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Personality differences in managers who have, and have not, worked abroad

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ABSTRACT

The present, exploratory study examined bright-side personality trait (NEO-PI-R and MBTI) and dark-side trait (HDS) differences between middle to senior managers who had, and had not, worked abroad. It also examined the relation of personality trait variables to the duration of time spent abroad. In all 3165 females and 10,068 males aged between 23 and 65 years went to work-related assessment centre. Results for a Domain and Facet analysis of the Big Five, as well as from the Dark-Side traits revealed numerous differences. Those who had worked abroad tended to be more Open and Conscientious, and less Neurotic. There were fewer differences on measures of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and dark-side HDS among those with experience loving abroad. They tended to be more Thinking than Feeling Types, Colourful/Histrionic and less Dependent. Regression showed those with work experience abroad tended to be older, Extraverted, Open, Conscientious males with a tendency to move towards as opposed to away from people. Those who had spent longer times abroad tended to be more Open and Diligent and less Agreeable. Limitations of this cross-sectional study are discussed.

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This study examines the personality correlates of over 13,000 middle aged adults who had and had not worked abroad, and how long they spent there. It is concerned with the concept of the expatriate manager and based on the assumption that personality factors play a part in who chooses to work abroad and stay there for a period of time. Indeed there is literature on the “migrant personality” which suggests there is “syndrome of personality characteristics” among individuals who want to emigrate that differentiates them from those who want to stay in their country of origin (Boneva & Frieze, 2001). Of course, some jobs require going abroad which is not a matter of choice while in others people can “turn down” the offer of a sojourning work assignment, though it may be at some personal cost.

One framework for understanding expatriate success is the *Attraction-Selection-Attrition* theory (Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). The theory suggests that people are attracted to specific jobs because of their interests and personality; organisations then choose people they believe compatible for different jobs, and later some people leave a job (*attrition*) when

they feel they do not fit in. This *Attraction-Selection-Assessment* process leads organisations and groups within them to become increasingly homogenous. In this sense it is possible to talk of person-job “fit” or “misfit”, or of congruity between a person and their work-group, and a “fit” for working abroad. Thus people may be attracted to international organisations that have offices in many countries and a reputation for moving their staff around on “foreign assignments”. Similarly these organisations tend to seek out those eager to work abroad with the abilities, personality and values to thrive. This study examines how personality relates to the choice of overseas experience. There is a vast literature on how personality influences a wide range of work related behaviours, one of which is choosing an international organisation with the possibility of being asked to work abroad (Furnham, 2008).

Indeed, some businesses, for a variety of reasons, have an active (and expensive) policy of regular job transferral, while for some occupations (e.g., travelling salesperson, diplomat, soldier, missionary), the job, almost by definition, involves travel and working abroad for extended periods. Indeed job applicant for many jobs state specifically that they choose the job precisely and specifically for the opportunity to work abroad (Furnham, 2015). Our question is the extent to which personality traits play a part in this decision.

It is not until comparatively recently that social scientists have

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begun to consider some of the psychological causes and consequences of business transfer and the intention to migrate (Winchic & Carment, 1988). What businesses and developmental agencies, as well as academics, want to know is what are the *best individual difference predictors of work efficacy while abroad* (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). These include abilities (multilingualism), skills, personality and values. They are interested in such things as at what stage in their working lives people go abroad, how long they stay, and what particular experiences they have, as this seems to strongly impact on their performance both abroad and when they return (Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). They are also very interested in selecting those who will thrive in difficult and unfamiliar environments involving danger or particular hardships. There is also the possibility that the overseas experience changes personality and values which is discussed below.

There are various reasons why middle managers have experience of working abroad. Some people join organisations for that express purpose, while others astutely avoid them (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). There are many factors involved: first, whose choice/initiative it is (the individual or the organisation); the second the extent to which it is voluntary vs compulsory; and thirdly where and for how long people are posted abroad. Other factors include personal and family circumstances. In this study most people worked for large organisations at some point in their career and were offered the opportunity to move abroad which they could refuse. Our central question is the personality differences between those with and without overseas working experience.

