Japanese Expatriates and Their Coping Strategies in Overseas Japanese Companies

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Preferred streams: 1. human resource management and development, 2. international management, 3. organizational behavior
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ABSTRACT
Research has shown that Japanese expatriates experience various types of role stress in overseas Japanese companies. However, little is known of the coping strategies adopted to deal with the role stress, or the effectiveness of these strategies. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to examine the effectiveness of the coping strategies used to alleviate Japanese expatriate’s role stress. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 Japanese expatriates. The findings showed that cultural background is related to the effectiveness of coping strategies. Avoidance strategy is found to comprise two facets, relationships building and cultural adaptation. Contrary to the literature, we found that avoidance strategy is a form of effective coping strategy.

Keywords: International OB; Cross-cultural behavior; Stress and stress management; International human resource management; Overseas Japanese companies; Australia

Research has shown that individuals working for overseas Japanese companies experience a degree of stress (Byun & Ybema 2005; Okamoto & Teo 2011). This involves host country staff feeling alienated and believing that Japanese expatriates are not providing enough information (Yoshihara 2001). While the literature has shown that individuals use coping strategies (e.g., Hu & Cheng 2010; Stahl & Caligiuri 2005) to deal with workplace stress, there has been little empirical research on how individuals cope with intercultural interaction stress, and the effectiveness of these strategies (Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). Hu and Cheng (2010) argue that there should be more attention paid to understanding how individuals develop effective coping strategies. The current paper therefore seeks to investigate the type and effectiveness of coping strategies used by expatriates in overseas Japanese companies in Australia. It is likely that Japanese expatriates experience role stress with host country staff in Australia due to the cultural differences between them.

COPING STRATEGY TYPES
Coping strategies are used when experiencing role stress (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn & Snoek 1964). These coping strategies are commonly recognized as problem-focused coping strategies or emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Problem-focused coping strategy refers to an individual’s active attempts to remove or change the source(s) of a problem to ease their role stress. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping strategy involves avoiding or withdrawing from a situation to mitigate problems, or attempting to change oneself in order to adapt to the source of stress (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub 1989). Carver et al. (1989) developed a detailed inventory classifying coping
strategies. They list five categories for each of the two strategies. The five categories of problem-focused strategies are: (1) active coping, (2) planning, (3) suppression of competing activities, (4) restraint coping, and (5) seeking instrumental social support. The emotion-focused strategy involves restructuring one’s cognitions and perceptions, and these are: (1) seeking emotional social support, (2) positive interpretation, (3) accepting reality, (4) denying reality, and (5) turning to religion.

This traditional approach is a reactive coping used in order to manage stressful experiences encountered (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). A new approach, proactive coping, is suggested by Dewe, O’Driscoll and Cooper (2010). This proactive coping generates a positive psychological state and personal growth. In contrast to the reactive coping that is employed after stress is experienced, proactive coping is oriented to future use for the purpose of prevention of stress. Dewe et al. (2010) suggest coping strategy research attention should be shifted toward this proactive coping.

**EFFECTS OF COPING STRATEGIES**

It is commonly acknowledged that an emotion-focused coping strategy has a negative effect and a problem-focused coping strategy has a positive effect in reducing one’s stress (Billings & Moos 1981; Latack 1986). In accordance with this claim, previous studies on coping strategies in an intercultural context find emotion-focused strategies, such as withdrawal from the situation, associate negatively with expatriates’ adjustment to work in the host country (Feldman & Thompson 1993; Selmer 1999; Tung 1998). Problem-focused coping strategies, on the other hand, are found to associate positively with their adjustment (Selmer 1999; Stahl 2000). These strategies include task oriented strategies (Selmer 1999; Stahl 2000); learning about, and adjustment to, culture (Stahl 2000); interpersonal strategies (Feldman & Thomas 1992; Selmer 1999; Stahl 2000); and showing tolerance and patience (Selmer 1999).

