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Is variety the spice of (expatriate) life? How cultural diversity in an expatriate's home country affects their adjustment

Abstract

Purpose: While the expatriation literature has explored cultural adjustment in considerable depth, it has largely overlooked the influence of cultural diversity in an expatriate's home country. This study addresses this shortcoming by investigating how home-country cultural diversity affects expatriate adjustment.

Design/methodology/approach: We adopt a qualitative, inductive approach based on semi-structured interviews with a small number of Malaysian managers on international assignment in the Greater Brisbane area of Queensland, Australia.

Findings: Our two key and related observations from the interviews are that, firstly, the existence of sizeable and profoundly distinct ethnic groups in an expatriate's home country serves as an aid to successful adjustment, as it enhances cross-cultural understanding and communicative skills. Secondly, the positive effects of home-country cultural diversity are particularly felt by expatriates from ethnic minority groups in the home country due to their in-group and out-group interactions at home and their additional linguistic arsenal.

Social implications: Multiculturalism is a polarising and contentious topic in the public debate in many countries around the world, frequently used for differing political purposes. But in a globalising world, it is unlikely to disappear any time soon, making it imperative for academic research to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon, from as many angles as possible, including from an international business perspective.

Originality/value: This study addresses an under-researched topic, namely how cultural diversity within an expatriate's home country impacts adjustment. From our findings, we also introduce a theoretical model for use in future research.

Keywords: culture; cultural diversity; expatriate adjustment

1. Introduction

International assignments (IAs) do not come cheap: training, relocating, housing, insuring, compensating, schooling, and eventually repatriating an expatriate and any accompanying

family members can cost a multinational enterprise (MNE) up to five times their base salary (Shah *et al*., 2022). Employers are therefore understandably quite keen to ensure expatriates succeed on the job – not just to secure some returns on their investment but also, looking further ahead, to safeguard their reputation and international ties. How one performs at work is of course related to and influenced by a wide range of factors, one of the most important of which, for expatriates, concerns their adjustment to their host country (Kraimer, Wayne and Jaworski, 2001). In expatriation parlance, adjustment refers to 'the degree of fit between the expatriate manager and the new environment in both work and non-work domains' (Aycan, 1997, p.436). Since expatriation, by definition, involves cross-border movements and interactions, cultural differences – and how an expatriate copes with them – take on an especially important role in adjustment and IA success (Huff, Song and Gresch, 2014).

Researchers have highlighted various antecedents behind adjustment success (or lack thereof), ranging from one's gender (Haslberger, 2010) and nationality (Richardson, 2022a) to the roles played by social networks (Pustovit, 2020) and pre-departure training (Hutchings 2003). The present paper seeks to contribute to this field of inquiry by exploring whether and how cultural diversity in an expatriate's home country influences the adjustment process. In essence, the central question this paper asks is: *How does cultural diversity in an expatriate's home country affect their adjustment*? We take inspiration from an earlier study by Freeman and Lindsay (2012), which showed that cultural diversity in a *host* country exacerbates adjustment challenges. Based on Australian expatriates' experiences in culturally diverse Malaysia, their study found that the existence of multiple languages and communication styles in such a host country creates some complexities for adjustment. In this study, we reverse the perspective by investigating the impact of *home*-country cultural diversity on expatriate adjustment. Like Freeman and Lindsay (2012), our two contexts are Malaysia and Australia,

though in our case Malaysia represents the home-country context and Australia the destination/host country. Drawing on Longhi (2014, p.3), we define a culturally diverse country as one that "hosts a variety of groups with different habits and traditions."

We begin by examining what existing literature suggests in terms of how an expatriate's culturally diverse home-country environment might potentially influence adjustment. Next, we describe the research methods adopted in the study, before presenting and discussing our findings. We round off with some concluding remarks and a note on the study's limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Cultural differences and expatriate adjustment

As we have already highlighted, expatriate adjustment is a quite broad notion in that it relates not only to the workplace but also, and just as importantly, the non-work environment. Unpacking this concept a little further, Haslberger, Brewster and Hippler (2013) argue that cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements are all at work, which merely goes to underline just how complex the adjustment process can be. One of the main factors behind this complexity is the existence of cultural differences and the challenges involved in adjusting oneself accordingly (Johnson, Lenartowicz and Apud 2006). Being competent in handling cultural differences has been demonstrated by multiple studies to have a significant effect on expatriate adjustment and performance (Abdul Malek and Budhwar 2013; Wildman, Griffith and Klafehn, 2022).

