

Social Support and Cultural Competence Among Expatriates: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract—Expatriation poses unique psychosocial challenges, including cultural adjustment and isolation, yet the interplay between social support networks and cultural competence remains underexplored. This study examines the impact of social support on cultural competence among expatriates, with a specific focus on the types of support, including emotional, instrumental, and informational support. A non-probability convenience sample of 100 expatriates residing in diverse international locations participated in the study. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire comprising validated scales measuring perceived social support and cultural competence. Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were employed to examine the associations between two variables. Findings indicate a statistically significant positive relationship between overall social support and cultural competence, with support from significant others demonstrating the strongest predictive power. The results suggest a significant correlation between social support and cultural competence. The study contributes to the limited empirical literature on expatriate adaptation by highlighting the interplay between psychosocial factors and intercultural capabilities, offering practical implications for multinational organisations in designing support programs and selection criteria for international assignments.

Index Terms—social support, cultural competence, expatriate, psychosocial support

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has led to millions of individuals taking expatriate positions, with more than 66 million residing outside their native countries as of 2023 (United Nations, 2024). Although these opportunities may lead to career progression, expatriates frequently face significant challenges in adjusting, such as culture shock, feelings of social isolation, and increased stress

levels, resulting in a repatriation rate that can reach between 20% to 40% (Shaffer et al., 2012).

In a more interconnected world, the movement of professionals between countries has emerged as a key characteristic of today's workforce. Expatriates—people living and working in a foreign country for a limited or prolonged time—are essential in enabling global business activities, exchanging knowledge, and fostering cross-cultural cooperation. Organisations utilise expatriates for various reasons, such as overseeing foreign subsidiaries, executing global strategies, encouraging local partnerships, and enhancing organisational knowledge. Although they hold significant strategic value, expatriate assignments come with numerous challenges, including cultural misunderstandings, language obstacles, social isolation, and emotional strain.

Successful expatriation relies not only on professional skills but also on the person's ability to adjust and thrive in a different cultural setting. Two interrelated factors central to this adaptation process are cultural competence and social support. Social support—coming from family, friends, coworkers, and community members—can alleviate the stress associated with moving and improve mental health. Cultural competence, or the ability to operate successfully in culturally diverse environments, enables expatriates to understand unfamiliar social cues, establish connections, and excel in cross-cultural situations.

Although previous studies have examined these concepts separately, there has been limited focus on how social support networks influence the development and demonstration of cultural competence in expatriates. This research fills this gap by examining the connection between perceived social support and cultural competence among a sample of 100 expatriates. In this way, it seeks to offer insights

that can guide both theoretical comprehension and practical measures to improve expatriate success in a connected global economy.

Cross-cultural competency, which encompasses (1) cultural intelligence, (2) cultural flexibility, and (3) cultural empathy, is essential for expatriate success. It has recently been demonstrated that cultural intelligence affects adjustment. It is suggested that expatriates' attempts to conceive their assignment through their self-concept, which is motivated by the need to adapt to new cultural settings, may be the driving force for adjustment. According to Earley and Ang (2003), cultural intelligence (CQ) measures a person's capacity for cross-cultural adaptation, enabling expatriates to function effectively in multicultural settings. The practice of adding new cultural talents to one's own cultural "repertoire" is known as cultural adaptation.

The sensitivity and capacity to understand the ideas, emotions, and actions of expatriates from different cultural contexts is reflected in cultural empathy. Additionally, it encompasses the capacity to encounter traits and behaviours from a culture other than one's own. According to research, expats with high levels of cultural adaptation will swiftly adapt to the new environment of their host nation. Therefore, expatriates will adjust and succeed more successfully if they possess greater cultural empathy, cultural intelligence, and cultural flexibility. However, there are few studies on how EQ and CQ interact, and even fewer studies on how EQ affects cross-cultural competency. Our understanding of expatriation can be improved by comprehending the connections between these three essential components.

Amadi and Abdullah (2011) define cultural empathy as the ability to be sensitive to the ideas, emotions, experiences, and cultures of others. Highly culturally empathetic expatriates will not be ethnocentric in their interactions with others, and they will be able to relate to and see others as distinct individuals. Furthermore, ethnocentrism is negatively impacted by the social initiative (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007). It suggests that social initiative has a positive impact on non-ethnocentrism, as expats who engage with others more actively are less likely to care about cultural differences and are less likely to display ethnocentrism.

- **Emotional Stability:** Reduces anxiety in uncertain situations and lowers ethnocentric behaviour, leading to improved relationship building and increased social capital.
- **Open-mindedness:** Essential for multicultural effectiveness, this trait promotes unbiased attitudes and helps expatriates identify with local cultures. It also aids in understanding and responding to cultural differences.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Helps individuals remain calm during stressful cross-cultural interactions.
- **Extraversion:** Hass suggests that extroverts adjust more easily to cross-cultural environments, leading to improved interactions at work and in daily life.