Despite these findings, contradictory results are reported. For instance, Stahl and Caligiuri (2005) report mixed results, with some problem-focused strategies being effective for expatriate adjustment, and yet not effective for their desire to stay on in their international assignment. Psychological reappraisal is an emotion-focused coping strategy that refers to focusing on positive aspects of a problem and accepting these. This strategy has been found to be beneficial in facilitating
adjustment of expatriates as psychological reappraisal has been argued to ease one’s anxiety, particularly for those who are new to a host country environment (Feldman & Thomas 1992).

Coping strategy has been shown to have both positive and negative effects on role stress reduction. Billings and Moos (1981) identify the strategy of working harder, which is a problem-focused coping strategy recognized as having a positive influence. This coping strategy contributes positively to satisfaction with work adjustment, while having a negative effect on psychological aspects of the person.

Stahl and Caligiuri (2005) explain contingencies such as cultural context and length of time of international assignment are related to the inconsistent results. In terms of cultural contexts, Stahl and Caligiuri (2005) claim the greater the cultural distance between expatriate and host country staff, the greater the effect problem-focused coping strategy produces on expatriates’ adjustment. Contrary to that claim, Feldman and Thomas (1992) suggest social integration strategy, which is categorized as a problem-focused coping strategy, is more effective when expatriates are assigned to culturally similar countries in comparison to those countries where the culture is unfamiliar to expatriates.

Ohbuchi and Atsumi (2010) assert avoidance strategy is effective for individuals from an Asian background, due to their collective culture. They explain being a good member of a group and forming positive relations allow the people of collective cultures to continuously receive social or economic rewards. The avoidance strategy assists these Asians to develop such positive relations, and thus they are able to receive the rewards. In terms of time, the avoidance strategy is more beneficial from a long-term perspective than a short-term perspective (Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010). Cultural context has been raised as a critical factor for studying effective coping strategies (Stahl & Caligiuri 2005; Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010). There is a paucity of studies on coping strategies in intercultural contexts compared with those in monocultural contexts (Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). Ohbuchi and Atsumi (2010) argue avoidance strategy is an effective coping strategy adopted by Asians, especially in relation to Japanese employees in Japan. Nothing is mentioned about whether the avoidance strategy is effective for Japanese employees placed in an intercultural context. Thus, avoidance strategy may not be an effective coping strategy for Japanese expatriates assigned to Western countries. Ohbuchi and
Atsumi (2010) also state that little is examined on how avoidance strategy functions in a particular cultural context. It has been shown that role stress is experienced by people working for overseas Japanese companies (Byun & Ybema 2005; Okamoto & Teo 2011). Alleviation of role stress is critical for establishing a healthy organization (Gates 2001: 395).

In summary, the current study will seek to provide answers to two research questions. (1) What coping strategies are perceived as effective for Japanese expatriate staff of Japanese companies in Australia? (2) Why are they perceived as effective? How are they used?

METHODS

A main aim of the current study is to identify how Japanese expatriates adopt coping strategies in alleviating their role stress in Japanese companies in Australia. A qualitative approach has been adopted as it is inductive and exploratory, and this approach is to be used for discovery (Merriam 1988). A qualitative approach is thus adopted for the current study. Data was collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observation, field notes, documentation, and archive records. An interview protocol was developed based on the literature (a copy of the interview protocol can be obtained by contacting the first author). The first author conducted all of the interviews using this protocol. In total, 31 Japanese expatriate staff from Japanese companies located in Australia participated in the study. Interviews were carried out at the informants’ workplace. The length of the semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes. All interviews were recorded, and were conducted in Japanese, as using informants’ native language is considered to be an effective form of collecting valid and trustworthy cross-cultural data (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis 2004: 224).

The qualitative data were analysed using NVivo (Qualitative Solutions & Research Pty Ltd.) as computer assisted qualitative data analysis increases rigor (Silverman 2000). NVivo allows for coding of specified segments of the texts, and retrieval of the texts marked under the same code. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that coding is a data reduction process that enables the drawing of concepts and conclusion. They strongly recommend counting the number of phenomena in order to verify the data and reduce researcher bias. We adopt this particular approach in the current study.
FINDINGS

Data analysis resulted in identifying six types of effective coping strategies being used to alleviate role stress in intercultural interactions in Japanese companies in Australia. They are: (1) relationship building, (2) communication, (3) participation opportunities, (4) hiring bicultural staff, (5) indirect active coping, and (6) avoidance.