What, then, determines one's ability to adjust to the cultural differences that come with an expatriate assignment? One factor that has been studied quite extensively is an individual's previous experience living and/or working overseas. Although Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al. (2005,

p.272) argue that the impact of this is likely to be "only minimally helpful for…adjustment", others have found that such experiences have more positive effects (Takeuchi and Chen, 2013). Leaving aside any inconsistencies that might exist in the findings, what is important from the perspective of our study is that, in our view at least, it is difficult to equate overseas *experience* – valuable as it might be – with one's experience *coming from* a culturally diverse home country. First, growing up in a multicultural country usually involves a multicultural education, such that one learns from an early age not just about one's own cultural background but also about "cultural similarities and differences in the cultural plurality of [one's] peers" (Goh, 2012, p.397). It seems fair to assume, therefore, that working effectively across cultures would be something relatively 'natural' in someone from such a country, rather than something that can requires training, as in the case of someone who gains international experience later in life. A useful analogy might be the difference one often observes in people who learn a language in childhood compared to those who do so in adulthood.

Second, it is very often the case that an overseas experience involves minimal interaction and networking with host-country nationals, with expatriates essentially forming "ethnic enclaves" or "bubbles" in which they mingle primarily with other expatriate workers, usually of the same nationality (Ho *et al.*, 2022; Peltonen and Huhtinen, 2023). As insightful as these findings may be, the focus of inquiry has tended to exclude the significance of cultural diversity (or lack of diversity) in one's home country, which of course is the central concern of our study here. We believe that this merits greater attention because diversity within a *host* country has been shown repeatedly to influence adjustment (e.g. Freeman and Lindsay, 2012; Pires *et al.*, 2006), thus suggesting a possible influence of diversity in the *home* country.

Another factor that relates to our inquiry here concerns ancestral heritage – specifically a migrant ancestry – and how this might influence adjustment. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly,

given their family's international history, there is much evidence in the literature suggesting that such people actually do not always adjust well to expatriate assignments (see, e.g. Selmer and Shiu, 1999; Selmer *et al*., 2003). A key reason for this appears to relate to self-identity challenges, though it should be noted that a significant bulk of studies in this area have tended to focus on such individuals' experiences in their *ancestral homelands* (e.g. ethnic Chinese expatriates in China (Richardson and Ng, 2021), ethnic Indians in India (Jain, 2013), and Vietnamese expatriates in Vietnam (Nguyen-Akbar, 2017)), rather than as expatriates in a more *general* sense, as is our aim here. Moreover, their attention has been directed towards , and not towards how cultural diversity within their (non-ancestral) home country impacts their adjustment, which of course is what we are exploring in the present study.

2.2 Home-country cultural diversity

While within-country cultural diversity exists to some degree almost universally, minority groups generally constitute a relatively small proportion of a country's total population. In fact, among the world's countries, the second largest ethnic group accounts for, on average, 17 per cent of the total population, although this figure is even smaller in the West, where the largest minorities tend to be smaller, or to put it another way, where the majority ethnic group constitutes a larger proportion of the overall population (Fearon 2003).

Either way, international business (IB) scholars still typically refer to *national* cultures – understandably perhaps, given the nature of their field of study: inter*nation*al business. Crucially, however, what this implies is that one can generalise with a certain amount of assurance across a particular country when discussing culture. Now this may be true to an extent in many countries, but in some cases it may be somewhat misrepresentative due to the existence and prevalence of sizeable ethnic minorities, whose languages, norms, values, and religious beliefs may differ quite significantly from those held by the dominant group (Muiz 2015). In

such contexts, we may have to refrain from discussing culture at a national level, or at least tread very cautiously when doing so. In Singapore, for example – which, like Malaysia, is home to an eclectic mix of Chinese, Malays, and Indians – talk of a ubiquitous 'Singaporean' culture may at times be slightly misleading, which is why researchers frequently study ethnic groups in isolation from each other (e.g. Tsui-Auch 2004) or in a comparative manner (Osman-Gani and Tan 2002).

What does all this mean for expatriates from such countries? It is possible that persistent exposure to and interaction with people from different cultures in their homeland can leave an expatriate who hails from such a country better prepared to handle foreign assignments. For example, Crowne (2008, 2013) has shown that in-depth exposure to another culture, acquired through, say, education and/or employment abroad, has a significant influence on cultural intelligence, which of course can help facilitate adjustment (Tripathi *et al.*, 2024). In fact, even a structured study-abroad programme lasting as little as a week can result in a notable increase in cultural intelligence (Engle and Crowne 2014). We believe, therefore, that it is not unrealistic to expect an expatriate born and raised in a culturally diverse country to have a relatively high degree of cultural intelligence, and thus a particularly strong ability to adjust to an overseas assignment, even if he/she has spent only a limited time outside his/her home country.

But there is another way of looking at this, one that suggests that a multicultural background does not guarantee effectiveness across cultural contexts (Saad *et al.* 2012). For a start, the potential 'benefits' (from an expatriate adjustment perspective) of multiculturalism may not be spread evenly across the board. Although minority ethnic groups may develop a familiarity with multiple cultures owing to their regular in-group and out-group interactions and engagements, the dominant cultural group usually partakes less in cultural acrobatics, thus restricting their adaptability (Pattie and Parks 2011). Alternatively, there may be minimal

incentive or desire for cultural flexibility among either the dominant or minority communities as the prevalence of multiple, sizeable ethnic groups could lead to some form of ghettoisation, whereby the different groups live separate non-overlapping lives, interacting only minimally across ethnicities. In societies where one cultural group is particularly dominant, minorities tend to interact and engage with that group more readily due in part to the need to develop a network of trading partners. However, the value of inter-cultural networking and interaction for someone from a large minority group is much lower than it is for someone from a small minority group (Lazear 1995). Where there is limited cross-cultural communication, the different groups may gain only restricted exposure to each other, thus minimising opportunity to better understand one another, and, therefore, restricting opportunities to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to facilitate adjustment.

