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Repatriation Adjustment: A Study on Sri Lankan Academic Repatriates

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Abstract

A large and growing body of literature investigated the return of corporate repatriates; the repatriation of academics has not yet been sufficiently discussed in the literature. Particularly, in Sri Lanka, repatriation of academics was unnoticed so far. About the repatriation of university academics, it is not clear whether academic repatriates experience repatriation issues as corporate repatriates. Therefore, this study investigated if academic repatriates experience adjustment issues, and the influences of repatriates personal and situational variables such as length of overseas assignment, the time passed upon repatriation, cultural disparity, and age on repatriation adjustment. The study was conducted with a group of 140 Sri Lankan academics and used t-test and multiple regressions to test the proposed five hypotheses. For this study, the researcher collected data from two groups of academics: one group of academics are those who have no repatriation experiences, and the other group of academics is those who have repatriation experiences. The second group consists of academics (repatriates) who had been attached to a foreign university or academic institution for more than one year, had been involved in academic activities, and, at the survey date, had returned within the past two years. Results indicated that academic repatriate's experiences less fit with their home university compare to academics who do not have repatriation experiences. Multiple regression analysis proved that repatriates' personal and situational variables had no any significant impact on repatriation adjustment.

Keywords: Repatriation, Adjustment, Academics, Internationalization

Introduction

The internationalization of education has blurred the boundaries of national academic careers (Altbach & Lewis 1996) and has influenced the nature and functions of universities (Baruch & Hall 2004; Lane 2011). Universities view academics with international experience as a valuable asset (Harari 1981; Welch 2005). Universities make use of such global expertise for their institutional development such as course development, international research and teaching activities, and expansion of institutional networks. As universities are suffering from a shortage of talented people, the global market for them has become highly competitive, and academics are more likely to move from a developing country to a developed country, and move from a low ranked university to a high ranked university. These trends are unfavorable for the universities that are in developing countries and are low in international rankings to recruit talented academics from the global market.

Therefore, to ensure their sustainable growth, many universities have taken responsibility and oversight for their staff (Kaulisch & Enders 2005), and invest significant amounts of money in developing their talent pool. For example, governments or universities in Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and China encourage academics to gain overseas experience. In such countries, universities have granted financial assistance and leave with pay to their academics during their stay abroad. Similarly, governments of other countries (e.g., Ghana and Iran) invest a substantial amount of money in facilitating their university academics to gain overseas experiences in teaching and research.

Background of the Problem

The Sri Lankan government and academia are very keen to upgrade their universities to reach a high international standard and meet national needs. Most importantly, the Sri Lankan government has attempted to increase the World University rankings of Sri Lankan universities. In an attempt to get universities to reach international recognition and make Sri Lanka a global knowledge hub in Asia, the Sri Lankan government has continued to invest much money in the development of human capital (HETC 2013; Samaranyake 2011).

Academics are encouraged by the government to gain international experience in research and teaching. The Sri Lankan government provides financial assistance for academics who want to engage in research and teaching offshore for a specified period. Also, many international scholarships such as the Commonwealth Scholarship, the Australian Leadership Award and awards from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are available for Sri Lankan academics who wish to pursue their research and higher studies overseas. Furthermore, a World Bank assisted project; “Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century” (HETC) also focuses on strengthening human resources in the higher education system by providing international experience to university academics (HETC 2013). International experience is highly respected in Sri Lankan universities and is perceived as an opportunity to gain foreign exposure and experience. Perceived societal status increases with international experience and thus, in addition to the government motivation, individuals are themselves motivated to gain international experience. This situation has fueled academic expatriation from Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, before academics leave the country, they need to sign an agreement with their university confirming that they will return to their home organization and serve for a particular period back at home university. Sri Lankan expatriates have strong family ties and are sentimental about their country (Anas & Wickremasinghe 2010). Because of the bond agreement and family attachment, a reasonable number of academics return to their home university.

Repatriation issues of different re-entry groups; for example corporate repatriates, students, corporate repatriates’ spouse and missionaries have been discussed in the literature in the various field of study. These studies highlight all re-entry groups’ experiences repatriation stress and feel uncomfortable. Repatriates see the home context as unfamiliar, and they need to readjust and settle into that context. Particularly, the literature on corporate repatriation

has stressed the importance of effective management of repatriation, and has highlighted the fact that unsuccessful management of repatriation leads to employees suffering from problems of adjustment which result in stress and loss of motivation at work (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall 1992; Suutari & Brewster 2003). This situation leads to adverse consequences, for example, high turnover and low performance were observed among repatriates. Academic repatriates can be more inclined to leave the organization when they experience unsatisfactory adjustment (re-integration) since their academic career (with international experience) can be very marketable outside the current employer (Jepsen et al. 2014; Lorange 2006; Richardson & McKenna 2002).

