

Working Paper

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Expatriate Mental Health

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Organizations continue to appoint employees to international assignments due to the continuous growth of mergers and acquisitions (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2012). Yet, the cost of long-term international assignments is still one of the top challenges of organizations (Cartus, 2018) and, consequently, they cannot afford the risk of expatriate failure. Thus, it is important to understand how organizations can decrease the rate of failure in international assignments. A recent study by Aetna (Patel, 2017) indicate that the rate of mental health issues among expatriates is increasing and that this issue should not be ignored. Examining mental health among expatriates is particularly important due to the unique challenges related to international assignments, such as language differences (Luo & Shenkar, 2006), cultural distance (Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005), expatriate adjustment (Firth, Chen, Kirkman, & Kim, 2014), family adjustment (Gupta, Banerjee, & Gaur, 2012), repatriation (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007), host country national reactions (Toh & Denisi, 2003), lack of social support (Sterle, Vervoort, & Verhofstadt, 2018), among others. We argue that examining expatriate mental health can advance our understanding of the role that mental health plays in expatriate success. Thus, in this study we examine the role of work stressors on expatriate mental health, and how mental health, in turn, affects expatriation outcomes.

First, we examine how stressors affect expatriate mental health. Our hypothesized model then explicates the mediating role of expatriate mental health in the relationships between expatriate work stressors (e.g., role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict) and outcomes (e.g., early return intent and assignment satisfaction). The relationships between the challenges that expatriates face in their international assignment and expatriation outcomes have been examined extensively in the expatriation literature (e.g., Bruning, Sonpar, & Wang, 2012; Carraher,

Sullivan, & Crocitto, 2008; Naumann, 1993; Shaffer, Kraimer, Yu-Ping, & Bolino, 2012; Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002; Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison, & Diehn, 2016), however, the mediating role of mental health issues in these relationships has not been greatly explored. In this research, we intend to conduct a study with the goal of increasing our understanding of the role of mental health in the relationships between expatriate work stressors and assignment satisfaction and early return intention.

In addition, it is important to examine what moderating factors may lessen the effects of stressors on expatriates' mental health. We draw from conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and propose that organizations may provide resources to expatriates that will help them to deal with the stressors related to international assignments. Specifically, we investigate how HPWS for expatriates can attenuate the effects of stressors on expatriates' mental health and, in turn, on expatriate outcomes. We argue that expatriates can turn to resources gained from their firms' HPWS when stressors are present and mitigate the stressors' effects. Thus, we explore the role of HPWS for expatriates in moderating the relationship between expatriate stressors and mental health, leading to higher assignment satisfaction and lower early return intention.

Our research makes several important contributions. First, we extend the research on expatriate beyond the stressor-stress relationships by examining the effects of challenge and hindrance stressors on mental health. Theoretically, it is important to understand the role of stressors on expatriates' mental health because of the undesirable relationship between mental illness and employee performance, and this relationship may be worsened due to the challenges associated with international assignments.

Second, we examine the mediating role of mental health in the relationships between expatriate work stressors and assignment satisfaction and between expatriate work stressors and early return intention. Extant research on expatriates has focused on how international assignments' challenges and stress affect expatriation success, yet, we know little about the mediating role of mental health on these relationships.

Third, we draw from the COR theory to understand the role of HPWS for expatriates on the relationships between stressors and mental health, and consequently on early return intention and assignment satisfaction. Specifically, we intend to demonstrate how employees who perceive to receive more support (i.e., resources) from their organizations HPWS are more likely to deal with work stressors in a more positive way and consequently are more likely to enjoy and succeed in their international assignment.

Fourth, we contribute to the HPWS literature by proposing a definition of HPWS for expatriates and developing and testing a new HPWS scale specifically for international assignments. This is important because the vast majority of HPWS work has focused on employees in general occupations; however, employees on international assignments have specific needs related to their roles and thus it is essential to understand how organizations can provide the resources for international assignees to succeed in their work abroad.

From a practical stance, organizations may be more aware of the importance of providing mental health benefits to expatriates as well as of developing programs to decrease the likelihood of expatriation mental health issues. Likewise, when expatriates are more aware of the risks associated with mental illness while in the international assignment, they may be better prepared to deal with the expected stressors related to expatriation. Taken together, our study develops and tests a moderated mediation model outlining the mechanisms and boundary conditions related to

employees' stressors, mental health and outcomes while in international assignments (see Figure 1).