Take this study's home-country context, Malaysia, where the Chinese constitute more than a quarter of the population and the Indians roughly eight per cent and where the assimilation of these and other minorities has never really been a priority for decision-makers, possibly in expectation of strong resistance. Here, unsurprisingly maybe, cultural boundaries are very evident and fiercely guarded, with each group diverging from the other not only linguistically, culturally, religiously, and sociopolitically (Crouch 2001; Gill 2014; Yeoh and Yeoh 2015), but even along judicial and labour lines (Janssesns, Verkuyten, and Khan 2015). More precisely, Malaysia operates a dual legal system, with civil law aimed at the general population at large and a parallel set of Islamic/Sharia laws applicable solely for its (mainly Malay) Muslim citizens (Fulcher 2003). In terms of employment, Malay-owned companies tend to hire a predominantly Malay workforce and most Chinese-owned companies favour Mandarin-speaking Chinese staff (Guan 2005; Lee and Abdul Khalid 2016).

The existence of multiple sizeable ethnic groups is obviously a complex social phenomenon that offers both challenges and opportunities for a country and its citizens. From an IB perspective, not a great deal is known about the impact of such cultural diversity on global business activities, particularly when it comes to managers on IAs. This study seeks to address this shortcoming.

3. Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of our study, we adopted a qualitative research design (Birkinshaw, Brannen and Tung 2011; Froese 2012; Myers 2013). Although IB research has, like other areas of management inquiry, been dominated by quantitative methods, prominent figures in the field have, for more than a decade, been championing qualitative methodology due to its strength in investigating and understanding the complex and contextual world in which IB is situated (Birkinshaw *et al*. 2011; Cuervo-Cazurra, Andersson, Brannen, Nielsen and Reuber 2016). An in-depth qualitative approach is especially appropriate for studies related to culture as it enables the researcher to "go beyond stereotypical representations of cultural difference by trying to make sense of a culture's internal logic and showing how collective sense-making processes can explain an individual's actions in cross-cultural situations" (Stahl and Tung 2015, p.409). It is also widely accepted that 'how' and 'why' questions are best answered through qualitative interviewing techniques (Myers 2013; Yin 2009) because of their ability to probe deeply into a particular issue. The thick, detailed descriptions of real-world phenomena, which are unique to qualitative methods, are especially helpful in presenting a more holistic picture of the respondents' experiences of their lived worlds, and the actual meanings they ascribe to their actions and settings (Gephart 2004).

3.1 The context(s) of the study

Like Freeman and Lindsay (2012), we select Malaysia as one our research settings because of its cultural diversity, though in our case Malaysia serves as the respondents' *home* country. Although ethnic Malays constitute the majority of Malaysia's population at around 50.1 per cent, there are significant Chinese (22.6 per cent) and Indian (6.7 per cent) minorities (Wong *et al.*, 2023), with the remainder comprised of various non-Malay indigenous groups. There is also considerable religious diversity in Malaysia, with Islam, the official state religion, followed by a 'not-so-large' majority (60 per cent) of Malaysians, meaning that a 'not-so-small' minority of 40 per cent observes other religious traditions (Mohamad 2011). Thus, Malaysia fits well with our definition given earlier of a culturally diverse country – something that is in fact not entirely new (Ferrarese, 2024). Having said this, it should be remembered that all such countries have their own ways of managing the challenges and opportunities multiculturalism presents (Noor and Leong, 2001), and so Malaysia, like every other country, is not representative of all other culturally diverse countries.

On this point, and as noted earlier, a rather unique feature of Malaysia is how the minority groups have largely been able to preserve key aspects of their cultural heritage, with most Chinese and Indian children, for example, attending vernacular schools in which the medium of instruction and communication is for a large part not the national language of Malay, but rather Mandarin or Tamil (Shakir 2009). Partly as a result of this segmented schooling system, most Chinese and Indian Malaysians converse with one another not in Malay, but in one of the various Chinese languages/dialects spoken in Malaysia (increasingly Mandarin, but also Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka, among others) or in Tamil, although English is also often used among the urban middle classes. The existence of this highly segregated education system unsurprisingly results in limited opportunity for intercultural interaction (never mind

assimilation), despite the notable size of each ethnic group (Montesino 2012). Therefore, the cultural heritage of most Chinese and Indian Malaysians has not really been diluted, despite their communities' long presence in Malay-majority Malaysia. On the contrary, 'each group has maintained its cultural heritage, including language, dress, food, religion, and customs…[retaining] its own cultural identity while living and working side by side' (Merriam and Mohamad 2000, 49). In summary, the country is home to a population whose population is profoundly diverse at a cultural level, making it suited to serving as the present study's context.