Both corporate and academic expatriates live and work in new cultural and organizational settings; they adopt new cultural and organizational values and norms to perform well there (Richardson & McKenna 2002; Richardson & Zikic 2007). However, academic expatriates are substantially involved in teaching and scholarship, whereas corporate expatriates are involved in management activities in their subsidiary companies. A large and growing body of literature has investigated the return of corporate repatriates; the repatriation of academics has not yet been sufficiently discussed in the literature (Garson 2005). Particularly, in Sri Lanka, repatriation of academics was unnoticed so far. About the repatriation of university academics, it is not clear whether academic repatriates experience repatriation issues as corporate repatriates. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate if academic repatriates experience adjustment issues, if so, to identify whether repatriates personal and situational variables influence repatriation adjustment.

Literature Review

The literature highlighted that workers usually suffer difficulties of adjustment in international assignments (e.g. Black et al. 1999). Employees are suffering from adjustment issues not only when they are expatriated but also when they return to their home countries (Vidal et al. 1997). Literature has been consistently suggesting that the repatriation adjustment was more severe than that repatriates' expected, and their overseas adjustment (Adler 1981; Black et al. 1992; Wang 1997).

Repatriates see the home context as unfamiliar, and they need to readjust and settle into that context (Adler 1981; Allen & Tavares 1998; Lee & Liu 2007). Repatriates experience psychological discomfort, alienation, uncertainties, and loss of control (Black et al. 1992; Kraimer 2012; Sussman 2001; 2002; Vidal, Valle & Aragón 2007), and such experiences can be assigned to the mismatch between repatriates' repatriation expectations and the reality they experience upon their repatriation (Gregersen & Black 1995; Hurn 1999; Stroh 1995). This mismatch can be due to mainly two reasons: (1) the failure of expatriates to follow changes in the home organization during their absence and (2) changes within expatriates and their failure to realize the changes occurring within themselves (Baughn 1995; Hurn 1999; Jassawalla et al. 2004; Martin & Harrell 1996; Stroh 1998).

Changes in the home organization may be in the form of structural and procedural changes (Adler 1981; Stroh, Gregersen & Black 2000). For instance, an organization might have been

restructured, and communication channels might have been changed. In addition, supervisors and co-workers of repatriates are likely to have changed during their absence. Moreover, there can be changes in informal groups and organizational power politics. An informal group which was previously powerful may have lost its power, and a new informal group may have become a powerful one.

During their overseas stay, expatriates are most likely to change. Expatriates are exposed to significantly different organizational and cultural environments, which provide expatriates with different stimuli that force them to change to adjust themselves to the context (Hermans & Dimaggio 2007; Kohonen 2004).

Cultural identity transition is the consequence of an expatriate's adaptation to the host country's cultural context. Cultural identity transition is "the degree to which an individual identifies with the home country and the host country" (Sussman 2001; 2002). The key cultural identity transitions were labeled as subtractive (disintegrated), additive (host favored), global/intercultural (integrated) and affirmative (home favored) based on to what extent they established their link with home and host culture (Cox 2004; Hyder & Lövblad 2007; Sussman 2001; 2002). Subtractive and additive shifters are those who have a weak link with their home culture and strong ties with their host culture respectively. On the other hand, affirmative and intercultural shifters are those who have strong ties with home culture and those who accept both home and host culture respectively.

As discussed above, repatriates experience repatriation as an unexpected and stressful process, and this process was more painful than their expatriation experiences. Repatriates' identity change (Baughn 1995; Hermans & Dimaggio 2007; Kohonen 2008; Kraimer 2012) and changes in home organization/country (Black et al. 1992; Harvey 1982) make repatriates form unrealistic expectations. Repatriates' identity change (Hermans & Dimaggio 2007; Kohonen 2004) influences their cultural identity transition. Along with unmet expectations (Black et al. 1992; Harvey 1982; MacDonald & Arthur 2003) cultural identity transition (Cox 2004; Sussman 2000; 2002) made repatriation experience a painful process. The above mentioned antecedent conditions can be common to all repatriates. For this reason, all kinds of repatriates may find the repatriation experience was stressful, and reintegration to their home organization/country was a painful process (Adler 1981; Garson 2005; Szkudlarek 2010).

