



Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

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A Longitudinal Analysis

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Yaping Gong

Department of Management of
Organizations
The Hong Kong University
of Science and Technology

Song Chang

Department of Management of
Organizations
The Hong Kong University
of Science and Technology

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e-mail: mnygong@ust.hk (Y. Gong)
mncs@ust.hk (S. Chang)

THE RELATIONSHIPS OF CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT WITH DISPOSITIONAL LEARNING ORIENTATION AND GOAL SETTING A Longitudinal Analysis

YAPING GONG

SONG CHANG

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

In this article, the authors posit that dispositional learning orientation and self-set goal level are two critical motivational antecedents to cross-cultural adjustment. They collected longitudinal field data from 117 sojourning international undergraduate students. Regression results indicate that self-set academic and social-interaction goal levels are positively related to academic and social adjustment, respectively. A dispositional learning orientation is positively related to academic and social adjustment but the relationship is mediated by the self-set goal level. They discuss contributions to and implications for cross-cultural adjustment research.

Keywords: goal orientation; goal setting; cross-cultural adjustment

Scholars have long been interested in the topic of cross-cultural adjustment (e.g., Brislin, 1981), which is defined as the degree of a sojourner's psychological comfort with various aspects of a host country (e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1991). Although scholars have intensively studied the antecedents of cross-cultural adjustment (see Church, 1982; Ward, 1996), two potentially critical motivational antecedents—goal setting and dispositional learning orientation—have received little attention in the literature.

Earley and Ang (2003) posited that goals are the central motivational element in successful cross-cultural adjustment. They suggested that cross-cultural adjustment “requires not only a cognitive understanding of a new culture but also a person's motivation to engage the new culture” (p. 125). Based on goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), they further proposed that a sojourner's goal setting and the resulting goal level could serve as a critical motivational force in the cross-cultural adjustment process. Sojourning undergraduate students may pursue two central types of goals: academic and social-interaction goals. The first objective of this study is to examine the impact of sojourning students' academic and social-interaction goal levels on their academic and social adjustment, respectively.

Sojourners also bring their dispositional goal orientations to cross-cultural encounters (Gong, 2003). A dispositional goal orientation describes the general purposes individuals bring to various achievement settings (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). In a cross-sectional study, Gong (2003) examined the impact of goal orientation on cross-cultural adjustment but did not test the task-specific goal level as the mechanism through which goal orientation affects adjustment. In this study, we focus on the dispositional learning orientation. With a focus on mastery, individuals with a dispositional learning orientation seek challenges and persist in the face of setbacks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). As the second objective, we propose and test the idea that the effect of the dispositional learning orientation on cross-cultural adjustment is mediated by task-specific

goal levels. Church (1982) concluded that “consistent successful prediction of sojourner adjustment with personality variables has not yet been demonstrated” (p. 557). Our mediation approach provides one potential explanation for the inconsistent findings because the effect of dispositional variables may differ with or without the inclusion of mediating variables. Cross-cultural adjustment is temporal in nature insofar as it is a process and thus is better examined longitudinally. Therefore, we conduct our study using a longitudinal design.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

GOAL SETTING AND CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Goal-setting theory suggests that specific, difficult (but realistic) goals lead to higher performance than do easier goals or do-your-best goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). This theoretical tenet has received remarkable empirical support (Locke & Latham, 1990). Moreover, the generalizability of the theory has been substantially established. Locke and Latham (1990) concluded that the results are consistent across diverse experimental and field tasks (e.g., bargaining, driving, logging, maintenance and technical work, management work, etc.), samples (e.g., women, men, White people, Black people, managers, students, etc.), and conditions of goal setting (i.e., self-set goals vs. assigned goals).

Goal-setting theory provides a motivational explanation for why people with similar knowledge or skills still have notable variations in their performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). Sojourning students may differ in their academic and social-interaction goals. The academic goals are the sojourners’ goals for his or her academic activities (e.g., the cumulative GPA a sojourner is trying to achieve). The social-interaction goals are connected to the number of host-country friends a sojourner plans to make (the surface level) and the level of understanding of interpersonal relationships in the host country that the sojourner seeks to achieve (level of depth). As discussed below, different levels of these two types of goals may lead to different degrees of academic and social adjustment.