Consistent with Freeman and Lindsay (2012), we also felt that Australia represented a suitable 'counter context' in which to undertake such an investigation because of its cultural distance from Malaysia. National cultural distance poses a challenge to expatriates due to the culture-based differences in work-related values and behaviour, leading to increased anxiety and stress (Froese and Peltokorpi 2011). Another interesting feature of Australia is that, despite it also being culturally quite diverse, it is more monolingual than Malaysia, with more than 70% speaking only English (the national language) at home (Mayfield, 2017). Compare this to Malaysia, where considerable numbers of people do not use the national language, preferring, for a multitude of reasons, to converse in alternative languages like Mandarin (or other Chinese dialects), Tamil and even English (see Mukherjee and David, 2011). Therefore, to really understand the role and impact of home-country cultural diversity on expatriate adjustment, it was important to select a host country that was culturally and contextually dissimilar to the expatriates' home country.

3.2 The sample

We opted for a snowball sampling approach due to the small population size (Danisman 2017; Yao 2013). More precisely, we utilised the personal networks of one of the authors and emailed potential respondents within and around the greater Brisbane area of Queensland, Australia to

formally invite them to participate in the study, highlighting also the assurance of confidentiality should they agree to participate. A number of those contacted either declined our invitation to participate or were unable to spare time for an interview. The final sample comprised seven Malaysian senior managers who were on temporary assignment in Australia for their respective organisations (i.e. they are all organisation assigned expatriates), which included both Malaysian and non-Malaysian companies (see Table 1). Three of the interviewees worked for the same Malaysian oil and gas employer, with the remainder each working for different companies. Four of those interviewed were male and three were female. Reflecting Malaysia's ethnic mix, the sample, despite its small size, was made up of an eclectic cultural group including Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Although some of the respondents had, like many middle-class Malaysians, received their tertiary education abroad, they had all spent their formative years in the country, attending local schools.

---*Insert Table 1 here*---

Based on face-to-face feedback from consultations one of the researchers had previously had with 10 other expatriates, it was understood that individuals on IAs took an average of two to three months to adjust themselves to the host-country office's operations and practices. Moreover, based on these discussions, it was explained that an average of six months was needed to familiarise oneself with the host-country's culture. Therefore, a key criterion in the selection of the respondents was that each had to have been on IA for a minimum of six months, to allow for sufficient exposure to local practices, and to facilitate a more holistic view. On this note, the respondents varied in the time they had spent as expatriates in Australia. On average, they had spent 38 months on assignment in the country, with the longest assignment period at the time of interview being five years and the shortest being just under one year.

3.3 The interview and analysis process

We developed an interview guide based on existing literature (Freeman and Lindsay 2012; Froese 2012; Yao 2013). The interviews took on an open-ended, semi-structured nature thus ensuring that all sessions addressed a common set of themes whilst also allowing each respondent some freedom to introduce new insights which had been overlooked by the authors (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri 2008). Since English is widely used as the chief business language among Malaysian executives, all interviews were conducted in English.

Before starting the interviews, each respondent was provided with an information sheet to formally get their consent, and once again they were reminded and assured of the study's confidentiality. Each interview lasted at least one hour, with the average duration being just under 79 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded, resulting in a total of 517 minutes of recorded interview data.

We opted to analyse the data manually (Basit 2003), with the first step being to personally transcribe each interview to familiarise ourselves more closely with our data (King and Horrocks 2010; Maxwell 2013). Like other qualitative studies on expatriate adjustment (Freeman and Lindsay 2012; Froese 2012), we each undertook a careful reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts, which enabled us to identify a set of recurrent themes (or codes) that emerged from the interviews to supplement the initial themes developed in the interview guide. Coding (or categorising) of substantial interview text enables researchers to organise and make sense of their data and to identify emerging phenomena within and across the interviews (Basit 2003). Our coding process involved two broad phases: the first developed mainly from the data itself, with the second-cycle coding focusing on identifying patterns and themes across the codes (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019). The coded data were then sorted into different categories according to the emergent themes. For example, there were a number of examples

recounted by the interviewees concerning things like alcohol consumption within the Australian social setting and how this was sometimes a bit discomforting for Muslim participants but not for others. These examples were grouped together and coded accordingly.

The fruits of our analysis are presented here in the form of summarised themes and selected quotations (Cuervo-Cazurra *et al*. 2016; Freeman and Lindsay 2012). To attain trustworthiness in the study, we resorted to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. To enhance credibility and dependability, we ensured that the transcriptions reflected the exact words of the respondents, which also provided us prolonged engagement with the data. Developing a strong rapport with the interviewees was also important in eliciting more authentic responses and further enhancing credibility. The purposive sampling and thick descriptions extracted from the interviews means that the respondents' experiences discussed here are, to some extent at least, representative of and thus transferable to expatriates from other culturally diverse home countries. At the very least, this allows for transferability judgements to be made. Finally, both authors read carefully through the interview transcripts to ensure that the findings were grounded in the data, thus enhancing our study's confirmability. In keeping with the general ethos of qualitative inquiry, though, we acknowledge that our findings are not generalisable, context-free truth statements.