A large body of literature on international assignment investigated repatriation of corporate employees and highlighted that corporate repatriates' repatriation experience was stressful and repatriates feel uncomfortable and mismatch with the home context. The repatriation of academics has not yet been sufficiently discussed in the literature (Garson 2005). Corporate expatriates are involved in management activities in their subsidiary companies but, academic expatriates are substantially involved in teaching and scholarship. However, academic expatriates live and work in new cultural and organizational settings; they adopt new cultural and organizational values and norms to perform well there (Richardson & McKenna 2002;

Richardson & Zikic 2007). Adaptation to this changes their behavior, attitudes and broadens their outlook (Andreason & Kinneer 2005; Baughn 1995; Kohonen 2004; 2008).

Garson (2005, p. 324) noted that the experiences of both expatriation and repatriation of an academic are paralleled in the literature dealing with corporate expatriates and repatriates. When she talks about her experience as an academic repatriate, she says, "I realized that I had had an experience similar to those of managers who returned early from their overseas assignment" Therefore, academic repatriates like corporate repatriates may establish unrealistic repatriation expectation and experience reserve cultural shock which creates academic repatriates to feel uncomfortable and mismatch with their home context/university. Therefore, researcher proposed the following hypothesis.

H₁: Academic repatriates experience repatriation adjustment problems.

When expatriates were on overseas assignment for long time, they would change themselves significantly (Cox 2004; Kohonen 2004; 2008; Sussman 2002). Such personal change influenced their repatriation expectation and adjustment (Harvey 1982; Black et al. 1992). However, the empirical evidence was inconsistent. While Black and Gregersen (1991) found the period of time spent on an overseas assignment influenced work adjustment negatively, Gregersen and Stroh (1997) and Suutari and Välimaa (2002) found its negative influence on general adjustment. However, Black (1994) has found no significant impact on any facets of adjustment. This mixed result suggests that the effect of the length of the overseas adjustment may depend on the repatriation context. Therefore, in this study, researcher proposed that;

H₂: Length of overseas assignment positively relates to the repatriation adjustment.

As with the period spent on an overseas assignment, the time passed upon repatriation also has substantial influence on repatriation adjustment. Repatriates need time to reduce uncertainty and reintegrate to the home country/organization (Adler 1981; Black & Gregersen 1991; Cox et al. 2012; Sussman 2002). While Gregersen and Stroh (1997) found time passed upon repatriation has a positive impact on both general and work adjustment, Black (1994) and Gregersen (1991) found its positive impact only on the general adjustment and work adjustment respectively.

H₃: The time passed upon repatriation positively relates to the repatriation adjustment.

The repatriation process can be influenced by cultural disparity (Gregersen & Black 1996; Vidal et al. 2007). When there are significant differences between home and host country culture, repatriates' adopted host cultural values, customs, and norms contradict with the home-country's cultural values and norms. This situation may lead to feelings of discomfort (Black et al. 1992). However, to what extent they have changed their cultural identity during their overseas stay influences their sense of comfort upon repatriation (Sussman 2002). In a study among Finnish repatriates, Gregersen and Stroh (1997) found cultural novelty negatively influenced interaction adjustment only, but another two studies (Black & Gregersen 1991b; Black 1994) found no significant influences on any facets of the adjustment.

H₄: Cultural disparity negatively influences the repatriation adjustment.

Empirical examination on the impact of age on the adjustment has been widely discussed in the literature on international assignment (Suutari & Välimaa 2002; Black 1994; Black & Gregersen 1991b), but Gregersen and Stroh (1997). Older employees are well aware of the home country context and are able to understand the nature of the changes upon their repatriation. Thus, age can positively influence on repatriation adjustment (Hyder and Lövblad 2007). Similarly, it was argued that as younger employees quickly adapt themselves to the host country culture and develop deep identity change, the repatriation adjustment was difficult for younger workers (Cox 2004). The empirical evidence confirms the positive impact of age on adjustment (Black 1994; Black & Gregersen 1991).

H₅: Age positively related to repatriation adjustment

Methodology

As quantitative method better fitted the study focus, research questions, and the prior state of the theory researcher chose quantitative method to answer my research question. This study is a cross sectional study using questionnaires.

