AN INTEGRATIVE VIEW OF INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, we differentiated international experience into current and past experience. In addition, we organized past international experience along two dimensions: domain (work/travel) and cultural specificity (U.S./non-U.S.). We examined the effects of expatriates’ current assignment experience and past international experience on cross-cultural adjustment. The results indicate that past international experience moderates the relationship between current assignment tenure and general and work adjustment and also that general and work adjustment directly affect expatriates’ early return intentions.

International work experience has gained increasing significance and is widely recognized as a vital asset (e.g., Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001; Sambharya, 1996) and as a potential source of competitive advantage (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997) for multinational companies. For firms competing in the global marketplace and for aspiring executives developing their careers, international assignments constitute an important set of work experiences. Indeed, international work experience is one of the major requirements for promotion to higher-level managerial positions (Carpenter et al., 2001; Daily, Certo, & Dalton, 2000), and CEOs with longer international experience are often more highly sought after than those who lack extensive international experience (Daily et al., 2000).

Yet it is difficult for individuals to be successful during international assignments, and their failure has considerable costs for their organizations. For example, the cost associated with the early return of a typical expatriate is estimated to range from $250,000 to $1.25 million (Mervosh & McClenahan, 1997). In addition, organizations that fail to fully develop needed international experience among managers face potential inability to carry out global strategic initiatives. Insufficient international experience may also be associated with suboptimal productivity of foreign subsidiaries, lost opportunities for creating or penetrating markets, and difficulties building and maintaining relationships with host country stakeholders (Dowling, Welch, & Schuler, 1999). Furthermore, expatriate failure also bears considerable costs for managers, including loss of self-esteem, self-confidence, and reputation, as well as reduced motivation and willingness to support other expatriates (e.g., as a mentor) (Dowling et al., 1999). An unsuccessful international assignment may also impair a manager’s ability to learn and develop the competencies needed by his or her organization and, thus, to attain future expatriate positions.

The inability of expatriates to successfully adjust to foreign environments has been cited as one of the most frequent reasons for unsuccessful overseas assignments (e.g., Caligiuri, 2000; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). As a result, considerable attention has been devoted to identifying the factors that influence expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment and the successful completion of their assignments (e.g., Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). Though the specific focus of previous studies varies, one common theme is that international experience is a critical factor influencing

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expatriate adjustment, which, in turn, is associated with assignment completion (cf. Black et al., 1991; Parker & McEvoy, 1993). However, several conceptual and operational limitations on studying types and influences of international experience remain. These limitations might be due to the lack of a theoretical and integrative framework in conceptualizing international experiences.

The main objective of this study was to develop and examine hypotheses relating to the influence of different types of experience abroad (international experience) on expatriate adjustment and early return intentions by integrating research on work experience (e.g., Quiñones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), work-family conflict (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Major, Klein, & Ehrhart, 2002), time (e.g., Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001; Goodman, Lawrence, Ancona, & Tushman, 2001), and adjustment (e.g., Selmer, 2002). First, we extended Selmer’s (2002) work by differentiating international experiences into current and past ones. Second, we distinguished among prior international experiences using two dimensions that address their quality: (1) domain and (2) cultural specificity. Using the first dimension, we classified experiences as occurring in the work or the non-work domain. Using the second, we classified each experiment into culture-specific and nonspecific (culture-general) components, which could be either work-related or non-work-related. Third, we examined the influence of prior international experiences by focusing on both length- and amount-based conceptualizations of these experiences (cf. Quiñones et al., 1995; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Finally, we examined the moderating effects of previous international experiences on the relationships between current experiences and sociocultural adjustment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the international context, sociocultural adjustment refers to an individual’s ability to adapt to a foreign environment (Selmer, 2002) and can be viewed as the degree of ease (or difficulty) employees have with various aspects of an overseas assignment (e.g., Black, 1988; Black et al., 1991). Taking a work-family conflict perspective, we identify two broad domains, work and nonwork, in which expatriates need to adjust if they are to function effectively in a foreign environment. General adjustment refers to an individual’s psychological comfort, familiarity, and ease regarding features of the general, nonwork environment, such as food, housing, climate, and living conditions. Work adjustment refers to an individual’s psychological comfort with various aspects of work, such as supervisory and job responsibilities (Black, 1988; Black & Stephens, 1989; Black & Gregersen, 1991a, 1991b).

Various studies have indicated a significant relationship between adjustment and expatriates’ intentions to return to their home countries early, before their international assignments are completed (Black & Stephens, 1989; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). However, the influences of prior international experience on cross-cultural adjustment have yet to be fully examined. When prior international experience has been analyzed, it has typically been included as a background or a control variable (e.g., Black, 1988; Black & Gregersen, 1991a; Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). With a few exceptions (e.g., Black, 1988; Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999), most of those studies have generally shown a positive but nonsignificant relationship between prior international work experience and adjustment.

Moreover, the studies that have supported this link have presented inconsistent findings. For instance, Black (1988) found a significantly positive relationship between length of international work experience and work adjustment. Parker and McEvoy (1993) found a positive relationship between international living experience and general adjustment, but not between such experience and work adjustment. Shaffer and colleagues (1999) did not find a relationship between previous international work experience and general or work adjustment. As these equivocal findings imply, there is a need for more theoretical development and examination of international experience and its relationships to expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment.