There is an extensive research literature on the choices and challenges of working abroad (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). These studies are concerned with the predictors of accepting a work assignment abroad, as well as the correlates of success and satisfaction while abroad (Van der Velde, Bossink, & Jansen, 2005). For instance, in a meta-analytic study Hechanova, Beehr and Christiansen (2003) found self-efficacy, frequency of interaction with host nationals, and family support consistently predicted different types of adjustment. However, like many other studies this focused on reaction to the sojourn experience rather than the choice to go (Huang, Chi, & Lawler, 2005).

1. Personality and adaptation abroad

The present study was concerned with “bright” and “dark” side personality differences between a large group of British managers who had, and had not worked abroad. Bright-side traits are considered to be traits measuring normal personality functioning while dark-side traits are more associated with dysfunctional traits (Furnham & Crump, 2005; Furnham, 2015).

Some studies have looked at the personality trait correlates of a successful expatriate assignment. Ones and Viswesvaran (1997) summarized criterion-related validity studies of personality-related predictors for expatriates. Findings indicated that the personality determinants of expatriate early returns, job performance, adjustment, and other criteria were different. Conscientiousness appeared to be a good predictor of expatriate job performance, and a valid predictor of overseas counterproductive behaviours. Most of these studies have also found that personality variables predictive of expatriate adjustment include Emotional Stability whereas, for job performance, ambition and aspects of Openness to Experience were predictive. A little later, Caligiuri (2000) found that Extraversion, Agreeableness and Emotional stability were negatively related to the desire to terminate their overseas assignment while Conscientiousness was related to positive supervisor ratings on the assignment.

Studies by Mol and colleagues have looked at personality correlates of those interested in becoming expatriates (Mol, Born,

Willemsen, van der Molen, & Derous, 2009) as well as trait correlates of work performance among expatriates. They found Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability and Conscientiousness, but not Openness related to job performance along with other variables like cultural sensitivity and language ability (Mol, Born, Willemsen, & van der Molen, 2005). Recently Canache, Hayes, Mondak, and Wals (2013) found Openness and Extraversion was correlated with the intention to migrate in 22 country samples. Earlier Boneva and Frieze (2001) found that those who chose to migrate compared to those who do not want to resettle in a foreign country tended to be more achievement and power, but less affiliation oriented, and overall more work oriented.

Most of the personality related work in this field has however been concerned with trait correlates of adjustment and performance on foreign assignments (Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2013; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013).

Interestingly all these studies looked at personality traits prior to moving abroad. It is possible that an overseas experience actually changes personality. This issue of the stability of personality over adulthood has been extensively researched.

2. The stability of personality

There have been many studies that examine the stability of psychological characteristics over time. The debate about the equivocal nature of both findings and conclusions regarding continuity vs. change revolves around a number of issues such as the reliability and validity of personality tests used (to account in part for measurement error); the moderator variables considered (like sex, education and ethnicity); the age at which people are measured (i.e. adolescents, adults, old age); the time span that shows most change and stability; how change is measured (such as mean level change, rank order, ipsative change); the stability of the environments of people and what, if anything leads to change (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

The results have patterns to them though there inevitably remains many disagreements (Ardelt, 2000). All agree that there is evidence of both stability and change. From these studies it may be possible to draw the following conclusions: Personality seems most stable between the ages of 30 and 60yrs particularly using established big five measures to assess it. There are modest increases in Emotional Stability and Agreeableness over this period with Extraversion and Neuroticism showing least change (both with a slight decline) and Conscientiousness showing most change (an increase). Males seem more stable than females.

Various studies have been reported using longitudinal data and cross-lagged correlation coefficients, path analysis and structural equation modelling where the causal ordering in the analysis has not matched the time at which data was gathered (Cheng & Furnham, 2012). That is, because it is generally accepted that some factors are generally stable over adulthood (like height) it is assumed that when they are measured is relatively unimportant (i.e. people remain very similar in height from 20 to 60). It is however generally accepted it is desirable to measure variables according to the causal modelling pattern and also check the reliability of those measures.

3. This study

This exploratory study used the results from assessment centre data based which has been used to provide data for various other studies (Furnham, Crump, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2007; Furnham, Crump, & Ritchie, 2013). The consultancy collected this information

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