Sample and Procedures

For this study researcher collected data from two groups of academics: one group of academics is those who have no repatriation experiences and the other group of academics are those who have repatriation experiences. The second group consists of academics (repatriates) who had been attached to a foreign university or academic institution for more than one year, had been involved in academic activities, and, at the survey date, had returned within the past 2 years.

120 Questionnaires were distributed to each group of repatriates by the researcher directly and through researcher's friends. Each questionnaire accompanied by a cover letter assuring confidentiality. Researcher sent reminders to respondents by mail and ultimately researcher received 71 and 82 responses from academics and academic repatriates respectively. The response rate was 62.5 % which is greater than the average rate of 52.5% in organizational research (Baruch & Holton 2008). 13 questionnaires (nine from group one and four from group two) were rejected: seven were rejected because of more than 15% missing values and six were rejected as respondents have less than one year overseas experience.

Respondents' Profile

Table 1 shows the profile of two groups of respondents included in this study. No big differences observed between the two groups of repatriates.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

		Group 1	Group 2
<i>Respondent's Profile</i>		<i>Number</i>	<i>Number</i>
Gender	Male	42	40
	Female	36	38
Cultural disparity	Asia	n/a	34
	Other countries	n/a	44
Previous overseas experiences	Yes	n/a	21
	No	n/a	57
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Age		37.4	42.2years
Working experience		9.2	11.6 years
Length of overseas assignment		n/a	41.3 months
The time passed upon repatriation		n/a	13.1months

Variables

Adjustment

To date various methods have been developed and introduced to measure repatriation adjustment of corporate repatriates (Black & Gregersen 1991; Gregersen & Stroh 1997; Suutari & Välimaa 2002; Vidal et al. 2010). Feledman and Thomson (1993) proposed three adjustment indices: job satisfaction, intention to remain with the organization and psychological well-being, and argues that these three indices were more relevant and suitable for measuring job transition adjustment. Person-team fit and person- organization fit can be considered successful adjustment in collectivist cultures whereas role performance may be a relevant and appropriate index in an individualistic culture (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson 2002). Therefore, in the present study context person-organization fit (PO-fit) can be a more suitable and relevant index to measure the adjustment of Sri Lankan academic repatriates. To what extent repatriates perceive they fit their organization will indicate to what extent they have adjusted to the home organization.

Therefore, in the present study, repatriates' adjustment was measured by measuring the degree of repatriates' perceived PO-fit. To measure PO-fit, five items were used (Cable & DeRue 2002; Judge 1996) with some modification but without changing the meaning. The respondent was asked to respond to each statement using one of the responses based on 7-point Likert-type scales, with possible responses ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree.

Demographic and Situational Variables

In addition to repatriation adjustment, 7 situational and personal variables were measured to describe the research sample. These variables were: gender, marital status, previous overseas experience, age, working experience, overseas experience and repatriation experience.

Data Analysis Procedures

First, the survey data were entered into a Microsoft Excel sheet and then transferred to SPSS 20 for data cleaning and analysis. First, researcher performed Exploratory Factor Analysis

(EFA) Further, T-test, regression analysis were performed to analysis the data and test the hypothesis.

As the proposed survey was self-report and cross-sectional it may be vulnerable to common method variance (CMV). Therefore, researcher took the necessary steps to minimize CMV issues in the survey at both the design stage and the analysis stage as suggested by Chang Podsakoff et al. (2003).

Data Analysis and Results

Before conducting the analysis the accuracy of the data was checked; no values outside the specified range were found, means standard deviations and correlations appeared to be reasonable. Further, questionnaire non-responsive rate, item non-response rate, distribution of data and outliers were taken into account and treated properly.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) Approach

Researcher used the Principal Axis Factoring (PAF approach) to (a) identify whether the same factors as found before were replicated, or whether new factors emerged than those anticipated in this study; (b) determine whether the measures included in the scales reasonably measured the construct in this study context. The EFA results are tabulated below in Table 2.

Factor	Items	Adjustment
Adjustment	Adj-1	.893
	Adj-2	.901
	Adj-3	.952
	Adj-4	.766
	Adj-5	.795
Eigenvalues		3.7
Cronbach's alpha		.92
Variance explained; Total 74.6% KMO, .87.		
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Approx. Chi-Square 344.51) Sig .000		

The results showed that only one factors emerged with eigenvalues 3.7. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .87, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity $p < 0.05$. Loadings of all variables with related factors were greater than .766. Cronbach's alpha value was satisfactory (.92). The EFA confirmed that adjustment is one factor, no new factors emerged than those anticipated in this study; and the measures included in the scales reasonably measured the construct in this study context too.

