
The experience of Asian expatriates in Australia.

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ABSTRACT

Workforces in individualistic countries, such as the US, the UK and Australia, are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. In Australia, the population now comprises people from more than 220 nationalities, approximately 45% of whom were born overseas. It is expected that, by the year 2030, 25% of the Australian population will be of Asian origin (Nankervis, Compton, & McCarthy, 1999). Despite large Asian expatriations, the small number of Asian permanent residents in Australia (i.e. 4.7% of 18m people) infers that Asians may be having difficulty fitting into the Australian context. This paper will highlight the unaddressed racial tension in Australian workplaces and discuss the experience of Asian expatriates in light of the racial and value dissimilarity associated with Asian (collectivist) and Australian (individualist) cultures.

Keywords: Expatriates; Cultural Orientation; Asian Minorities; Diversity Management; Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Workforces in individualistic countries, such as the US, the UK and Australia, are becoming increasingly culturally diverse. In Australia, the population now comprises people from more than 220 nationalities, approximately 45% of whom were born overseas. It is expected that, by the year 2030, 25% of the Australian population will be of Asian origin (Nankervis, Compton, & McCarthy, 1999). Notably, over the past decade, there has been an enormous expansion of Asian expatriates in international operations (Bedi, 1996). Consequently, the increasing cultural diversity in what has to date been a largely individualistic workforce in Australia presents challenging human resource management and organisational issues (D'Netto & Sohal, 1998).

This paper addresses the experience of Asian expatriates in Australia, specifically examining the experience of Asians (as collectivists) fitting into the Australian culture (as an individualist nation). Although the expatriates in developed countries (e.g. Tokyo and Australia) are predicted to receive less perks due to their high social and economic climate (Australian CPA, 2001; Gottlieb, 1996), managerial support around racial tensions (i.e. individualism versus collectivism) should not be undermined. This paper will outline firstly the unaddressed racial tensions in the Australian workplace. The experience of Asian expatriates in light of collectivists' and individualists' distinctive racial attributes and work values will also be discussed. The paper will conclude by presenting recommendations on diversity oriented managerial practices.

UNADDRESSED RACIAL TENSIONS IN THE AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACE

Since the 1960s, Australia has attempted to remove its racist image by removing the white Australian policy. In the past 30 years, Asian expatriation in particular has been fostered by the Australian immigration policy for the social, commercial and economic well being (Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2003). Today, the success of Asian expatriates' experience in Australia

depends on the national and organisational ability to integrate them into the Australian culture (c.f. Stedham & Nechita, 1997).

Despite this, the level of prejudice and discrimination in Australia has continued and may even be on the rise, preventing new entrants to succeed in their work life (James & Heathcote, 2002; Nesdale, 1997). The small number of Asian permanent residents (i.e. 4.7% of 18m people) infers Asians may be having difficulty fitting into Australia. Unfortunately, despite the importance of cultural diversity management, many Australians fail to recognise its importance and leave racial tensions unaddressed in the workplace (James & Heathcote, 2002). Notably, racial issues are more openly discussed among Anglo-Saxons in Britain, South Africa and the US than in Australia (Australian Department of Immigration & Ethnic Affairs, 2000). Part of the explanation for this difference is the Anglo-Australian's perception of themselves as tolerant to dissimilar races and scepticism that racism still exists in Australia (James & Heathcote, 2002).

Indeed, changes in demographics, coupled with the globalisation of business operations and the increasing popularity of team-based management techniques, behoove Australian organisations to effectively manage Asian expatriates' work experience (cf. Guzzo, 1995; Lau & Murnighan, 1998; Shaw & Barrett-Power, 1998; Thomas, 1999).