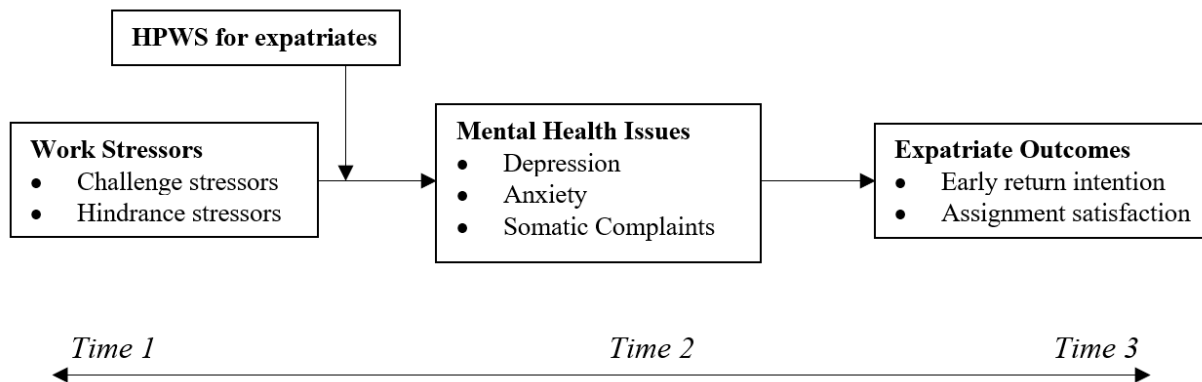


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Work Stressors and Mental Health in International Assignments

Stressors are defined as “stimuli that evoke the stress process” (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005: 764), and they can be aggregated into two categories: challenge stressors (e.g., number of projects, time pressures, amount of responsibilities) and hindrance stressors (e.g., work politics, red tape, role ambiguity, role conflict) (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000). The occupational health literature suggests that stressors are likely to decrease mental health and increase stress (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986). However, instead of proposing that all stressors lead to undesirable outcomes, researchers posit that challenge stressors will provide more opportunities for positive outcomes, while hindrance stressors will likely hamper those opportunities (LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). For example, Kelloway and Barling (1991) found that role ambiguity increases emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and decreases work satisfaction, leading to a decrease in mental health among hospital employees. Conversely, challenge stressors may motivate employees to succeed in their assignments because challenge stressors provide

opportunities for promotion and status (Firth et al., 2014). Taken together, this empirical evidence suggests that challenge stressors and hindrance stressors may also affect expatriates' mental health in different ways. Hindrance stressors are likely to weaken the mental health of employees engaged in long-term international assignments; by contrast, challenge stressors may increase employees' work motivation and consequently improve their mental health while they are engaged in the international assignment.

Hypothesis 1: Hindrance stressors in international assignments negatively relates to expatriate mental health.

Hypothesis 2: Challenge stressors in international assignments positively relates to expatriate mental health.

The Mediating Role of Mental Health on the Relationships Between Stressors and Assignment Satisfaction and Early Return Intention

Research has shown that work stressors are related to several work outcomes. For example, Brief and Aldag (1976) observed that role conflict was negatively related to work satisfaction and role ambiguity was positively related to turnover. Certain types of stressors have also been linked to expatriates' intention to return early (Firth, Chen, Kirkman, & Kim, 2014).

In addition, prior research has suggested that mental health is related to several work outcomes (LePine, LePine, Jackson, 2004), yet we have not considered mental health as a mediator in these relationships. Indeed, research has shown that poor mental health is negatively related to job satisfaction (Rosen & Hochwarter, 2014) and positively related to turnover intention (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008), and this may be more problematic for expatriates who are pressured to succeed in the international assignment due to its exorbitant cost (Cartus, 2018). This is because international assignments have a set of unique features and challenges of the job

that expatriates may have not experienced in their previous work assignments, such as a different cultural environment, the need to communicate in a foreign language, or in a language that is foreign for the local people, the lack of social support, and other related work pressures.