4. Findings

Our analysis of the interview data generated two key themes: cross-cultural flexibility arising from regular cross-cultural interaction at home; and variation between expatriates who belong to ethnic minorities at home and those who belong to the dominant ethnic group.

4.1. The advantage of home-country cultural diversity in expatriate adjustment

Six of the seven participants were exposed to diverse cultures from an early (i.e. primary school) age, with the exception being Siti[1], who spent the first part of her childhood in a rural village that was, like most Malaysian villages, predominantly Malay in its demographics. However, she relocated with her family to a city with a more ethnic variation during her secondary school years where she mingled with a more diverse set of children, and therefore still gained considerable experience in cross-cultural interaction during her formative years. In their expatriate assignments in Australia, all respondents worked predominantly with Australians, though most also reported having colleagues who were from other countries – in other words, fellow expatriates.

There was unanimous recognition of the considerable cultural differences between Malaysian and Australian work environments, particularly supervisor-subordinate relations and communication. Nurul, for instance, observed that:

> *In Malaysia, you have a lot of respect for your superior. Like, whatever your superior says, you'll say "yes, boss" or "yes, I'll do it". But here, everyone just speaks their mind.*

The respondents also noted the cultural differences *outside* the office, especially the role that alcohol plays in building relationships – something that is not too common in Muslim-majority Malaysia. In light of these differences, the interviewees all acknowledged the important role their home country's cultural diversity played in facilitating their adjustment as expatriates. A recurring theme during the discussions was the role of 'understanding' and 'respect' for distinct worldviews and values, as the following statements demonstrate:

For me there wasn't much of a culture shock [when I arrived in Australia], because in primary and secondary school I had a diverse range of friends…It's fun learning about other people's language and culture. I've been doing that since I was about five or six (Steve)

When you have diverse cultures in a country – in terms of religion, race, you know…whether you like it or not, you have to spend more time building relationships. It's not always about results [in Malaysia] (Osman)

In Malaysia, you learn to respect other people's cultures, their ethics, and things like that. The Chinese have their way of doing things, the Indians have their way of doing things, the Malays have their way of doing things. We have to respect each other. The same goes for when I first moved here. We [Malaysian expatriates] may not like the way they do things, but we have to respect them…you can't expect them to change just because you don't like something (Nurul)

Having grown up in Malaysia, I learned to really respect people from difference backgrounds. I feel I respect culturally different people more than they do in Australia, which is an important skill for an expatriate (Arif)

I have no cultural inhibition working with anybody at all because from a very early age – primary school, secondary school, university – I've worked with so many different people. So, from a very young age, you know how to react to different people and to try and get as much consensus as possible and keep everyone happy (Shan)

Sticking with the religious theme for a moment, these quotes are quite revealing, with the non-Muslim participants talking about the 'fun' and 'happiness' in these types of interactions, and the Muslim participants slightly less enthusiastic about them ('whether you like it or not', the need to 'respect' these types of differences). Leaving religion aside now, the respondents highlighted how their home-country environment had equipped them with a certain amount of 'social skills' (Arif) and cross-cultural 'flexibility/adaptability' (Siti), especially in terms of adjusting their communication style to suit the particular recipient(s) of their message and 'gauging' (Shan, Steve) quite rapidly how to please someone from another culture:

> *To tie that back to a multicultural society, I think you analyse people more. When you grow up, the first thing you do is you look around you and you analyse all the people around you – 'He's Malay, he's Chinese, he's Indian; OK, that's your story, that's your story, and that's your story'. When you go overseas, you do the same thing. 'Oh, you're Australian, this is the way you communicate' or 'you're Italian, this is the way you communicate'…When you work in a team, and you have someone from a different cultural background to supervise you, it's not easy to understand what they mean when they say or do something. But when you grow up in a country like Malaysia, which is multicultural…you can actually gauge whether your [ethnically different] boss is happy with your work or not…over the last few years I've been able to use these skills that you get from growing up in a place like Malaysia* (Shan)

> *When I deal with Indian colleagues here, it's not just the language, it's also about [understanding] the culture, doing certain things to please them and*

motivate them. You have to understand that. Growing up in Malaysia has really helped me in my expatriate assignment (Aida)

Coming from Malaysia helps [as an expatriate]. You learn how to gauge other people's thought processes. That's why, anywhere I go, I find it easy to make friends. It's not magic; you need to build this [skill] from a young age (Steve)

Being a Malaysian expat, you open your eyes to different ethnic groups. Diversity has been around [in Malaysia] for a long time, whether or not you like to see it…It's about being flexible and adaptable and being more compassionate towards other people and trying to understand them better (Siti)