The first theme, relationship building strategy, concerns the establishment of positive human relationships that foster camaraderie among work colleagues. It involves understanding, respect, acceptance of fellow colleagues, and learning how to work successfully together. The ‘relationship’ here primarily refers to those between Japanese expatriate staff and non-Japanese host country staff (HCS). Approximately 32 percent of Japanese expatriate staff expressed the significance of this strategy. This strategy is used during the normal course of daily work activities. Japanese expatriate staff described this strategy as crucial in working together within the same company.

The second theme, communication, was identified as an essential instance of coping strategies. Similar to relationships building strategy, this strategy was used for daily interactions between non-Japanese HCS and Japanese staff. Approximately 45 percent of informants expressed the importance of effective communication between non-Japanese HCS and Japanese staff in establishing good relationships in companies, and that serious efforts must be made to communicate.

Japanese expatriate staff acknowledged the implicit nature of the Japanese communication style incurs communication difficulties with non-Japanese HCS. They thus expressed that their communication must be explicit, and a clear and full explanation must be articulated to non-Japanese HCS.

The third and fourth themes, participation opportunities and hiring bicultural staff, were adopted by management. The results find HCS were dissatisfied with the amount of information provided by Japanese expatriate staff, and wanted greater participation in the company’s activities, particularly in decision making. Corresponding to their dissatisfaction, Japanese expatriate staff believed increasing HCS’s participation was a valuable strategy for managing them. The strategy thus
involves management displaying reliance on HCS, and an expectation that HCS would take an active role in the company’s business activities.

Hiring bicultural staff refers to the practice of hiring HCS who are familiar with Japanese people and well versed in Japan’s culture, corporate customs and/or language. Japanese informants mentioned that those bicultural staff were not only well acquainted with Japan, but also tended to accept Japanese corporate customs and culture. Thus, they were perceived as quite different from HCS who did not have these qualities.

The fifth theme, indirect active coping, is consistent with the characteristics of active coping defined by Carver et al. (1989). However, it differs from it in one way. It involves a third party or ‘go-between’ so that no direct communication is needed between the primary parties. Nearly a quarter of the informants commented on this. Typically, this strategy was used between Japanese expatriate staff and non-Japanese HCS. For instance, when a Japanese expatriate staff member needed to comment on something that they would hesitate to say directly to a non-Japanese HCS, such as a caution or making a request, Japanese expatriate staff would ask either non Japanese HCS or Japanese HCS to speak on their behalf. This strategy enabled staff to solve a problem without having to confront the person concerned directly.

The last theme, avoidance, is about avoiding confrontation. This strategy was only used for dealing with non-Japanese HCS. The results found that nearly 30 percent of Japanese expatriate staff recognized their own avoidance tendencies when dealing with non-Japanese HCS. The avoidance strategy occurred in potential disciplinary situations such as when non-Japanese local staff made frequent private phone calls during work hours, when they regularly took days off, or when they left work without finishing a task required to be completed on the day. In these situations, Japanese managers in Japan would normally caution their junior staff to refrain from doing these things. Japanese managers in Australia who participated in the current study however, tended to keep their concerns to themselves in order to avoid conflict with local staff.

Most of the comments made by Japanese expatriate staff about avoidance mention they should not expect non-Japanese HCS to show a level of commitment similar to that shown in Japan. Although
they were dissatisfied with HCS’s work attitudes and were frustrated, they reiterated that they were working in Australia and should accept the local standards of work commitment. By using this strategy, they were able to avoid causing any confrontations with non-Japanese HCS, preferring to maintain peaceful personal relations and work environments rather than take any risk of causing discord.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Anatomy of Avoidance Strategy

Japanese expatriate staff practice avoidance strategy when they experience stress in relation to the work attitudes of non-Japanese HCS. They use the strategy primarily for two reasons. The first reason is to avoid any dissonance with non-Japanese HCS and maintain harmonious personal relations. The second reason is Japanese expatriate staff’s wish to adapt to the work culture of the host country. The findings thus establish avoidance strategy is composed of two facets, relationships building and cultural adaptation.