A Model of International Experience and Expatriate Adjustment

International experience is a multidimensional concept that varies along several dimensions. In general, we follow prior research on work-family conflict (e.g., Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992) that has focused on two domains, work and nonwork. We followed that prior research approach by (1) differentiating previous international experiences into work and nonwork ones and (2) viewing general and work adjustment as respectively representing the nonwork and work domains. Figure 1 presents our research model.

First, it is important to recognize that experiences have a time component (e.g., Goodman et al., 2001; Shaffer et al., 1999). At any given time, an experience can be conceptualized as one that has
occurred in the past, is currently occurring, or will occur in the future (e.g., Goodman et al., 2001). Here, we focus on past and present experiences because these are more likely to influence employees’ current attitudes and behaviors than are anticipated experiences. Second, extending research on work experience (e.g., Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998) and work-family conflict (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), we conceptualized past international experiences as relating to either work or nonwork. Third, individuals differ in the extent of their country-specific experiences (Hofstede, 1980). Prior international experience in the same culture as the one where an expatriate is currently assigned is likely to be most valuable in his or her learning cultural values and norms. Hence, we differentiated prior international experience further as either country-specific or general. In the following sections we discuss the influence of current assignment experience and prior international experience on expatriate adjustment.

Current Assignment Tenure

The logic arguing for a positive relationship between the length of time in a current work assignment (current assignment tenure) and cross-cultural adjustment is relatively straightforward. When expatriates initially arrive in the host country, they face considerable uncertainty about many different aspects of both life and work. However, over time, they are likely to acquire information that enables them to function more effectively in the new environment. With prolonged exposure to the nuances of the host culture, expatriates are likely to become more familiar with the general surroundings and find more suitable standards (for instance, less expensive housing, a safer neighborhood, better knowledge of the transportation systems) and become better adjusted.

With regard to work-related adjustment, time spent in an assignment is also important. Longer tenure increases opportunities for expatriates to learn appropriate work behaviors through direct as well as vicarious modeling (Bandura, 1997). In addition, an extended period of time may be required before expatriates are fully accepted by their peers and develop work relationship with their peers (cf. Hofstede, 1980). Consistently with existing research, we anticipate that the length of a current assignment tenure is associated with an enhanced understanding of the culture of a host country and
an increased ability to adapt behaviors to fit with those appropriate to the host country. More specifically, we expect current assignment tenure to be associated positively with both general and work adjustment.

The Influence of Prior International Experiences

When examining the interplay between current and prior international experience, Selmer (2002) explored the possibility that prior international experience moderated the relationship between current assignment tenure and adjustment, studying Western expatriates in Hong Kong. Using split-group analysis, he found that prior Asian experience among the novice group (less than one year on a foreign assignment) was significant, but prior international experience outside Asia was not significant for either group. Although Selmer did not divide prior experience into travel and work episodes or into culture-specific and culture-general components, his study provides initial support for moderation by previous international experience.

The types of prior international experience that expatriates possess are also likely to influence their adjustment to a host country. Logically, greater past experience, be it more numerous episodes or a single lengthy episode, should be associated with higher general and work adjustment, as past experience provides expatriates with direct opportunities to learn a variety of skills. Intercultural communication, relocation, and cognitive skills will be gained, all of which should have a positive influence on the expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment (Black et al., 1991; Selmer, 2002; Shaffer et al., 1999). However, existing research presents inconsistent findings regarding the specific nature of these relationships.

Viewing international experience from a knowledge transfer perspective (Davenport & Prusak, 1998) may help clarify these inconsistencies. Research in the area of knowledge transfer suggests that learning within a domain is different from transferring that knowledge across domains (Klaczynski, 1993) or over time (Phye, 1990). The more established the routines or the schemata that individuals acquire from direct experience as well as vicarious observation, the more beneficial these will be in subsequent overseas experiences. Yet, according to social learning theory (e.g., Bandura, 1997), “A great deal of psychological modeling occurs in everyday association networks” (Bandura, 1997: 92), and the people with whom one regularly associates determine the content of learning. When individuals visit foreign countries, the people that they observe the most tend to be the ones with whom they interact more frequently in everyday encounters. As a result, the contents of learning—that is, the routines or the schemata appropriate for functioning in the culture—tend to be predominantly domain specific. In this regard, prior international nonwork experiences would logically be helpful for creating and developing routines and schemata that benefit adjustment to a general environment (that is, general adjustment), but this knowledge and familiarity may not necessarily translate to an expatriate’s work environment (that is, work adjustment).

Work on knowledge transfer by Barnett and Ceci (2002) as well as by others (e.g., Hinds, Patterson, & Pfeffer, 2001; Klaczynski, 1993; Phye, 1989, 1990) also supports this domain specificity argument. According to this research, transfer across different knowledge domains, time periods, and/or physical and social contexts, which Barnett and Ceci called “far transfer,” is more difficult to achieve than transfer within domains, time periods, and/or similar physical and social contexts, labeled “near transfer.” In studying cognitive transfer (“the application of previously demonstrated knowledge to a different problem in the same context or to a different problem in a different context” [Phye, 1990: 826]), Phye (1989, 1990) demonstrated that transfer based on memory is inferior to on-line transfer (near transfer; Barnett & Ceci, 2002) in that across-domain transfer is more likely to occur when the physical context remains the same and the time lag is negligible (such as, for instance, in the case of current experience). Moreover, when transfer is memory-based (the time lag is considerable), as occurs, for instance, in the case of past experience, within-domain transfer is more likely because at least the physical context remains the same (Barnett & Ceci, 2002).