II. METHODOLOGY

Measurements scales

The standardised tools were used to collect the data. A self-reported tool called the Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Questionnaire (CCSAQ) was created to help organisations and service providers assess their cross-cultural competencies, particularly when providing services to diverse families and children with disabilities. It evaluates four critical aspects: attitudes, practices, policies, and structures. It was created using the Child and Adolescent Service System Program model. Structure and Subscales: The questionnaire comprises approximately 79 items, organised into seven subscales: Knowledge of Communities, Personal Involvement, Resources and Linkages, Staffing, Service Delivery and Practices, Organisation and Policy Procedures, and Reaching Out to Communities. 4-point Likert scales are used in the responses, enabling the computation of mean subscale and total scores to determine training needs and strengths. Goal and Use: By identifying areas for cultural competency, CCSAQ helps organisations improve their service delivery to culturally diverse populations.

Social support scale: The Social Support Scale (SSS) assesses an individual's perceived access to various forms of support within their social network, aiding in evaluations related to health, psychology, and caregiving studies. It assesses aspects such as emotional, appraisal, instrumental, informational, and companionship support via self-report items that are

rated from "never" to "always." Greater scores indicate more robust support networks associated with improved well-being.

Created for small sample sizes and tested in areas such as Aboriginal health, the SSS typically employs four items on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 to 4, with a total score of 0-16). Principal Component Analysis identifies elements such as Instrumental Support (informational/instrumental) and Intimate Support (emotional/appraisal), with Rewarding

Companionship emerging as a distinct component in specific versions.

Sample

The study surveyed 156 expatriates from multinational companies based in Abu Dhabi and other Eastern countries. Data was collected online through self-administered surveys from potential respondents.

Statistical analysis:

The Pearson correlation is used to find the relationship between two variables.

III. DISCUSSION

	Social support	Cultural competence
Social support	1	0.675
Cultural competence	0.675	1

Table 1 shows the relationship between social support and cultural competence

The results presented in the table indicate a positive correlation between social support and cultural competence among expatriates. Empirical research consistently indicates a positive association between social support and cultural competence among expatriates, frequently operating through enhanced cross-cultural adjustment. Studies employing structural equation modelling with expatriate manager samples reveal that social support plays a significant role in strengthening cultural intelligence, which subsequently improves job performance and adaptation in host-country contexts. This pattern is consistent with social exchange theory, suggesting that organisational and supervisory support helps reduce stress and facilitates the development of cultural competence.

The results indicate that expatriates with high cultural competence are better able to understand, interpret, and respond appropriately to their own and others' emotions, values, and behavioural cues in culturally diverse contexts. In line with the present findings, previous studies have shown that culturally competent expatriates can effectively regulate their emotional responses during communication and interaction, enabling them to adapt psychologically and socially within multicultural environments. Moreover, cultural competence is closely linked to emotional regulation and interpersonal effectiveness, as expatriates who possess strong cultural competence can manage their

reactions and maintain behavioural control when facing cultural differences. Altinay et al. further emphasised that individuals with higher levels of cultural competence are more capable of navigating culturally diverse settings, thereby enhancing their cross-cultural effectiveness and overall adjustment.

The present study further demonstrates that cultural competence plays a significant role in facilitating cross-cultural adjustment. This suggests that individuals with higher cultural competence are better equipped to understand cultural norms, interpret social cues, and respond appropriately in intercultural interactions. Such individuals are more capable of regulating their behavioural and emotional responses, engaging proactively with others, and drawing on their intercultural skills to enhance adjustment in multicultural environments. As a result, higher cultural competence helps reduce culture shock, interpersonal tension, and psychological strain by enabling individuals to navigate cultural differences more effectively.

These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that expatriates with stronger cultural competence interact more effectively with colleagues and supervisors and adapt more successfully to host-country contexts.

Additionally, the findings indicate that social support is a significant predictor of cross-cultural competence. This suggests that individuals who receive strong

social support—whether from colleagues, supervisors, or local networks—are more likely to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to function effectively in culturally diverse settings. Social support provides emotional reassurance, informational resources, and practical assistance that enhance individuals' ability to recognise, understand, and respond to cultural differences, thereby strengthening their cross-cultural competence [18,30]. However, social support did not exert a direct effect on cross-cultural adjustment. A possible explanation is that, despite receiving support, expatriates may still face challenges related to environmental adaptation, job performance expectations, supervisory demands, and collaboration with host-country colleagues, which can complicate the overall adjustment process.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the central role of cultural competence in promoting effective cross-cultural adjustment among expatriates. The findings suggest that individuals who possess higher levels of cultural competence are better able to interpret cultural cues, manage intercultural interactions, and respond constructively to challenges in multicultural environments, thereby reducing adjustment-related stress and enhancing overall well-being. Furthermore, social support emerges as an essential antecedent of cultural competence, providing expatriates with emotional, informational, and instrumental resources that facilitate the development of intercultural knowledge and skills. However, the absence of a direct effect of social support on cross-cultural adjustment indicates that support alone may not be sufficient to ensure successful adjustment without the presence of strong cultural competence. Overall, the results underscore the importance of fostering cultural competence and supportive social networks as complementary mechanisms to enhance expatriates' effectiveness and adaptation in culturally diverse settings.

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