Hypothesis Testing

T-test was performed to identify if there is significant differences in adjustment between academics and academic repatriates (Table 3). T-test result indicates that there is a significant difference in adjustment between academics and academic repatriates. Academics perceive high level of PO-fit compare to academic repatriates. In other words, academic repatriates experiences less fit with their home organization.

Table 3: Mean Differences in Adjustment (PO-Fit) between Repatriates and Non-Repatriates

Adjustment	Groups	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error	t- value	Sig
	Repatriates	78	3.82	1.45	.165	-9.40
Non repatriates	62	5.54	1.28	.163		

To test the rest of the four hypotheses (H_2 to H_5) researcher performed regression analysis. While Adjustment was entered as dependent variable academic repatriate' age, working experience, overseas experience, cultural disparity, repatriation experiences were entered as predictor variables of adjustment as hypothesized. The results showed that the above said predictor variables of adjustment together explain 1.8% ($R^2 .018$) of the variance of the model and the model not fit with the data ($F .257$, sig .95). Regression analysis results are tabulated in Table 4.

Table 4: Regression Analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	3.38	1.45		2.32	.02		
Length of overseas assignment	.00	.01	.05	.47	.63	.91	1.08
The time passed upon repatriation	-.01	.02	-.05	-.49	.62	.94	1.06
Cultural disparity	.30	.46	.07	.65	.51	.94	1.06
Age	-.00	.02	-.03	-.24	.80	.94	1.05

As shown in the above table none of the four dependent variables has significance influence on repatriation adjustment. Therefore, the four hypotheses (H_2 to H_5) were rejected.

Discussion and Conclusion

In line with the proposed hypothesis (H_1), this study found that academic repatriate's experiences less fit with their home university compare to academics who do not have repatriation experiences. As stressed in the literature repatriates see the home organization as unfamiliar, and they need to readjust and settle into that context (Adler 1981; Lee & Liu 2007). Repatriates found re-adjustment to their home context was more painful and challenging than they expected and their expatriation adjustment (Adler 1981; Black et al. 1992; Piet-Pelon & Hornby 1992; Wang 1997).

Adjustment theorists in the area of domestic and international relocation (Ashford & Taylor 1990; Nicholson 1984, Black et al. 1991, Black et al. 1992) commented that moving to a new place creates uncertainty and loss of control. Thus, repatriation transition creates uncertainty and a sense of loss of control (Black et al. 1992; Suutari & Välimaa 2002) experience psychological discomfort, alienation, uncertainties, and loss of control (Black et al., 1992; Kraimer 2012; Sussman 2001; 2002; Vidal, Valle & Aragón 2007). Therefore, consistent with existing literature that deals employees relocation this study suggests academic repatriates also experiences adjustment difficulties when they return to their home university.

Further, though it was suggested repatriates personal variables influences on repatriation adjustment findings of the previous studies were inconsistent. This study found no support to the view that length of overseas assignment, the time passed upon repatriation, cultural disparity and age positively related to repatriation adjustment have positive effect on the adjustment of academic repatriates.

As unsuccessful repatriation adjustment is a potential hurdle for better use of top talent and hampers the successful process of internationalization of the education and can be costly for both repatriates and the organization both repatriates and universities need to take necessary steps for better repatriation adjustment. Particularly, in Sri Lanka where government/universities encourage their university academics to gain international experience in research and teaching by providing financial assistance and other benefits those who want to engage in research and teaching offshore for a specified period the issue of repatriation of academics seriously taken into account for the better uses of academic repatriates to increase the quality of Sri Lankan universities and succeed in the process of internationalization of the university/education. Further, as academic repatriates can be more inclined to leave the organization when they experience unsatisfactory adjustment (PO-Fit) since their academic career (with international experience) can be very marketable outside the current employer (Jepsen et al. 2014; Lorange 2006; Richardson & McKenna 2002) Sri Lankan universities and government should take necessary actions to manage the repatriates well and make use of their international experience to upgrade Sri Lankan academic institutions.

This study, by providing empirical evidence, proves academic repatriates experience repatriation issues and tables the following questions for the further empirical research (1) What are the determinants of successful adjustment of academic repatriates? (2) What are the consequences of unsuccessful adjustment of academic repatriates? (3) How can universities and repatriates effectively manage the repatriation of academics?

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