We found support for the adoption of avoidance strategy by individuals from a collective culture in maintaining social relationships (Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010) in stressful intercultural interaction situations. Forming good personal relationships with HCS is categorized as a problem-focused coping strategy, and is effective for expatriates’ adjustment (Feldman & Thomas 1992; Selmer 1999; Stahl 2000). Learning about and adjusting to another culture (Stahl 2000) and psychological reappraisal (Feldman & Thomas 1992; Feldman & Thompson 1993) also have a positive impact on expatriates’ adjustment. These claims suggest the two facets of avoidance strategy, relationships building and cultural adaptation, have positive effects, and that the avoidance strategy enacted by Japanese expatriate staff is perceived as an effective coping strategy.

This finding contrasts to the prevalent understanding that avoidance strategy, which is recognized as an emotion-focused strategy, has a negative association with one’s role stress (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman 1984). There was mixed finding in relation to the effects of coping strategies in the literature (Feldman & Thomas 1992; Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). As discussed above, the current study uncovers that the avoidance strategy is perceived as effective, and it is composed of two facets,
relationships building and cultural adaptation, which illustrate why the avoidance strategy is perceived as effective. We thus suggest coping strategy may be composed of several facets, and effects of coping strategies are detected through analysis of each facet.

Types of Effective Coping Strategies

Six coping strategy types are identified in our study. They are summarized in Table 1 below. As shown in Table 1, the six coping strategies are classified into three different groupings of coping strategies: proactive coping strategies, reactive coping strategies, and reactive coping with proactive nature. Dewe et al. (2010) distinguish proactive coping strategy from reactive coping strategy. Proactive coping strategy is future-looking, enacted to prevent possible stressful situations taking place, while reactive coping is undertaken after an encountered stressful incident (Dewe et al. 2010). Four strategies, relationships building, communication, participation opportunities, and hiring bicultural staff, are undertaken during the daily work activities wherever appropriate. Thus, they are all proactive coping strategies. Indirect active coping and avoidance strategies, on the other hand, are used when individual staff experience a stressful incident. The two strategies are therefore considered as reactive coping.

As discussed in the previous section, avoidance strategy has two facets, relationship building and cultural adaptation. The former facet refers to proactive coping, and the latter is reactive coping. Hence, the avoidance strategy can be considered as reactive coping as it is enacted after role stress is experienced (Dewe et al. 2010). It was found to also incorporate characteristics of proactive coping. Although Dewe et al. (2010) made a distinction between proactive and reactive coping, nothing is mentioned about a coping type with a mixed nature of both proactive and reactive coping types. The findings of this study illustrate that three types of coping, (1) proactive coping, (2) reactive coping, and (3) reactive coping with a proactive nature, are perceived as effective coping strategies in Japanese companies in Australia.
Active coping strategy is one of the problem-focused coping strategy types categorized by Carver et al. (1989). We renamed it as ‘indirect active coping’ as it involves seeking assistance or delegation to a third person, or ‘go-between’. Although Carver et al. (1989) developed detailed coping strategy types, the indirect active coping strategy is not listed in their classification. Hence, the term ‘indirect active coping’ is newly used in our study.

**Contexts and Effective Coping Strategies**

Cultural background influences the effectiveness of coping strategies (Feldman & Thomas 1992; Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). In contrast to Westerners, Asians have a propensity to use avoidance strategy (Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010). Our study found that avoidance strategy is used only by Japanese expatriate staff, which thus supports the belief that cultural background influences preference and perceived effective coping strategies.