The way people communicate across the often-considerable cultural borders in Malaysia is quite diverse, with people often varying their language and even accent according to the recipient of a particular message. Malaysians regularly use the term *rojak*[2] as a light-hearted way of describing their assorted use of language in everyday communication. Studies suggest that speakers of multiple languages benefit from more flexible thinking (Athanasopoulos *et al*. 2015), which makes multilingualism a particularly valuable resource for managers with mobile careers (Itani, Järlström and Piekkari 2015). In Steve's experience, success as an expatriate depends a lot on adapting one's approach according to the prevailing cultural context, which he argues is something in which people from Malaysia have a natural advantage. According to a number of the respondents, Australians, irrespective of their hospitality, are far less able to vary their communicative style to suit that of their counterpart.

The participants also alluded to the importance of *competition* among the ethnic groups in Malaysia as a contributing factor to successful adjustment. As noted earlier, Malaysian society has long been highly segregated in nature – a phenomenon that both stems from and reinforces widespread stereotyping between the dominant ethnic groups, and which has long fostered intergroup tension and competition (Jenssens *et al*. 2015; Mura and Tavakoli 2014). Crouch goes so far as to state that the country's failure to achieve ethnic assimilation means that 'Malaysia seems to have most of the ingredients for continuous ethnic tension and violence' (2001, p.227). Siti, the interviewee who moved from a rural village to a culturally diverse city during her childhood and whom we introduced earlier, believes that her competitive spirit – which, she feels, has been a key factor in her successful expatriate adjustment – was moulded by this move:

> *[...] is a majority-Chinese city. I think that out of 1,000 students [at my school], 700 were Chinese and 300 were Malay. So I think that really opened my eyes because I had never been in such a situation where there were a lot more non-Malays. So I learned to compete and I think that's something that has stayed with me until now...Malaysia is a multicultural country, so you have a lot of competition among the ethnic groups. That in a way prepares you for independence during your assignment.*

Having noted this, however, our interviews suggest that the *extent* to which adjustment is facilitated by the spirit of competitiveness arising from home-country intergroup rivalry was not unanimous across the board. More precisely, with the exception of Siti, the Malay managers did not see this issue as having any major bearing on their ability to adjust during expatriate assignments. This point brings us to the second key theme that was evident in our analysis,

namely that the positive effects of home-country cultural diversity appear to be felt more keenly by ethnic minorities than those belonging to the dominant ethnic group.

4.2. Variations between ethnic-minority and ethnic-majority groups

Although all the participants acknowledged the positive effects of home-country cultural diversity on their adjustment, the interview data revealed some inconsistency between the Malay (home-country dominant ethnic group) and non-Malay (home-country ethnic minorities) managers. Firstly, as noted above, the spirit of competitiveness was an especially strong factor for Shan (ethnic Indian) and Steve (ethnic Chinese), but was only cited by one of the five Malay managers (Siti – who of course received her secondary education in a Chinese-majority school setting). This is somewhat reflective of the pattern of Malaysian society as a whole, where research has repeatedly suggested that, compared to the minority groups, the Malays favour social harmony over competition and wealth acquisition (Abdul Rashid and Ho 2003; Lim 2001; Richardson, Yaapar and Amir 2016; Richardson, Yaapar and Abdullah 2017). For some writers (Lee 2012; Lee and Abdul Khalid 2016; Montesino 2012), this might be attributed, at least in part, to Malaysia's affirmative action policies, which favour indigenous groups and Malays in terms of public university admissions, civil service recruitment, and other government incentives. It was suggested that these policies serve to instil strong survival skills among ethnic minorities whilst simultaneously minimising Malay incentives to excel. Steve explained:

> *Most [Malaysian] Chinese and Indians are very competitive. It's, like, if they work, they want to make sure they get everything right all the way. But when I see my Malay colleagues, they are a little bit laid back, like 'tak apa lah*

[it's OK], you do all the work, I'll relax'. In terms of business it's the same thing.

Shan agrees that minority groups in Malaysia tend to be more driven and competitive, arguing that these traits were developed when their forefathers first arrived on Malaysian shores and endured all manner of struggles in order to survive:

> *Working hard is not something we [ethnic minorities] are alien to. A lot of us do work hard. It goes back to our parents and grandparents – how hard they had to work when they first arrived [in what was then called Malaya]. And they still remind you about it, you know. Even people whose parents and grandparents worked in the agricultural areas in the villages – when their children live in cities now, they're reminded about where they came from. Working hard is not something we are not used to… [Given] the vision of Malaysia, which was created in 1957, and over the last 60 years [of pro-Malay government policies], we've done pretty well for ourselves.*