Asian Expatriates' experience emerging from the effect of racial dissimilarity and value dissimilarity in Australia

While there are multifaceted definitions of cultures (Krober & Kluckhohn, 1985), Hofstede defines culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one society from another (Hofstede, 2001). The collective programming of the mind refers to shared patterns of beliefs, values and ideas that shape human attitudes and behaviours (Bochner, 1994; Earley & Gibson, 1998; Marsella, Devos, & Hsu, 1985; Triandis, 1994a; Tung, 1995). Across the cultures of the world, the most important dimension of cultural differences is the

relative emphasis on individualism versus collectivism (Triandis, 1990).

Individualism refers to societies in which an "I" consciousness is emphasised through independent values such as right above duties, primary concern for personal goals and immediate family (Hofstede, 2001). Individualist cultures place greater emphasis on personal identity, personal goals, competition, and independence of the self from the group (Stipek, 1998; Triandis, 1994a). The independent values subsequently manifest loosely connected behavioural patterns between individuals and groups.

Collectivism, on the other hand, refers to societies in which a "WE" consciousness is emphasised through interdependent values such as cohesive in-groups, mutual obligations and concern for one's groups with unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 2001). Collectivist cultures place greater emphasis on social identity, group goals, cooperation, and interdependence of the self with the group (Cox, 1991; Triandis, 1990). The interdependent values manifest closely connected behavioural patterns between individuals and groups (Bochner, 1994, 1991; Hsu, 1981; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norrasokkunkit, 1997; Triandis, 1994, 1995).

Hofstede (1994) found that Western nations were high on individualism, in which the US and Australia are respectively ranked first and second (Hofstede, 1980). Notably, Asians who are high on collectivism, comprise the majority of new entrants in the workforce in Australia. Individualism and Collectivism defined by Hofstede involve two important dissimilarities: national dissimilarities and value dissimilarities (Earley & Gibson, 1998). In light of the effect of racial dissimilarity and value dissimilarity, this paper examines the experience of Asian expatriates in the Australian workforce.

EFFECTS OF RACIAL DISSIMILARITY ON ASIAN EXPATRIATES' EXPERIENCE

Race and racism are still burning issues in Australian society (Jonas, 2004). Research indicates that racial diversity plays a critical role in the initial process of in-group (e.g. Anglo-Australian, Caucasian)

and out-group (e.g. Asian, Middle Eastern) categorisation (See Harrison et al., 1998). Observable differences are likely to produce negative short-term effects from the stereotypes evoked (Harrison et al., 1998; Jackson, Stone, & Alvarez, 1993; Pelled, 1996). Negative stereotypes tend to produce prejudicial attitudes and the exhibition of prolonged discriminatory behaviours (Lee, 1996). For example, long lasting prejudices in Western countries such as those of some Anglo-Americans toward African-Americans, prejudice toward women, and the physically and mentally disabled are all founded upon easily detectable physical differences (Nesdale, 1997). Similarly in Australia, some Anglo-Australians attribute a negative stereotype to Aborigines such as drinkers, trouble-makers, and dirty (Augoustinos, Ahren, & Innes, 1994; Locke, Maclead, & Walker, 1994).

Unfortunately, data from the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) in both the US and Australia showed no significant decrease in racioethnic minority claims for racial discrimination at the workplace in the past decade (Nesdale, 1997; Robertson & Block, 2001). The Australian EEOC annual report indicates that each year approximately 9,000 people from all over Australia contact the commission's complaint information service (EEOC, 2003).

Despite the Australian Government's espoused desire to be accepted as part of Asia by introducing an immigration policy, Asians have experienced racism in Australia. Initiated by Pauline Hanson, a former independent member of parliament, the liberal (conservative) government has tried to restrict Asian immigration concerned of being overpowered by Asian prosperity (Anonymous, 1997). For example, the children of members of Perth's biggest Chinese organisation were repeatedly told "Ching go home" in playgrounds (Anonymous, 1996). Singaporean soldiers in MP Pauline Hanson's province were assaulted, spat on, and verbally abused by locals (Anonymous, 1996).

To date, the recent federal government proposal to abolish the post of race discrimination commissioner signals a passive national dealing with the effect of

racial dissimilarity in Australia (Jonas, 2004). The government's unqualified commitment to eliminate racial discrimination implies Australia failing to eliminate racism in the Australian workforce.