Accordingly, when expatriates' mental health deteriorates due to international assignment stressors, their satisfaction with the international assignment may also decrease and they may feel a higher desire to return home prior to the expected assignment completion. Thus, we propose that mental health will mediate the relationships between stressors and early return intention and satisfaction with expatriate assignment.

Hypothesis 3: Expatriate mental health is (a) positively related to satisfaction with international assignment and (b) negatively related to early return intention.

Hypothesis 4: Mental health mediates the negative relationship between stressors and satisfaction with international assignment, and the positive relationship between stressors and early return intention.

The Attenuating Effect of HPWS for Expatriates on the Relationship Between Work Stressors and Mental Health

Previous research suggests that not all employees respond to work stressors in the same way and that relationships between stressors and outcomes may be contingent to other factors (Dawson, O'Brien, & Beehr, 2016; Liu, Spector, & Shi, 2007; Rosen & Hochwarter, 2014). Conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) also suggests that employees will rely on their available resources to protect them from stressful situations (Hobfoll & Lilly, 1993). We propose that expatriates from organizations high in HPWS have more access to resources to deal with stressors and thus are less likely to suffer from mental illness. In such situations, these

employees will draw from the resources that were provided to them to deal with their work-related issues.

Indeed, HPWS has been associated with several positive outcomes. For example, researchers found that HPWS leads to higher employee psychological capital (Agarwal & Farndale, 2017) and psychological empowerment (Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009). HPWS has also been linked to increased productivity (Datta, Guthrie, & Wright, 2005), job satisfaction (Schmidt & Pohler, 2018), organizational commitment (Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011), and decreased turnover intentions (Armstrong, Flood, Guthrie, Liu, Maccurtain, & Mkamwa, 2010; Guthrie, 2001; Sikora, Ferris, & Van Iddekinge, 2015).

Although many studies have examined the direct effects of HPWS on several work outcomes, the moderating role of HPWS on the relationships between work stressors and outcomes has not been widely examined. Specifically, we are interested in a unique group of employees (i.e., expatriates) who have unique challenges and needs, and thus we suggest that HPWS for expatriates may moderated several work relationships related to international assignments. We define HPWS for expatriates as a set of human resource practices that enhance expatriate performance and expatriation success. In this study, we argue that organizations can provide the resources needed, through HPWS for expatriates, to assist employees to deal with work stressors related to international assignments.

Drawing from COR theory, we explain why expatriates from firms with HPWS for expatriates are less likely to be affected by the stressors related to international assignments. HPWS for expatriates provide resources that expatriates can draw from to endure the stressors they face while in the international assignment. Even though these stressors are new for expatriates who were used to other types of stressors in their home organizations, expatriates

were not provided with the resources to deal with them prior to departure and they will not know where to turn to to address them. Conversely, expatriates who were not exposed to resources in their pre-departure stage are more likely to feel anxiety and depression when they are faced with the stressors related to the international assignment. Thus, HPWS for expatriate may alleviate the negative effects of stressors on expatriates' mental health.

Hypothesis 5: HPWS for expatriates moderates the direct effect of stressors on expatriate mental health.

Hypothesis 6: HPWS for expatriates moderates the indirect effect of stressors on expatriates' (a) assignment satisfaction / (b) early return intention through mental health.

Method

Two samples will be used to develop and validate the HPWS for expatriate scale and one sample will be used to test our hypotheses.

Study 1: Scale Development

Given the specific challenges and needs of expatriates, the purpose of Study 1 is to develop and validate a measure of HPWS to be used specifically for expatriates. We started by defining *HPWS for expatriates* as a set of human resource practices that enhance expatriate performance and expatriation success. Using our definition of HPWS for expatriates as a guiding point, we identified several items from four HPWS scales (i.e., Gould-Williams & Davis, 2005; Lepak & Snell, 2002; Patel, Messersmith, Lepak, 2013; Truss, 1999) and adapted each item specifically to the context of expatriation. We reviewed the items several times until we felt comfortable with the initial pool of 39 items, which included expatriate-related items on selection, training, participation, mobility, information sharing, compensation, and assessment.

