & Gregersen, 1990). Taken together, the above studies show several common denominators of job satisfaction in domestic and expatriate settings.

However, conceptual discussions and research findings suggest that the complexity of expatriate assignments necessitates the consideration of additional factors that arise in international settings. For example, expatriate job satisfaction has been described as the successful adjustment to overseas job requirements and the formation of relationships with the host country's workforce and customers (Black et al., 1991; Hechanova et al., 2003; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). Research supports these perspectives because boundary-spanning activities are found to have a positive impact on job satisfaction (Au & Fukuda, 2002). Studies further show that prior international work-experience and cross-cultural training have a positive influence on expatriate job satisfaction (Miller, 1975; Naumann, 1993a). The expatriates' location should also be taken into account because experienced US expatriates have been found to exhibit higher job satisfaction in Western Europe than in Latin America (Miller, 1975). In order to create a more comprehensive understanding of factors that affect expatriate job satisfaction, we draw on the cultural distance perspective.

### 1.2. The cultural distance perspective

Cultural distance has evolved from the psychic distance concept (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), and describes differences between any two countries with respect to the level of development, education, business and everyday language, cultural values, and the extent of connections between these countries. Psychic distance and cultural distance have often been used synonymously in the IB literature (Shenkar, Luo, & Yeheskel, 2008). However, these constructs can be distinguished, in that cultural distance measures socio-cultural differences between two countries, whereas psychic distance refers to managerial perceptions (Evans & Mavondo, 2002). Kogut and Singh (1988) simplified the multidimensional cultural distance construct into a single index, which is an aggregate measure of Hofstede's (1980) national culture dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individuality, and masculinity. The index has been used at the company- and country-levels to test the influence of culture on international trade patterns, market entry, and joint-venture performance. Notwithstanding the popularity of this measure, research has produced mixed results due to conceptual and measurement-related weaknesses

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