It has been perceived by Asian expatriates that the new immigration policy has not ended discrimination against Asians rather merely reduced the extent of discrimination (Anonymous, 1997). In short, the racial homogeneity of Anglo-Australia is still being maintained (Anonymous, 1997).

Supervisors tend to categorise subordinates as either in-group or out-group members early in their relationship when there is little information exchanged between the two (Tsui, Egan, & Porter, 1994). In the US, this phenomenon is evident in that Anglo-Americans continue to experience more favourable work outcomes than do other racial minority groups, especially Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans (Robertson & Block, 2001). Similarly, research in Australia shows that an assimilationist culture, which largely ignores the needs of Asian minority groups, still prevails over the attributes of multiculturalism (Loosemore & Chau, 2002). This pattern of individualists' negative stereotypes toward collectivists is also repeatedly confirmed by other empirical studies (See Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). For this reason, Asians are predicted to more often report a negative experience at work (e.g. hopelessness, work anxiety, stress, depression, job tension, low self-esteem, less confidence, and less perceived supervisory support), which in turn is expected to affect negatively their attitude toward their organization (e.g. lack of commitment and perceived unfairness). The detrimental effect of prejudice on Asian's attitudes and experience at work is expected to translate into a propensity to engage in negative group dynamics and behavioural outcomes (e.g. negative cohesion, segregation from individualists, turnover, and absenteeism). Evidence supporting these assertions regarding the experience of Asian expatriates in Australia is provided by the research of Fujimoto & Härtel (2000; 2004), Fujimoto, Härtel, and Panipucci (2004).

Previous research on racial diversity

implies that cultural diversity will reap its full potential if organisations foster diversity-openness, which enables employees to overcome their negative stereotypes, and prejudices toward culturally dissimilar members (Fujimoto & Härtel, 2004). The effect of cultural diversity on workgroups is much more complex than the effect of observable racial dissimilarity (Thomas, 1999). This is because the effect is dependent upon how ICs' perceive persons of a dissimilar race, which is deeply rooted in divergent ICs' values or conceptualisation, namely the independent value of individualists and the interdependent value of collectivists. This will be discussed next.

Effect of Value dissimilarity on the Asian Expatriates' Experience

Although values refer to implicit differences and are not easily detected, actual dissimilarity in cultural values was found to have great influence over organisational outcomes (Harrison et al., 1998, Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). The theoretical perspectives from organisational behaviour (Schneider, 1987), sociology (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Berger, Rosenholts, & Zelditch, 1980) and social psychology (Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1961) support the idea that, during the initial stage of interaction, group members categorise other group members based on stereotypes prompted by overt characteristics. However, as members interact with one another, stereotypes are subsequently replaced by a deeper level knowledge of the psychological features of one another (Harrison et al., 1998). The distinctive psychological features of ICs adds further complexity to social interaction, which influences their interaction with culturally dissimilar others. In other words, value dissimilarities experienced by Asian expatriates in Australian workforce are expected to produce enduring effects in the Australian workplace (cf. Shaw, 1990).

Value similarity within organisations is expected to produce less ambiguity and conflict, and more coordination, satisfaction, and commitment. It is because value similarity among members facilitates clear communication about what effective, behavioural, and cognitive

responses are expected of individuals (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Kluckhohn, 1951). For example, Asian expatriate managers on foreign Asian assignments find it easier to adapt to new working environments due to the similarity of Asian core values than do their Western counterparts (Bedi, 1996). In other words, as Asian expatriates fit into Australian workplaces, they may recognise Australian's dissimilar values, which consequently results in ambiguity, conflict, lack of coordination, and less satisfaction at work (Raven & Rubin, 1976). For example, in Australia, perceptions of being discriminated against were higher for employees identifying themselves as having a collectivist orientation, than for employees who held the individualist orientation associated with the Australian culture (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994).