Content validity was established by using 52 senior undergraduate students immediately after they completed an advanced human resource course from an institution of higher education located in the United States. The sample of undergraduate students was appropriated for this validation step as these students are believed to have the intellectual ability to rate the items according to the definition provided and have less bias than experts in the field (Hinkin & Tracey, 1999). Using the Qualtrics.com survey platform, the items were presented to each participant in a random order, and participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that each item fit the definition of HPWS for expatriates, as defined above, using a Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree: this item is not a good measure of HPWS for expatriates) to 5 (strongly agree: this item is a good measure of HPWS for expatriates).

After we analyze the validation data, items with an average rating of less than 3.5 (from a 5-point scale) will be eliminated. The remaining items will be included in Study 3, which will allow us to run exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to shorten the scale and then to test our research hypotheses.

Study 2: Identification and Recruitment of Corporate Expatriates

Prior to testing our hypotheses in Study 3, we will administer a demographics survey to 750 respondents from three countries (250 respondents per country) using the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform (MTurk). The purpose of the demographics survey is to develop a sample of corporate expatriates to be used in the hypothesis testing. The demographics survey will be administered in Qatar, UAE, and Kuwait. These countries were selected due to their high percentage of expatriates (over 50%) (ExpatFocus, 2015; Limacher, 2016). To identify legitimate expatriates, the demographics survey questions were developed with the intent to reduce or

eliminate social desirability bias, that is, to make it harder for respondents to answer questions based on what they believe researchers are seeking. We expect to build a database of at least 300 expatriates to be used in Study 3.

Study 3: Hypotheses Testing

For the hypotheses testing, we will administer three surveys, separated by one week each, to 300 expatriates identified in Study 2. In the first survey, in addition to the other hypotheses testing-related items, we will administer the HPWS for expatriate scale that is being developed in this study. This step will allow us to run exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses and potentially eliminate additional items. We also expect to identify seven HPWS for expatriates' subscales from the factor analyses. The second and third surveys will be used, in addition to the first survey, to test our moderated mediation model.

Measures

HPWS for expatriates. This scale will be developed and validated in this study.

Challenge stressors. We will measure challenge stressors using six items developed by Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, and Boudreau (2000). Respondents are asked to indicate how much stress each item causes them in a scale anchored at 1 (produce no stress) and 5 (produce a great deal of stress). A sample item includes "The pressures I experience."

Hindrance stressors. We will measure hindrance stressors using five items developed by Cavanaugh and colleagues (2000). Respondents are asked to indicate how much stress each item causes them in a scale anchored at 1 (produce no stress) and 5 (produce a great deal of stress). A sample item includes "The lack of job security I have."

Mental health. We will measure mental health using three subscales: anxiety, depression, and somatic complaints. The anxiety and depression scales were developed by Veit

and Ware (1983). Respondents are asked to indicate how often they felt each symptom in the past month, using a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (most or all of the time). The somatic complaints scale was developed by Spector and Jex (1998) and respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced each of the items in the scale in the past month, using a scale from 1 (very slightly/ not at all) to 5 (extremely). A sample item includes “The lack of job security I have.”

Early return intention. We will measure early return intention using three items developed by Kraimer and Wayne (2004). Respondents are asked to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each of the items, using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item includes “Most likely, I will request an early return to a home-country assignment.”

Assignment satisfaction. We will measure assignment satisfaction using five items adapted from the Brayfield and Rothe’s (1951) job satisfaction scale and one item from the Hackman and Oldman’s (1975) Job Diagnostic Survey. For five of the six items, we replaced the word *job* with the words *international assignment*. Respondents are asked to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each of the items, using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item includes “I feel fairly satisfied with my present international assignment.”

Control variables. We will control for factors that are also likely to affect mental health, early return intention, and assignment satisfaction. Specifically, we will control for psychological resilience (Block & Kremen, 1996), expatriate adjustment, country novelty (Black & Stephens, 1989), expatriate assignment tenure (in months), expected assignment duration (in years), prior international experience, language proficiency (Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001) and several

demographics characteristics such as gender, age, education, organizational tenure, and position level.

Statistical Analyses

We will use IBM SPSS to review and prepare the data, and to run exploratory factor analyses. We will use MPlus to run confirmatory factor analyses and to test our hypotheses.

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