Taking these arguments in combination, we posit that a major difference between current and prior international experience is that transfer across domains is more likely to occur with current experience (near transfer); that is, current assignment tenure has a positive relationship with general and work adjustment. In contrast, the influence of prior international experience (far transfer) is likely to be limited to transfer within domains because of the differences in the knowledge domain and the physical and social contexts in which the transfer has to occur and because of the temporal separation between the learning and the transfer (to the current situation). Thus, we expect current experience to influence general and work adjustment but expect the moderating effects of prior experience to be domain specific unless the cultural setting of current and prior experience is the same (prior expe-
perience within a given culture is more likely to be transferable over time; Phye [1989, 1990]). In the following sections, we discuss the hypothesized moderating effects of different types of prior international experience on the relationship between current experience and adjustment.

Hypotheses

**Prior international nonwork-related experience.** Previous international nonwork experiences such as traveling and studying are likely to be associated with the extent to which expatriates adjust to foreign cultures. When people travel to foreign countries, they learn the behaviors, customs, and norms of those cultures through direct experience or through observation of the host nationals’ behaviors (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, individuals with extensive experience in other cultures are also likely to have developed comprehensive cognitive frameworks or templates known as schemata, which are defined as sets of cognitions about people, roles, or events that govern social behavior (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1984) that aid adaptation to novel environments.

In this regard, expatriates with more numerous or longer prior international experiences are likely to develop more comprehensive cognitive schemata than those with fewer or shorter prior international experiences. These schemata can help expatriates adjust to the foreign culture. However, the expatriates with less prior international experience lack the comprehensive schemata. Thus, expatriates with more prior international experience can use both current experience and prior experience, while expatriates with less prior experience mainly rely on current experience. In other words, the influence of current assignment tenure is expected to be more significant for those less or shorter previous nonwork international experience, less significant for those with more or longer previous nonwork international experience. Research examining the extent of prior international experience (e.g., Black, 1988; Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998) has generally indicated a small, positive (but nonsignificant) association with adjustment. Given these previous findings, we treated number and length as likely to have similar moderating effects, although each is a distinct measure of the extent of international experience.

*Hypothesis 1. On the one hand, prior international nonwork experience moderates the relationship between current assignment tenure and general adjustment to a host country in such a way that current assignment tenure has less influence on general adjustment when expatriates have more and longer prior international nonwork experience. On the other hand, current assignment tenure has more influence on general adjustment when expatriates have less and shorter prior international nonwork experience.*

**Prior international work-related experience.** It is well established that companies in different cultures have different ways of conducting business (Hofstede, 1980). For example, collectivist cultures, such as the cultures of most Asian countries, emphasize a communication style in which “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person” (Hall, 1976: 79), whereas individualistic cultures, such as those of the United States, Germany, Scandinavia, and Switzerland, use a “low-context” communication style (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Expatriates from a culture with a low-context communication style would have difficulty adjusting to a culture with a high-context communication style, and vice versa (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1985). Expatriates might acquire this valuable knowledge about the subtle, but critical, inner workings of the foreign culture through prior international work experience. This knowledge may help form the competencies expatriates need to cope with their uncertain and complex work environments, thereby facilitating successful adjustment to new settings (Kanungo & Misra, 1992) or enabling the formation of schemata for dealing with unfamiliar situations. Thus, we expected the moderating effects of prior international work experience to be domain specific. The benefits of this experience will be limited to the work domain, but prior international work experience will act as a buffer. Those with longer or more experiences will have a gradual adjustment process, whereas those with shorter or fewer experiences will have a more pronounced adjustment process.

*Hypothesis 2. Prior international work experience moderates the relationship between current assignment tenure and work adjustment in such a way that current assignment tenure has less influence on work adjustment when expatriates have more and longer prior international work experience. On the other hand, current assignment tenure has more influence on work adjustment when expatriates have less and shorter prior international work experience.*

**Prior international culture-specific experience.**

Thus far, we have discussed the influence of previous international experience in general. However, it can be argued that prior international expe-
rience in a particular country eases current sociocultural adjustment to that country because knowledge has contextualized components (Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002). Reassignment to a similar culture (or cultures) is more stressful than reassignment to the same country. When expatriates have experience working or traveling in the United States, for example, they are likely to have been exposed to such cultural values and norms as being assertive and independent (cf. Hofstede, 1980). Given that each culture provides unique adaptation challenges in both work and nonwork realms (cf. Hofstede, 1980), culture-specific experiences should have a positive influence.

