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The role of essentialist beliefs on cultural adjustment and cultural intelligence development

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Cross-cultural adjustment refers to the degree of psychological comfort sojourners experience with various aspects of a host culture (Black & Gregersen, 1991). It has been shown to influence important organizational outcomes, such as job satisfaction and performance (e.g., Wang & Takeuchi, 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that cultural adjustment among sojourners has been the subject of extensive scrutiny for decades (Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004). Despite the progress made in the literature, an important question remains as to what kind of personal attributes would facilitate adjustment. While various personality traits and individual difference variables have been studied, the results of such investigation remained equivocal (e.g., Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004). Investigations of personality traits and other individual differences have been characterized as being atheoretical (Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002). Upon reviewing research on expatriate adjustment in the past three decades, Harrison and colleagues (2004: 225) concluded that, “Identification of ‘essential’ individual characteristics… has been hampered by a lack of compelling theory and few truly predictive (rather than concurrent) studies.”

The current study draws on an essentialism theoretical perspective in social psychology to understand how fundamental assumptions that sojourners have about their social environment could have significant implications to their adjustment. Essentialism is a belief that each social group, such as racial group or cultural group, possesses unchangeable essence that determines the abilities and qualities of its members (Chao, Chen, Roisman, & Hong, 2007). Extant research has revealed that endorsement of essentialist belief influences how individuals respond in diverse sociocultural environments (Keller, 2005; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008); however, it has received little attention in the cross-cultural adjustment literature. In the current research, we contribute to the cross-cultural adjustment literature by introducing and investigating essentialist belief as a fundamental and critical individual
difference that influences sojourner adjustment across a variety of sociocultural contexts, from rural migrants living in an urban city, foreign expatriates working in Mainland China, to Chinese exchange students living overseas.

Moreover, current study contributes to cross-cultural adjustment literature by examining the role foreign cultural experience plays in developing cultural competence. Individuals who are culturally competent possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities or attitudes to function effectively in intercultural settings (Earley & Ang, 2003). Although studies have found some evidence suggesting a positive association between prior international experiences and subsequent cultural competence (e.g., Parker & McEvoy, 1993), Black and Mendenhall (1991: 294) conceded that, “Exactly how that happens or what factors inhibit or magnify the impact of previous experience has yet to be comprehensively determined by scholars in the field.” Guided by the essentialism theoretical framework, we dissect the mediating mechanisms through which international experiences shape the development of cultural competence.

An essentialist theoretical perspective to cultural adjustment. As mentioned above, essentialism is the belief that each social group possesses unchangeable essence that determines the abilities and qualities of its members (Chao et al., 2007). It has been shown to influence judgments and perceptions in diverse social cultural contexts (e.g., Keller, 2005; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Specifically, research has found that individuals who endorsed essentialist beliefs tended to represent different cultural groups (e.g., Chinese and American) as incompatible, discrete entities, with non-overlapping attributes. Therefore, we posit that essentialist beliefs would lead sojourners to exaggerate differences between social groups, perceiving the characteristics of their host and home cultures (such as personalities, abilities, values, and customs) as immutable. Such apparent cultural divide would sensitize perceived incompatibility between cultures, discouraging sojourners from learning about the new environment and flexibly adopting to new practices, lowering their cross-cultural adjustment. Thus, we predict that endorsement of essentialist beliefs would be negatively associated with cross-cultural adjustment across general, social, and work/academic domains (Hypothesis 1).

Implications of adjustment to cultural competence. International experiences have been seen as critical in building cultural competence that are essential for career advancement (Daily et al. 2000). The construct of cultural intelligence (Ang, Van Dyne, & Koh, 2006;
Earley & Ang, 2003) has been developed to capture the idea of cultural competence in organizational settings. Sojourners can enhance their cultural intelligence through direct experience or through observation of other people’s behaviors (Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008). Their experience can influence their cognitive frameworks. It can provide knowledge and worldviews that shape their future responses in multicultural settings. As Walsh (1995: 281) postulated, “The cognitive structures generated from experience affect individuals’ abilities to attend to, encode, and make inferences about new information.”

Although being exposed to another culture might equip individuals with different cultural knowledge and ideas (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2006), sojourners who are overly sensitive to cultural differentiation and the apparently immutable cultural boundary would likely be less well-adjusted; the failure in adjustment can, consequently, be detrimental to the cultural intelligence of sojourners. Rather than equipping sojourners with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to function in future multicultural context, we argue that the negative adjustment experiences resulting from hypersensitivity to foreign cultural differentiation would hamper development of cultural competence (Hypothesis 2).

In short, we predict that sojourners’ fundamental assumptions about immutable cultural essences would negatively impact their cross-cultural adjustment. Their lower level of adjustment would adversely impact the development of their cultural competence. We tested these hypotheses across three studies among diverse populations. As essentialism is a novel construct to the sojourner adjustment literature, we first establish the hypothesized relationship between essentialism and adjustment among rural migrants living in urban cities (Study 1a) and among Western expatriates working in Mainland China (Study 1b). Then, we investigate the process and consequence of cross-cultural adjustment through a longitudinal design among exchange students (Study 2).

Study 1a examines the relationship between endorsement of essentialist beliefs and adjustment to urban cultures among children of migrant workers through a two-wave time-lagged design. The results revealed that essentialist belief about immutable social group essences was associated with poorer adjustment across general, social, and academic domains among rural migrants. Study 1b provided converging evidence of the negative impact of essentialist beliefs on cultural adjustment among Western expatriates working in Mainland China. Having established the relationship between essentialist beliefs and cultural
adjustment, Study 2 investigated the process through which essentialist beliefs influence sojourning experiences and the downstream consequences of adjustment among exchange students through a longitudinal design. The results indicated that essentialist beliefs influenced cross-cultural adjustment through heightening sojourners’ anxiety toward potential rejections by the host culture. Furthermore, their cross-cultural adjustment, social adjustment in particular, hindered the development of their cultural intelligence.

Taken together, the current research addresses the theoretical and empirical vacuum in the literature by adopting the essentialism theoretical perspective to examine the antecedents and consequences of cultural adjustment. It represents a first step toward a more theoretical and systematic approach in understanding cross-cultural adjustment across diverse sociocultural contexts. Theoretical and practical implications of the study will be discussed.

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