The pro-Malay policies highlighted here by Shan refers to the New Economic Policy (NEP), an affirmative action programme introduced in 1971 in an effort to narrow the wealth disparities that existed between the *bumiputeras* (an umbrella term that translates roughly to 'sons of the soil' and is used for the native people of Peninsular Malaysia and the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah) and the non-*bumiputeras* (that is, the Chinese and Indian minorities, though the wealth gap here referred mainly to that between the *bumiputeras* and the Chinese, not so much the Indians, who were economically much weaker than the Chinese yet still excluded from the benefits of the NEP and who therefore felt, and continue to feel, particularly aggrieved by the Policy – see Anbalakan, 2003). Though initially envisioned as a 20-year

programme, the NEP's affirmative policies "have remained in place, with marginal alterations, and Malaysia has largely evaded a thorough discourse on transitioning away from *bumiputera* preferential treatment" (Lee *et al*., 2012, p.70). More to Shan's point, there has long been a feeling among the Chinese and Indians in the country that the NEP pro-*bumiputera* policies were in fact mainly pro-*Malay* policies, by virtue of their being the largest indigenous ethnic community (Jomo, 2005), thus fuelling a spirit of strong self-determination, independence, and hard work among the two main ethnic minority groups.

The second intergroup difference that emerged from our analysis relates specifically to the cultural/religious identity of the Malays. Malay Malaysians have been followers of the Islamic tradition since around the thirteenth century. During the interviews, it became clear that adapting to a non-Muslim culture like Australia was more challenging for Malay managers due to religious differences:

> *We see Islamic values – perhaps since the 1980s – becoming more prominent compared to, say, the 60s and 70s. So there's a different set of values taking over Malays now. Due to these changes, some things have gained a foothold in the Malay community in place of other things like tolerance. It seems we [Malays] have become less tolerant than before* (Siti)

> *A lot of the Malaysians working with me here are of the Muslim faith, and there are not many things that are halal in Australia. That's been another problem for them. I know a lot of people who have struggled to survive here, and continue to struggle, because they can't adapt to the society they live in…In Australia, socialising through alcohol is a common thing, and I don't have a restriction to that, and that helps, yeah* (Shan)

> *One of the challenges in Australia for me is that during lunch time, people drink alcohol here. And obviously we [Malays] don't, right? That's been a major cultural shock for me* (Arif)

In addition to restrictions on alcohol, observant Muslims also adhere to dietary regulations, typically avoiding food that is not halal-certified. For managers like Nurul, who lives and works in a rural area located some distance out of Brisbane, finding things like halal butchers is always going to be comparatively troublesome.

By contrast, for non-Muslim Malaysian expatriates, familiarity with Muslim cultural values has actually had a positive effect, particularly in terms of working with (non-Malaysian) Muslim colleagues in Australia (Shan, Steve). It was argued that the prevalence in their home country of Islamic values has made it imperative for them to acquire a keen awareness of that religion's values and norms, thus making them more understanding of Muslim sensitivities in their IA.

Related to this, the Malay managers also expressed less willingness to assimilate and integrate with the prevailing local culture. Whereas Shan and Steve had made a point to socialise primarily with Australians and fellow expatriates and to attend cultural events, music festivals and other related activities, the Malay interviewees preferred to socialise with other Malaysians:

> *When I moved to Brisbane, I was looking for someone to speak Malay with, because sometimes you miss speaking Malay…Sometimes you just want to mingle with Malaysians. It's something that you're used to. And you want to speak the [Malay] language…I mix a lot with the Malaysian student*

community so that I can get more insights on where the halal restaurants are, where I can get this and that. (Nurul)

I don't find myself hanging out with a lot of Malaysians at all. Yeah, I've had a lot more social interactions with non-Malaysians…My philosophy is that I've come all the way to Australia to work; I'm not going to spend my time with people I already know [i.e. Malaysians]! (Shan)

To summarise, with the considerable discrepancies that exist among the ethnic groups, and particularly the higher levels of uncertainty avoidance among Malays (Hofstede 1991), it is not altogether surprising that their experiences as expatriates also diverge along ethnic lines.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study has generated two intriguing and related findings: (1) home-country cultural diversity seems to have a positive effect on expatriate adjustment, and (2) these positive effects appear to be f elevated when the expatriate in question belongs to a *minority* group in the home country. With regards to the first point, consistent exposure to sizeable cultural 'others' from a young age appears to instil certain values and skills that are useful during an IA. Studies have shown that desired leadership traits are not universal across cultures (Dickson, Castaño, Magomaeva and Hartog 2012; Mittal and Dorfman 2012) and that many expatriates have failed due to their inability to modify their management styles to fit the cultural conditions of their host country (Martinko and Douglas 1999). But individuals who are immersed in multicultural settings from an early age quickly learn the value of adjusting (and indeed *how* to adjust) communicative styles and are thus in an advantageous position over those from monocultural societies. In other words, they appear to be 'culturally agile' (Caligiuri 2023)

individuals by virtue of having lived alongside fellow citizens who, despite holding the same passport, are culturally dissimilar.