In addition, the uniform physical context (a single country) means that knowledge transfer will be near transfer (Barnett & Ceci, 2002), not far transfer. The likelihood of transfer across domains is thus increased (cf. Bhagat et al., 2002). Specifically, we expected both previous country-specific travel and previous country-specific work experience to have positive moderating effects on the relationship between current assignment tenure and adjustment in both the nonwork and work domains because the previous experience occurred in a highly similar, if not exactly the same, setting as experience in the current assignment. Moreover, in keeping with the rationale described earlier, we expected prior cultural experience to act as a substitute for current experience so that the influence of current assignment tenure on adjustment will be flatter for those with more or longer culture-specific experiences than it will be for those with fewer or shorter culture-specific experiences. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 3. Prior international culture-specific work and nonwork experience moderates the relationship between current assignment tenure and general adjustment in such a way that current assignment tenure has less influence on general adjustment when expatriates have more and longer culture-specific prior international experience. On the other hand, current assignment tenure has more influence on general adjustment when expatriates have less and shorter culture-specific prior international experience.

Hypothesis 4. Prior international culture-specific work and nonwork experience moderates the relationship between current assignment tenure and work adjustment in such a way that current assignment tenure has less influence on work adjustment when expatriates have more and longer culture-specific prior international experience. On the other hand, current assignment tenure has more influence on work adjustment when expatriates have less and shorter culture-specific prior international experience.

Cross-Cultural Adjustment and Premature Return Intentions

Anecdotal as well as theoretical studies that attest to the importance of cross-cultural adjustment to expatriate’s premature return abound. Given that the costs of premature return resulting from expatriates’ unsuccessful adaptation to foreign cultures are very high (Mervosh & McClanahan, 1997), linking cross-cultural adjustment to expatriates’ intentions to prematurely terminate assignments is critical. However, only a few studies have examined this relationship empirically (McEvoy & Parker, 1995).

When expatriates fail to adjust well to a foreign culture, every aspect of their lives becomes stressful. Even adaptable individuals are likely to encounter a period of intense stress (i.e., “culture shock”; Adler, 1997). If successful adaptation to the new environment never occurs, expatriates are likely to be under high stress for a prolonged period of time. Withdrawal behaviors, such as being absent from work, leaving work early, and quitting the job itself, are well-documented reactions to stress (e.g., Kahn & Byosiere, 1990). We expected that expatriates undergoing high stress would be more likely to withdraw from their current assignments. One such withdrawal behavior would be expressing a desire to leave an assignment before it is officially slated to end. On the other hand, when expatriates are well adjusted to a foreign environment, their stress level and their intentions to prematurely terminate their assignments are likely to be lower. Therefore, we expected the following:

Hypothesis 5. General adjustment is negatively related to expatriates’ intentions to return early.

Hypothesis 6. Work adjustment is negatively related to expatriates’ intentions to return early.

METHODS

Sample and Procedures

As part of a larger project focusing on sociocultural adjustment issues for expatriates and their spouses (Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002; Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002), surveys were mailed to 298 Japanese expatriates working in the United States. The director of a chapter of the Japan-American Society identified these individuals. The mailing included a cover letter from her, a cover letter from the researchers, and university-addressed, prepaid envelopes with identification codes (to match responses from different sources). Ten days later, the
researchers sent a reminder postcard to each expatriate, which was followed by another survey packet two weeks later for nonrespondents. We received survey responses along with contact information for supervisors from 243 expatriates, attaining an overall response rate of 81.5 percent. For the spouse data, expatriates indicated in the survey if they had spouses accompanying them to the United States. One hundred eighty-six respondents indicated that their spouses were available to fill out the survey (28 respondents were either single or divorced, and another 29 had spouses temporarily out of the country). We collected data from the spouses using the same procedure as for the expatriates. In short telephone interviews (about 10 minutes each), the primary researcher obtained work adjustment ratings from the supervisors the expatriates named on their surveys. These phone interviews yielded a 100 percent response rate. However, to keep the phone interviews short, we did not obtain demographic information from the supervisors.

All of the expatriate respondents were male, and most of them were married (88.5%). They averaged 38.99 years of age (s.d. = 7.68), ranging from 26 to 61 years old. Most respondents’ highest level of education was a bachelor’s degree (65.6%). Forty-three percent worked in research and development, 28.3 percent in administration, 18.7 percent in manufacturing, and 9.2 percent in sales. The majority of respondents (64%) had received predeparture training. Language training was the most common type of training provided to the expatriates (38.9%). As a group, the surveyed expatriates had traveled to 37 different countries, including countries in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, and southeast Asia and had taken an average of 1.56 trips each (s.d. = 1.45). The expatriates had worked in 36 different countries in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and southeast Asia, and they had been on 1.32 international assignments (s.d. = 1.96) on average.

Measures

As in existing work history studies (e.g., Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986), respondents were asked to identify the countries to which they had most recently traveled and the length of each trip; they were asked to identify each of their international work assignments prior to the current assignment by naming the country and the length; and they were asked to identify study-abroad experiences prior to the current assignment. Respondents were asked to provide these experiences in chronological order, backward from the most recent to the least recent (Schmidt et al., 1986). Because of space constraints, we asked respondents to list only five travel-, ten work-, and three study-abroad experiences. These international work/travel histories were used to derive the tenure and experience measures explained in more detail below.

**Current assignment tenure.** Current assignment tenure was measured as the number of months since an expatriate had arrived in his current assignment. Current assignment tenure averaged 29.66 months (s.d. = 22.57) but varied greatly, from less than 1 month to over 112 months (nine years and 4 months).