Culturally diverse workgroups tend to produce more coordination costs because of differing perspectives, attributes, and communication patterns caused by dissimilar values (Nadler, Keeshan-Nadler, & Broome, 1985). For example, a study of a Japanese manager operating an overseas company of individualists revealed his collectivist orientation often conflicted with the employees' preference for individualism over collectivism (Ishida, 1986), which reduced the effectiveness of the whole operation. Furthermore, research suggests that in order for US firms operating in China to be maximally effective, they need to minimise value judgments based on their culture and maintain an open mindset to Chinese management practices (Xing, 1995).

Recently, research found that in comparison with social category differences within workgroups, value differences produced significantly poorer perceived performance and lower satisfaction and commitment to the group (Jehn et al., 1999). This finding indicates that value differences may have more significantly detrimental effects on the experience of Asian expatriates than observable racial differences do.

Stemming from the preceding discussion, Asian expatriates are expected to experience cultural shock stemming from their distinctive behavioral value processes, which often conflict with that of individualism (cf. Crandall, D'Anello,

Lazarus, Wieczorkowska & Feather, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oberg, 1960; Triandis, 1994a). This is so because culture shock arises largely from the experience of uncertainty concerning appropriate behaviors in a foreign culture (Stedham & Nechita, 1997).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that although several studies predict negative outcomes of value diversity, there is some research that shows that members who are dissimilar in values and beliefs can develop more creative and better alternatives in problem solving, and higher quality decisions than similar members (Cox, Lobel, & Mclead, 1991; Ling, 1990; Mclead & Lobel, 1992; Ely & Thomas, 1999).

Management Implications on Asian Expatriates' Quality of life at Work

As the individualist/collectivist constructs reflect differences in race, values, attitudes, and behaviours (Triandis, 1980), the extent of the effectiveness of Australian organisations will be determined largely by their ability to be open to dissimilar races, ethnic groups, and the values associated with individualist and collectivist cultures (Härtel & Fujimoto, 2000). A diversity climate of openness, fostered by diversity-open HRM and the combined use of individualist and collectivist HRM policies and practices, is proposed (Fujimoto & Härtel, 2004).

Asian expatriate managers and Australian managers face challenges of balancing collectivist and individualist work values (cf. Bedi, 1996). Because the Australian workforce is increasing in its composition of collectivist members (e.g. Asian, Hispanic, Africans), organisations should incorporate a collectivist HR approach not only to indicate openness to collectivist values, but to foster an overarching climate of diversity-openness amongst all members. Collectivist HRM practices includes polices such as setting measurable group oriented targets at the beginning of the year; an equal distribution of bonus to each department based on the department performance and a profit-sharing plan in which a certain percentage of the profits is shared equally by all

employees. On the contrary, individualist HRM includes policies such as setting clear and measurable targets for each employee at the beginning of the year; setting very clearly defined responsibilities for each job; the supervisor sets annual objectives for each subordinate based on mutual discussion with each subordinate.

The incorporation of collectivist HRM policies and practices and the promotion of openness values would de-emphasise prejudices associated with dealing with culturally dissimilar others (Byrne, 1971; Ferdman, 1992; Triandis, 1994b). Notably, recent research found that diversity oriented HRM policies and practices were positively moderated with reduced prejudices (Fujimoto & Härtel, 2004). Furthermore, higher levels of a diversity climate of openness was associated with lower levels of collectivist's cultural alienation (Fujimoto & Härtel, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the experience of Asian expatriates in fitting into Australia. The effects of racial dissimilarity and value dissimilarity were examined to articulate the Asian expatriation in the Australian workplace. Despite the paucity of research conducted on the experience of Asian expatriates in Australia, work conflicts are anticipated as Asian expatriates (i.e. collectivists) fit into the Australian (i.e. individualist) workforce. Finally, although the Australian government has stated interest in facilitating inward Asian expatriation, the past and current evidence insinuates a lack of national and organizational effort to welcome it.

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