With respect to the study's second key finding, the experience of societal multiculturalism and the extent to which it impacts expatriate adjustment appears not to be uniform across ethnic groups. Across the world minorities experience a different set of societal challenges to their dominant-group compatriots. In response, many minorities continue to draw on elements of their cultural heritage whilst selectively adopting mainstream cultural resources to survive within mainstream society (Portes and Zhou 1993). In the case of Malaysia, whilst Malays are typically educated in Malay-medium schools, Chinese and Indian children very often attend Chinese and Tamil 'national type[3]' schools respectively, where Mandarin and Tamil are largely the mediums of instruction, though Malay and English are also compulsory subjects. Therefore, they have acquired certain mainstream Malaysian norms (primarily an ability to speak, if not always an enthusiasm for, the Malay language), whilst fiercely guarding pretty much all their other cultural resources. As a result, the two main minority groups emerge from the schooling system equipped with greater linguistic exposure than their Malay counterparts, thus better preparing them, in theory at least, for future cross-cultural encounters (see, e.g., Richardson and Ng, 2021). On this particular point, future researchers keen to extend the work done here might wish to explore adjustment differences among Chinese Malaysian managers in China and Indian Malaysian managers in India, possibly also comparing the experiences of what is likely to be Malay managers in state-owned enterprises working in subsidiaries abroad.

We summarise our two key findings in the form a theoretical model, as shown in Figure 1.

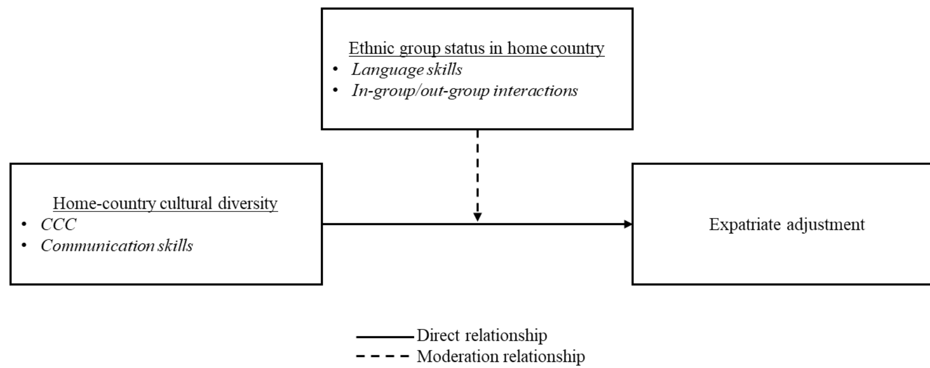

Figure 1: Theoretical model showing relationship between home-country cultural diversity and expatriate adjustment

5.2 Practical contributions

Given the high cost of expatriate failure, employers need to think very carefully about selecting managers for an expatriate assignment (Franke and Nicholson, 2002). And since cultural differences are a common source of difficulty for expatriate adjustment and success (Finken and Pilz, 2024), organisations should consider a manager's potential for effective intercultural capabilities in their decision (Potter and Richardson, 2019). Our findings suggest that firms should give strong consideration to individuals from countries that are culturally diverse, and particularly individuals who are ethnic minorities in those countries. In addition to being experienced cross-cultural communicators and collaborators, managers from culturally and linguistically diverse countries might also possess the strong drive and competitive spirit (DiRenzo *et al*., 2007) needed to adjust to expatriate life, which is often highly stressful and demanding (Stroppa and Spieß, 2011).

5.3 Limitations

Though our inquiry helps shed light on a largely unexplored area, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Whilst our interview guide focused on the role of home-country cultural diversity, it is not clear how far the individual personality traits of our respondents have

impacted their adjustment process. Our small sample also restricts generalisability from our findings, though it should be noted that we still managed to capture experiences across gender and from the Malay, Chinese, and Indian perspectives, which means there is some reasonable representation of the research context. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that statistical generalisation is not the principal objective of qualitative research, which is primarily centred on efforts to uncover "what things 'exist' rather than to determine how many such things there are" (Walker, 1985, p. 3). Moreover, the relatively small population of Malaysian company-assigned expatriates should not be overlooked and our sample size is comparable to other expatriation studies (e.g. Freeman and Lindsay 2012; McNulty 2015; Richardson, 2022b; Westropp *et al.*, 2016).

Related to this is the fact that our study was limited to just two contexts: Malaysia and Australia, both of which possess their own distinctive qualities that set them apart from other countries. Data collected from other culturally diverse nations, such as India, may very well have provided a contrasting picture, as might a study conducted in an alternative host country. To further our understanding of the phenomenon, we urge future researchers to consider alternative contextual settings to our own.

6. References

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[1] In the interests of anonymity, all names used here are pseudonyms.

[2] *Rojak* is a popular dish among Malaysians, typically consisting of a mixture of local fruit and vegetables bound together with a sticky, sweet sauce.

[3] Taken from the Malay *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan* (National Type School): *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina)*, usually abbreviated to SJK(C) and translated as '(Chinese) National Type School', and *Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil)*, likewise SJK(T) and '(Tamil) National Type School'.