Time is another factor influencing the effects of coping strategy (Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010; Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). Ohbuchi and Atsumi (2010) assert that avoidance strategy is more beneficial if it is used over a long term. Our study reveals avoidance strategy is used by Japanese expatriate staff who are on relatively short-term postings, but not by those on long-term postings. Avoidance strategy has two facets; relationships building and cultural adaptation. Both facets are recognized as effective for expatriate adjustment (Feldman & Thomas 1992). Our results thus illustrate avoidance strategy is effective, regardless of time frame, if it involves the two facets. This also indicates that a multi-faceted level of analysis is required to understand the effects of coping strategies.

**CONCLUSION**

The current study investigates coping strategies perceived as effective to reduce role stress of Japanese expatriate staff of Japanese companies in Australia. This study contributes by broadening understanding about effective coping strategies in an intercultural context. In particular, we reveal how to discern whether a coping strategy is effective or not. Contradictory results are reported as to effective coping strategies (Feldman & Thomas 1992; Stahl & Caligiuri 2005). We uncover the fact that coping strategy may be composed of several facets, and analysis of these facets is a key to
discerning if the coping strategy is effective or not. The current study also illustrates that effective coping strategies are related to cultural background.

Managerial Implications

Japanese overseas companies should ensure that expatriates develop the effective coping strategies identified in the current study (such as relationships building, communication, and participation opportunities) in order to alleviate their role stress. A way forward is to create multicultural teams comprising of both Japanese expatriates and HCS. This will allow the creation of more opportunities for them to communicate each other. This will lead to an improvement in communication, cross cultural understanding and working relationships between them.

Limitation

Our findings are applicable for Japanese companies in Australia. Expatriates from countries which have the same language and cultural values with Australia may not encounter similar problems which require coping strategies.

Future Research Implications

Future research should consider carrying out a similar study on expatriates in a context where they share the same language and cultural context as the host country (e.g. Hong Kong and or Taiwanese Chinese expatriates in mainland China). In addition, the same study could be replicated in other Western countries such as Europe to determine if findings from the current study can be generalised.

In conclusion, the current study shows that there are different facets of coping strategy being used by Japanese expatriate staff when coping with intercultural stress in overseas Japanese companies. Identifying the facets enabled us to explain why avoidance strategy is effective. This approach has never been revealed in the literature, and is the contribution of our study.

REFERENCES


Table 1: Types and Features of Effective Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROACTIVE COPING STRATEGIES</th>
<th>Staff Type</th>
<th>Descriptions and Representative Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships Building</td>
<td>JEX</td>
<td>Good personal relations are developed. “In order to understand one another and be able to discuss many things effectively at official meetings, we need to establish good human relationships. We really must do this.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>JEX</td>
<td>Communication is improved between non-Japanese HCS and Japanese expatriate staff. “The best thing would be regularly communicating with them about various topics, not just about work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation Opportunities</td>
<td>MGT</td>
<td>HCS are given more opportunities to participate in the company’s business activities. “So we need to develop a system where we give them more input, information, and we should reach decisions only after they are discussed by everyone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Bicultural Staff</td>
<td>MGT</td>
<td>Japanese management HCS conversant with host culture and corporate customs. “So we prioritize that type of person [who understands about Japanese culture] at the time of hiring.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>REACTIVE COPING STRATEGIES</th>
<th>Staff Type</th>
<th>Descriptions and Representative Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Active Coping</td>
<td>JEX</td>
<td>The situation is confronted using a third person or ‘go-between’. No direct communication involved. “I do this indirectly [getting other host country staff to tell this to the host country staff concerned]. The Japanese [expatriate staff] should stay behind the scenes.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>REACTIVE COPING STRATEGIES WITH PROACTIVE NATURE</th>
<th>Staff Type</th>
<th>Descriptions and Representative Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>JEX</td>
<td>Japanese expatriate staff solve problems by avoiding confrontation. Composed of cultural adaptation and relationship building “I try not to mention little things. Well, it may sound odd if I say this, but I try to be tolerant.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
HCS – Host country staff
JEX – Japanese expatriate staff
MGT – Management