Goals affect the direction, intensity, and persistence of individuals’ efforts (Locke & Latham, 1990). In the cross-cultural adjustment process, sojourning students who set higher academic and social-interaction goals are more likely to focus their efforts and attention on relevant academic and social activities and are less likely to be distracted, giving them a clear sense of direction. Goals also increase the sojourners’ behavioral intensity. Sojourners setting higher goals are more likely to exert more intense effort than are their counterparts with lower goals. For example, sojourners with higher social-interaction goals may seek more opportunities to interact with host nationals in the cross-cultural adjustment process. Finally, setting higher goals is more likely to lead to persistence in cross-cultural encounters than is setting lower goals. Sojourners who set relatively easy goals are likely to exert less effort and demonstrate lower levels of persistence. To summarize, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1a: The academic goal level is positively related to a sojourner’s academic adjustment.

Hypothesis 1b: The social-interaction goal level is positively related to a sojourner’s social adjustment.

THE DISPOSITIONAL LEARNING ORIENTATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF GOAL SETTING

Goal-orientation theory focuses on distal and global dispositional traits. Individuals differ in their dispositional goal orientations and such orientations may produce either adaptive or

maladaptive motivational patterns (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Individuals with a dispositional learning orientation view their competence as malleable and focus on mastery of tasks; individuals with a dispositional performance orientation view their competence as fixed and seek to demonstrate the adequacy of their competence or avoid negative judgments of their competence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). For three reasons, we focus on dispositional learning orientation only in this study. First, cross-cultural encounters are challenging and fraught with difficulties. Because individuals with dispositional learning orientations seek challenges and persist in the face of difficulties, it is meaningful and sensible to relate the dispositional learning orientation to cross-cultural adjustment. Second, scholars are still debating about the dimensionality of the dispositional performance orientation. Some scholars measure the dispositional performance orientation as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996) and others measure it with two dimensions: approach and avoidance performance orientations (e.g., Vandewalle, 1997). Still others further distinguish between three forms of approach performance orientation (e.g., Grant & Dweck, 2003). Finally, whereas results on the positive effect of dispositional learning orientation have been quite consistent in the goal orientation literature, results on the effect of the dispositional performance orientation have not been consistent.

Goal orientation theory suggests that sojourners with a high dispositional learning orientation are more likely to seek challenges in academic and social activities. It is in the process of accomplishing challenging tasks that individuals with a dispositional learning orientation increase their competence and mastery level (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). A sojourner's cross-cultural adjustment process is often fraught with temporary difficulties (Church, 1982). How sojourners approach difficulties might have a profound impact on their adjustment (Earley & Ang, 2003). Because individuals with a high dispositional learning orientation view difficulties or setbacks in a positive light, they tend to persist in academic and social activities and to increase efforts or search for more effective strategies in the face of setbacks. Indeed, Gong (2003) found that dispositional learning orientation was positively related to both academic and social adjustment in a cross-sectional study.

Dispositional learning orientation focuses on distal and general purposes and goal setting emphasizes goals for a task at a specific level. Scholars suggest that state-like motivational variables such as goal setting might mediate the effect of dispositional traits, such as a learning orientation, on performance (e.g., Kanfer, 1990). We posit that goal setting mediates the relationship between the dispositional learning orientation and cross-cultural adjustment. Scholars rarely take the mediation approach because of the lack of attention to the mechanisms of dispositional effects in cross-cultural adjustment research (e.g., Dalton & Wilson, 2000). Gong (2003) reported that the dispositional learning orientation enhanced sojourners' cross-cultural adjustment but did not examine the mechanism of this effect.