**Prior international nonwork experience.** Four variables for previous international nonwork experience were initially assessed. The first, the total length of previous travel experience, was created by summing each reported travel experience. The second, the total number of prior travel experiences, was created by counting the number of travel experiences listed. The third and fourth were the total length and number of previous international study experiences. However, only 16 expatriates (6.6%) indicated that they had studied abroad. Hence, this variable was dropped from subsequent analyses and the measure included only prior international travel experiences. Note that for the length-based and number-based measures of prior international travel experience, we treated U.S. nonwork experiences separately in order to clearly differentiate these culture-general components of experience from those culture-specific ones.

**Prior international work experience.** We assessed the total length of a respondent’s previous international work experience by summing months of reported previous international assignments. Moreover, the measure of the total number of prior international work experiences was created by counting the number of work experiences listed. U.S. work experiences were again treated separately from these measures of prior international work experience.

**Prior international culture-specific experience.** In order to examine the culture specificity of previous international experience, we summed the length of prior travel or work international experience in the United States and counted the number of U.S.-specific travel or work experiences. Length was measured by summing months across all the U.S. travel or work experience an expatriate reported.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Given that the experience variables were positively skewed, we subjected them to a square root transformation to normalize them before standardizing to create the interaction terms. After the analyses were repeated using the transformed variables, the findings were comparable...
Cross-cultural adjustment. Cross-cultural adjustment has been conceptualized as multidimensional (e.g., Black, 1988; Black & Stephens, 1989; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). In the present study, we assessed general and work adjustment using the seven- and three-item general and work adjustment scales developed by Black (1988) and colleagues (Black & Stephens, 1989) to represent the nonwork and work domains, respectively. For example, one item asked expatriates to rate their own degree of adjustment to a number of specific general living conditions (general adjustment) or specific job responsibilities (work adjustment). Rating anchors ranged from “not adjusted very well” (1) to “very well adjusted” (7).

In order to reduce the potential for common source bias, we used two different sources, each from the most appropriate source for either general or work adjustment to a new culture. Specifically, expatriates rated themselves on their general adjustment, and the supervisors most familiar with expatriates rated their work adjustment. We also obtained spouses’ ratings of expatriates’ general adjustment, which provided evidence of the convergent validity of the self-ratings of expatriates’ general adjustment ($r = .51, p < .001, n = 141$). To maximize sample size and statistical power, we used only expatriates’ self-ratings for general adjustment. The reliability of this seven-item scale was .81. We used a phone interview to obtain the ratings of work adjustment from superiors familiar with the expatriates’ work, using the three items. Cronbach’s alpha for this variable was .81.

Intent to return early. Two items were used to assess expatriates’ intentions of quitting the assignment and returning home early. Initially, three items were included in the questionnaire: two items adapted from Black and Stephens (1989): “I discuss the possibility of returning home early with my spouse” and “I will do anything to keep this assignment for its expected duration” (reverse-coded) as well as an additional item developed for this study: “I think about going home before the assignment is over.” However, we dropped the reverse-coded item from subsequent analyses because of its poor factor “loading.” The remaining two items had a reliability of .81 and correlated significantly ($r = .50, p < .01$) with the spousal assessment of the expatriates’ intentions to return early, which provided further evidence for the validity of expatriate ratings of those intentions. We used expatriates’ self-assessment of their intent to return early with mean replacement to maximize the sample size.2

Analytic Strategy

Given our interest in the moderating effects of prior international experiences and widely divergent measurement units, we standardized all the variables by a Z-score transformation to reduce the potential for multicollinearity (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983). To test Hypotheses 1 through 4, we performed two sets of moderated regression analyses: one for general and the other for work adjustment. In step 1, we included current assignment tenure, which was followed by the prior international experience variables in step 2. In step 3, we included all the interaction terms simultaneously. To test Hypotheses 5 and 6, which posit negative relationships between general and work adjustment, and early return intention, we entered current assignment tenure in step 1, the prior international experience variables in step 2, all the interaction terms in step 3, and general and work adjustment variables in step 4. In addition, to explicate the moderating effects further, we plotted significant interactions at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean, following the procedures specified by Aiken and West (1991).

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are depicted in Table 1. Unstandardized means and standard deviations of the variables are listed for informational purposes only because standardized variables are used in all the analyses except for the dependent variables. The directions of the correlations for all the experience variables were in the expected direction.

Table 2 shows the results of the moderated regression analyses. Models 1 through 3 report the constants and standardized coefficients ($\beta$s) associated with each individual step. Current assignment tenure had positive relationships with both dimensions of adjustment, as expected. Current assignment tenure was significantly and positively related to both general adjustment ($\beta = .24, p < .001$) and work adjustment ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) in the final model.

For the moderating hypotheses, the last step for

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2 We also tested the relationships between general and work adjustment on early return intentions using “listwise” deletion, owing to concern regarding mean replacement of an item. The results were highly comparable. Therefore, we report the results from the full sample here.
each regression indicates that the incremental variance accounted for by the interaction terms was significant for both facets of adjustment. For general adjustment, the interaction terms explained 9 percent additional variance over and above that accounted for by the variables in previous steps ($F = 2.95, p < .01$). For work adjustment, the incremental variance accounted by the interaction terms was 6 percent ($F = 2.32, p < .05$).