According to goal-orientation theory, individuals with dispositional learning orientations believe that competence and mastery level can be improved through effort (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Individuals with a high learning orientation seek challenges because challenging tasks or goals offer opportunities for improving competence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Individuals with learning orientations are also able to maintain the relatively high goals they set in the face of setbacks because they see such setbacks in a positive light (e.g., setbacks provide diagnostic information for identifying effective strategies). Therefore, a dispositional learning orientation might be associated with the setting of higher academic and social interaction goals. These goals in turn motivate sojourning students to focus on tasks at hand and increase efforts. For instance, sojourning students with high dispositional learning orientations might set a more difficult social-interaction goal (e.g., to make 10 host national

friends in a year), which motivates them to interact more with host nationals, leading to better social adjustment. To summarize, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2a: The relationship between the dispositional learning orientation and academic adjustment is mediated by a sojourner's academic goal level.

Hypothesis 2b: The relationship between the dispositional learning orientation and social adjustment is mediated by a sojourner's social-interaction goal level.

METHOD

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

Our sample included 117 first-year international undergraduate students enrolling in the first academic term at a major U.S. university. The average age, length of stay in the United States (in months), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score, and high school grade point average (GPA) were 19.7, 21, 580, and 3.33, respectively. About 57% of the participants were male. Participants were from diverse areas (e.g., Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and South America), and from 25 countries or regions with the top 4 being India, Korea, China, and Taiwan.

During the 1st week of the academic term, we assessed the participants' dispositional learning orientations. We also collected information on the participants' age, sex, home countries, length of stay in the United States (in months), English language proficiency (TOEFL score), high school GPA (because they were 1st-year undergraduate students), and previous interactions with Americans. We used the home country information to calculate the cultural distance between participant's home country and the United States (see the Measures section). About 4 weeks later, participants provided academic and social-interaction goals they planned to achieve by the end of the next academic term. Finally, we assessed the participants' academic and social adjustment at the end of the academic term.

MEASURES

We used the eight-item scale developed by Button et al. (1996) (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) to measure the dispositional learning orientation. We developed our academic and social adjustment scales for sojourning international students based on Black (1988). A sample item in the academic adjustment scale is "How well adjusted are you to the instructional methods in the United States?" (1 = *not well adjusted at all*; 7 = *very well adjusted*). A sample item in the social adjustment scale is "How well adjusted are you to being associated with Americans?" (1 = *not well adjusted at all*; 7 = *very well adjusted*). We conducted a factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation with oblique direct quartimin rotation. Results clearly suggest a three-factor solution corresponding to the dispositional learning orientation, academic adjustment, and social adjustment. The coefficient alphas for the dispositional learning orientation, academic adjustment, and social adjustment were .91, .88, and .70, respectively.

We measured participants' academic goals as the cumulative GPA they planned to achieve by the end of the next academic term (from level 1 = *at least 1.7* to level 8 = *4.0*). We measured participants' social interaction goals using two items. First, participants rated their goals for making host national friends by the end of the next academic term (from level 1 = *1–2 American friends* to level 5 = *more than 10 American friends*). Second, participants rated

their goals for understanding interpersonal relationships in the United States by the end of the next academic term (from level 1 = *a little bit of understanding* to level 5 = *a complete understanding*).

We included the following control variables. In all the analyses, we controlled for age, sex, TOEFL score, high school GPA, previous interactions with Americans (from 1 = *rare* to 5 = *very frequent*), length of sojourning in the United States, and cultural distance between a sojourner's home country and the United States. To calculate the cultural distance between participants' home countries and the United States, we used Hofstede's (1980) culture scores and Kogut and Singh's (1988) cultural distance index: $CD_{jk} = S\{(D_{ij} - D_{ik})^2 / V_i\} / 4$, where CD_{jk} is the cultural distance between country j and country k (k was the United States in this study), D_{ij} is the score for country j on cultural dimension i , D_{ik} is the score for host country k on cultural dimension i , and V_i is the variance of the index for cultural dimension i .

RESULTS

We first conducted simple correlation analyses. The correlation between the academic goal level and academic adjustment was positive ($r = .38, p < .01$). The correlation between the social-interaction goal level and social adjustment was positive ($r = .53, p < .01$). The dispositional learning goal orientation was positively related to the academic goal level ($r = .30, p < .01$), the social interaction goal level ($r = .26, p < .01$), academic adjustment ($r = .23, p < .05$), and social adjustment ($r = .22, p < .05$).

We followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure to test the mediation hypotheses. Specifically, we performed the following regressions: (a) adjustment on the dispositional learning orientation, (b) goal level (mediator) on the dispositional learning orientation, (c) adjustment on the goal level, and (d) adjustment on both the dispositional learning orientation and the goal level (mediator). In all our regressions, we controlled for age, sex, TOEFL, high school GPA, previous interactions with Americans, length of sojourning in the United States, and cultural distance. We conducted each regression separately.

In regression a, the dispositional learning orientation had a positive impact on academic ($\beta = .19, p < .05$) and social adjustment ($\beta = .17, p < .05$). In regression b, the dispositional learning orientation had a positive impact on the academic ($\beta = .26, p < .01$) and social-interaction goal levels ($\beta = .23, p < .01$). In regression c, the academic goal had a significant impact on academic adjustment ($\beta = .25, p < .01$), and the social-interaction goal had a significant impact on social adjustment ($\beta = .39, p < .01$), lending support to Hypotheses 1a and 1b. Finally, in regression d, the dispositional learning orientation had no significant impact on academic adjustment ($\beta = .10, ns$) but the academic goal did ($\beta = .18, p < .05$). Similarly, the dispositional learning orientation had no significant impact on social adjustment ($\beta = .09, ns$), but the social interaction goal did ($\beta = .37, p < .01$). The combined results from regressions a through d support the mediation Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we found that a sojourner's academic goal level was positively related to his or her academic adjustment, and a sojourner's social-interaction goal level was positively related to his or her social adjustment. The dispositional learning orientation was positively related to academic and social adjustment but the relationship was mediated by

the academic and social interaction goal levels, respectively. Sojourners with a stronger dispositional learning orientation tended to set higher goals, which in turn enhanced their academic and social adjustment.

This study makes several important contributions to the cross-cultural adjustment literature. First, motivational variables have received relatively less attention in the literature. In this study, we focused on the goal-related motivational aspects of cross-cultural adjustment and provided robust support for the importance of motivational variables in cross-cultural adjustment. Second, this study makes contributions specifically to the dispositional approach to cross-cultural adjustment. Previous studies on dispositional effects have focused on the direct relationship between dispositional traits and cross-cultural adjustment. Our results indicate that omitting intervening variables leads to different results regarding dispositional effects on cross-cultural adjustment. Our mediation approach therefore provides one explanation for the inconsistent results regarding dispositional effects (Church, 1982). Furthermore, the conceptualization and subsequent test of the intervening mechanism enabled us to provide a strong theoretical and empirical explanation for the effect of the dispositional learning orientation on cross-cultural adjustment. Methodologically, cross-sectional design is often used in studies of dispositional effects. We improved the design using a longitudinal study.

Our study is not without limitations. First, we focused on academic performance goals (i.e., GPA). Our approach is not inconsistent with dispositional learning orientation theory. Individuals with a dispositional learning orientation focus on mastery, and the behavioral manifestation of mastery is to seek challenges. In other words, individuals may simply choose difficult goals or tasks because the difficult goal or task offers opportunities to increase mastery. Indeed, the dispositional learning orientation has been found to increase academic performance goal levels (e.g., Vandewalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001). Our approach is consistent with goal-setting theory and research, which has been mainly focused on performance goals. It is also difficult to measure academic learning goals when one examines the overall academic adjustment of students with diverse backgrounds and course work. Ideally, a future study may examine both academic learning and performance goals. Second, one of our social interaction goals (i.e., understanding of interpersonal relationships in the United States) was not specific enough. In goal-setting studies, goals are often very specific quantitatively (e.g., reduce cost by 20%). It is difficult to quantify an understanding of interpersonal relationships. Because specific goals are more powerful than not-so-specific goals, our result regarding the impact of the social-interaction goal on social adjustment should be more conservative.

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Yaping Gong received his PhD in human resource management and organizational behavior from The Ohio State University. He is currently an assistant professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. His research interests include cross-cultural adjustment, international human resource management, strategic human resource management, multinational teams, and goal-orientation theory.

Song Chang is a PhD candidate at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. His research interests include strategic human resource management in China, culture, and goal orientation.