For Hypothesis 1, which posits the moderating effect of prior nonwork international experience on the relationship between current assignment tenure and general adjustment, the interaction term associated with total number of travel experiences was only marginally significant ($\beta = -.20, p < .10$), but the interaction term associated with the total length of travel experience was not ($\beta = -.06, p > .05$). Therefore, these results do not provide much support for Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 proposes a moderating effect of prior work international experience on the relationship between current assignment tenure and work adjustment. The interaction term associated with total number of work experiences was not significant ($\beta = .05, p > .05$), which does not support the first part of this hypothesis. On the other hand, the beta associated with current assignment tenure by total length of work experience interaction term had a significant, negative ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) relationship to work adjustment. Figure 2a indicates that when expatriates had longer prior international work experience, current assignment tenure had a weaker, positive effect, while it had a stronger, positive effect for expatriates with less

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<th>Variables</th>
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<td>1. Current assignment tenure</td>
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<td>3. Previous international travel experiences: Length$^b$</td>
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<td>4. Previous international work experiences: Number$^b$</td>
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<td>.08</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Previous international work experiences: Length$^b$</td>
<td>16.09</td>
<td>60.63</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Previous U.S. travel experiences: Number</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Previous U.S. travel experiences: Length</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.57***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Previous U.S. work experiences: Number</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Previous U.S. work experiences: Length</td>
<td>18.30</td>
<td>73.85</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. General adjustment</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.11†</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.12†</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Work adjustment</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td>.12†</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.18***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Intent to return early</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.11†</td>
<td>-.17***</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.02*</td>
<td>-.46***</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a n = 243$; reliability coefficients are reported along the diagonal: Means and standard deviations reported here are for unstandardized variables.

$^b$ Previous international travel and work experience excludes culture-specific (U.S.) experience.

$^† p < .10$

$^* p < .05$

$^{**} p < .01$

$^{***} p < .001$

Two-tailed tests.
international experience. In summary, the results support the second part of Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 advocates the moderating effect of prior culture-specific international experience—that is, prior U.S. travel and work experience—on general adjustment. The results indicate significant effects for the interaction terms of current assignment tenure and total number of U.S. travel experiences (β = .17, p < .05), total length of U.S. travel experiences (β = -.28, p < .01). The slopes for length-based prior U.S. travel and work experience were similar, as Figures 2b and 2c show. For expatriates with longer prior U.S. (culture-specific) experience, be it travel or work experience, current assignment tenure had a less positive effect on adjustment than it did for those with shorter prior U.S. experience. This effect of length-based prior international experience is similar to the one obtained for length-based prior interna-
tional work experience on work adjustment (for the second part of Hypothesis 2). Therefore, these results support Hypothesis 3.

On the other hand, the graph depicting moderation by number of prior U.S. travel experiences (Figure 2d) was surprising and contrary to expectation. For this type of interaction, when expatriates had more prior culture-specific (U.S.) experiences, current assignment tenure had a stronger effect on adjustment than it did when expatriates had fewer such experiences. This finding diverged from our expectation.

For Hypothesis 4, which proposes a moderating effect of prior culture-specific international (prior U.S. travel and work) experience on work adjustment, the results did not provide much support. Only the interaction term associated with number-based U.S. work experience was marginally significant for work adjustment ($\beta = .25, p < .1$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

Finally, for Hypotheses 5 and 6, which posit a negative effect of general and work adjustment on intentions to leave an assignment early, the results were consistent and supportive. When entered in the fourth (the last) step, both adjustment variables together explained 18 percent of incremental variance above and beyond that accounted for by the previous three steps ($\Delta F = 27.96, p < .001$). General adjustment had a negative beta coefficient of $- .38 (p < .001)$, while that for work adjustment was $- .17 (p < .05)$. These results support these two hypotheses.$^3$

Given two different types of interaction effect, one of which was unexpected, we examined other marginally significant interaction effects in purely post hoc analyses. The two marginally significant betas associated with number-based U.S. work experience (for general and work adjustment) had slopes similar to those found for number-based U.S. travel experience, which provides additional corroborating evidence for this type of interaction effect. On the other hand, the interaction effect for number-based general travel experience more closely resembled the interaction effect for length-based prior international experience. Given the exploratory nature and marginally significant effects of these interactions, we have to be very tentative in

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$^3$ To conserve space, we do not report the table showing these results. However, it is available per request to the first author.
Drawing any kind of conclusion but, at a minimum, there appear to be two different types of interaction effect that exist when different types of experience measures are used.

**DISCUSSION**

The main objective of this study was to examine the influence of current assignment tenure and previous international experience on expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment by integrating several different streams of research. To provide the theoretical thrust for examining the experience constructs, we drew from the work-family conflict literature to distinguish work and nonwork domains for expatriate adjustment and examined the moderating effects of prior international experience. We also integrated and extended findings from research on work experience (e.g., Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), time (e.g., Goodman et al., 2001), cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Hofstede, 1980), and expatriate adjustment (e.g., Selmer, 2002) to distinguish between current and past experience, and between travel, work, and culture-specific travel and work experience to help better understand how qualitative aspects of international experience affect expatriate adjustment and intentions to return home early. The results of the present study indicated that experience matters in distinct and complex ways. The current findings partly resolve some of the inconsistency associated with previous empirical studies on international experience in that previous international experience appeared to act more as a moderator rather than as a direct (main effect) variable, but the results also raise additional research questions that need to be explored further.

First, the findings regarding the moderating effects of previous international experience showed the impact of prior international experience to be substantially more complicated than it has generally been considered to be. Consistently with previous empirical studies, the simple correlation indicated a generally positive but weak association between previous international experience and cross-cultural adjustment. However, the results of this study support the view that prior international experience acts as a moderator rather than as an antecedent to expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment. More specifically, our variables representing prior culture-specific international (i.e., U.S.) experience had consistently significant moderating effects on the relationship between current assignment tenure and general adjustment, but the same variables did not have any meaningful moderating effects on work adjustment. On the other hand, culture-general, prior international work experience was a significant moderator of the relationship between current assignment tenure and work adjustment. In fact, it was the only significant moderator of work adjustment.

Perhaps temporal sequencing of adjustment dimensions (Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001) occurs in such a way that the moderating effects of culture-specific international experience indirectly influence work adjustment through the impact of these experiences on general adjustment. Incorporating the time perspective (cf. Ancona et al., 2001; Goodman et al., 2001) in examining the processes of adjustment should facilitate understanding this aspect. It may also be the case that the scale we used to measure work adjustment, although it is an established one, does not fully encompass the construct space that it purports to assess, and this deficiency resulted in these nonsignificant findings. Therefore, additional research that replicates and/or extends our findings is definitely needed to uncover the influence of experiences on cross-cultural adjustment.

The specific relationships that the different types of prior international experience had with adjustment may become clearer when these results are recast from a domain-specific and knowledge transfer perspective. Initially, we considered general and work adjustment as representing different aspects of national culture. However, it may be that the work adjustment dimension is tapping a distinct organizational (work) culture. When two domains are recast in this light (that is, as work versus national culture domains), taking a knowledge transfer perspective may permit additional insight into the domain specificity of prior international experience. As such, the notion of near (or “online”) versus far (memory-based) transfer (e.g., Barnett & Ceci, 2002; Phye, 1990) is useful for uncovering the different effects of current and prior international experience. With near transfer (that is, current assignment experience and culture-specific experience), knowledge is more likely to transfer across different domains (Barnett & Ceci, 2002). On the other hand, when transfer is required to occur across substantially different contexts (in a different culture or work context or after substantial time has elapsed), the transfer, if it occurs, tends to be domain specific (cf. Klaczynski, 1993; Phye, 1990).

Second, we found that the interaction effects differed depending on the measurement mode being

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4 We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this perspective, which helped us substantially in delineating the underlying effects of experience on adjustment.
used. The interaction figures for the length-based measures of prior international experience illustrate the anticipated effect. Contrary to expectation, the number-based measure of prior international experience exhibited moderating effects, whereby current assignment tenure was more important to expatriates with higher numbers of prior international experiences than it was for those with fewer. Although unexpected, these patterns of results demonstrate discriminant validity for the different “operationalizations” of the international experience concepts and highlight the importance of including multiple measures of experience to enhance understanding of these variables’ impacts on cross-cultural adjustment.

Third, we found current assignment tenure to have significant relationships with expatriates’ general and work adjustment. These findings are consistent with a growing body of research (e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1991a; Shaffer et al., 1999) and highlight the importance of current experience and adopting a time perspective for understanding expatriate adjustment. However, the variance explained in adjustment by current assignment tenure was 5 percent for general and 7 percent for work adjustment, low values that underscore that assignment tenure is only one of many important variables that influence expatriates’ cross-cultural adjustment. Finally, we also found both general and work adjustment to be negatively related to expatriates’ early return intentions, findings underlining the importance of cross-cultural adjustment for expatriate’s behavioral intentions.

Limitations

Of course, the results of this study must be viewed in light of its limitations. First, given our cross-sectional design, we cannot infer causality. Although our independent variables specifically referred to discrete events that had happened in the past, longitudinal examination where previous experience variables are measured prior to departure to a host country would be particularly valuable. Current assignment tenure and cross-cultural adjustment may also have a reciprocal relationship, whereby staying longer in the current assignment leads to better adjustment, which, in turn, leads to a longer stay. Although our cross-sectional data do not allow for testing this possibility directly, it highlights the importance of examining adjustment from a dynamic, process-oriented perspective if understanding of adjustment processes is to proceed further. In addition, expatriates’ general adjustment and work adjustments are likely to affect each other reciprocally in such a way that being adjusted to the general environment spills over to the work domain to improve adjustment, and vice versa. Previous research has explored directionality among adjustment dimensions (Kraimer et al., 2001; Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002), but no definite conclusion can be drawn yet. For practical reasons, understanding causality among adjustment dimensions is important so that firms can assist expatriates and/or their families to adjust to one dimension first; such adjustment might reduce the potential for premature return or poor performance, for example. Therefore, causal direction and reciprocal relations between current assignment tenure and adjustment, and among adjustment dimensions, need to be investigated with longitudinal data in the future.

Another limitation may be potential threats of common method or same-respondent biases. In order to mitigate these concerns, we used a phone interview method to collect work adjustment responses from the superiors, who were not the source of other data. We also assessed the reliability of spousal assessment of expatriates’ general adjustment and the convergent validity of these responses with expatriate ratings. Third, the results may have suffered from insufficient power to detect significant interaction effects. Although the analyses met the recommended ratio of 10 (responses) to 1 (variable), moderated regression analysis requires substantially more power to detect significance (Stone & Hollenbeck, 1994). Hence, our investigation may not have been able to detect other moderating effects of previous international experience. Therefore, the current findings have to be replicated before any definite conclusions can be drawn concerning the relationships between current and past experience and adjustment.

Fourth, the present investigation was limited to experience-related variables, although more comprehensive models of expatriate adjustment have included a wide variety of factors that have been found to affect adjustment (e.g., Black et al., 1991; McEvoy & Parker, 1995; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). We do not argue that experience-related variables are the only factors that are of import. However, as Aycan and Kanungo (1997) noted, not enough attention has been paid to explicating the process of adjustment, and it was our primary objective in the present study to integrate the expatriate adjustment, work experience, time, and work-family conflict literatures. Therefore, future research may ben-

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5 We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting these possibilities, which are important issues in the cross-cultural adjustment literature.
efit by integrating even more theories than we have applied here into a framework.

Our results may have been an artifact of the specific sample and experience measures that we used. It may be argued that Japanese expatriates possess more international experience in the United States than do expatriates from other nations, which may limit the generalizability of the present findings to other expatriate samples (such as Western expatriates in Southeast Asia). However, as Selmer’s (2002) study of Western expatriates in Hong Kong indicated, our length-based measure of prior international work experience moderated the relationship between current assignment tenure and work adjustment, providing some empirical support for the generalizability of our findings. Future research should examine this issue, using different samples.

In addition, we used length- and number-based measures of previous international experience not only in the work domain but also in a nonwork domain (i.e., travel) and a culture-specific (i.e., U.S.) domain to test our integrative models (rather than the different dimensions of work experience proposed by Tesluk and Jacobs (1998), to contribute to theory on both expatriate adjustment and work experience. However, an additional possibility is that the effects of prior international experience differ when different aspects of experience, such as challenge and density (see Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), are examined. Thus, future research should examine different aspects of experience and their effects on adjustment and other variables of interest.

Implications for Research and Practice

Despite these limitations, our study has a number of research implications. One significant implication may be that the current investigation opens up a new direction for expatriate adjustment research with regard to experience. Although increasing attention has been provided to other variables such as personality (Caligiuri, 2000) and spouse-expatriate interaction (e.g., Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi, & Bross, 1998), experience has been a neglected concept that may be important in influencing expatriate adjustment and other organization-related issues (turnover, promotion, career advancement, knowledge management, training, and so forth). Moreover, the effects of other aspects of experience, such as job and organizational tenure, may be examined within international assignment contexts in addition to current assignment tenure and/or prior international experiences. In addition, from a time perspective, expatriates’ knowledge of the exact length of their current assignments might also moderate the relationships between adjustment and early return intentions. This moderation might be such that the level of adjustment does not have any bearing on early return intentions when expatriates realize that their assignments will be over soon, but it does affect these intentions for those who are just starting their assignments.

Another avenue for future research might be to inspect antecedent variables for accumulating international experience, such as personality (e.g., openness to experience) and individual characteristics (e.g., parent’s ethnic background, network of friends with different cultural backgrounds, and nationality of significant others), and to link these variables to individual employees’ development of international experience. Relatedly, scholars could examine organizational characteristics that influence the development of international experience. For example, a headquarters or organizational climate that values international experience may lead to certain human resource management practices such as international job rotation and ultimately impact firm-level outcomes (cf. Daily et al., 2000). Nonwork experience may be incorporated into the relevant research in general as another type of experience that may interact with work experience to influence important variables such as work motivation, work knowledge and skills, and work-related attitudes (cf. Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Finally, spouses’ previous international experience may cross over to affect expatriates’ sociocultural adjustment (Takeuchi, Yun, & Tesluk, 2002). In particular, when an expatriate has little previous international experience, a spouse with substantial previous international experience can be more helpful. In addition, the spouse can be more helpful at the early stage of the assignment, when the expatriate may encounter more difficulty.

This study has several practical implications as well. First, an implication with regard to employee selection for international assignments may be that firms base selections on the nature of the task that needs to be accomplished. For example, if an international assignment requires expatriates to be productive from the onset, it may be better to select employees with a greater accumulation of work-related international experience. In contrast, if firms are selecting employees into international assignments for more developmental purposes, it may be better to identify those with less international experience to provide opportunities for the expatriates to accumulate global management knowledge, skills, and abilities. Providing international assignment opportunities to less senior employees may be an important means of developing future leaders who would be effective in the global arena. Relatedly, host companies may request em-
employees with more or less international experience to be sent from parent companies, depending on the situations they face and on what they expect from those situations.

In conclusion, the present research takes a significant step forward and sheds some interesting light on the concept of international experience and its relationships with expatriate adjustment. At the same time, it underscores the need for more empirical work in this area.

REFERENCES


