

Human Communication. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association. Vol. 11,
No. 4, pp.505 – 522.

**Communication Experiences of American Expatriates in South Korea:
A Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

Yang-Soo Kim, Ph. D., Associate Professor

Department of Speech & Theatre

Middle Tennessee State University

MTSU P.O. Box 43

Murfreesboro, TN 37132

(Phone) 615-494-8756

(Fax) 615-898-5826

(E-Mail) yskim@mtsu.edu

Abstract

The present study examines the communication experiences of American expatriates in South Korea. Y. Y. Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005) Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory provides the basis for offering an explanation of the linkage between the communication competence and psychological health of American expatriates vis-à-vis the South Korean sociocultural milieu. The analysis uses portions of verbal transcripts obtained through 20 in-depth personal interviews between June and September 2002. The results show that cultural differences reflected in verbal/nonverbal behaviors and work styles are important sources of psychological challenge for the American expatriates. The majority of American respondents reported that positive and genuine relationships/friendships with host nationals (i.e., Koreans) contribute to their positive and rewarding life experience overseas. As Kim's theory predicts, the overall outcome of the study affirms that communication is the central force in the adaptation of expatriates by promoting psychological health in an unfamiliar host cultural environment.

Key Terms: Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Host Communication Competence, Host Interpersonal Communication, Psychological Health

The Problem

The business environment is becoming increasingly global. To implement global corporate strategies and manage subsidiaries, many companies dispatch employees, particularly managerial and professional personnel, on overseas assignments. The number of expatriate assignments has been increasing and this trend is expected to continue (Windham International, 1998). In 1999, 80% of midsize and large companies sent professionals abroad, and 45% planned to increase the number of employees on foreign assignment (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Like other sojourners, business expatriates immerse themselves in a new, unfamiliar cultural environment. For such employees and their families, adjusting to life overseas poses a significant hurdle (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Tung, 1988).

Nearly 40% of American expatriates return early (Kealey, 1996), owing to the inability to adjust to a foreign cultural environment rather than to a lack of technical competence (Stroh, Dennis, & Cramer, 1994; Kramer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001). This retention failure incurs serious costs to both companies and individual employees. Early termination of just one expatriate costs an American company as much as \$1 million (Shannonhouse, 1996), in addition to various non-financial costs such as damaged reputation, lost business opportunities, and lost market or competitive shares (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Copeland & Griggs, 1985; Naumann, 1992; Shannonhouse, 1996). Withdrawal from international assignments is found to be costly for expatriates and their families as well, resulting in diminished self-esteem, impaired relationships, and interrupted careers, in addition to a possible adverse impact on qualified co-workers (Stroh, 1995; Tung, 1988).

Practical concerns such as these have been the primary driving force behind an extended body of sojourner studies. Many studies have approached the phenomenon of expatriate adjustment from the perspective of "culture shock" (e.g., Oberg, 1960; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Some studies have generated conceptual models to examine the process and mechanisms of expatriate adjustment, highlighting the roles of attribution, uncertainty reduction and expectations (e.g., Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Black, 1992). Other studies have identified specific factors that promote expatriate adjustment, including personality traits (e.g., Harrison et al., 1996; Shaffer et al., 2006;), spousal or family adjustment (e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1991; Torbiorn, 1982), cultural novelty (e.g., Dunbar, 1994; Stroh, Dennis, & Cramer, 1994; Van Vianen et al., 2004), organizational support (e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1991; Gomez-Meija & Balkin, 1987; Kramer & Wayne, 2004; Krell, 2005), previous international experience (e.g., Selmer, 2002; Takeuchi et al., 2005), and job characteristics (e.g., Aycan, 1997; Guy & Patton, 1996).

However, driven primarily by practical needs and interests such as selection, training and repatriation, most expatriate adjustment studies have been descriptive and atheoretical (Aycan, 1997). Factors of interpersonal and mass communication activities and of the host environment itself have not been examined. As noted by Shaffer, Harrison, and Gilley (1999), such studies have tended to address only a small number of factors as antecedents while excluding many other factors that are likely to influence the sojourner adaptation process. In addition, most of studies are quantitatively oriented on this topic.

The present study investigates the communication experiences of American business expatriates in South Korea to explore qualitative insight into their process of cross-cultural adaptation. Based on subjective accounts of adaptation experiences, the study examines how the American expatriates' communication experiences are related to their psychological well-being vis-à-vis their host cultural milieu (i.e., Korean society). Specifically, the important related

issues were posed as the following three research questions: (1) What kinds of contact and communication activities do American expatriates have with local people?; (2) What kinds of communication-related difficulties do American expatriates face?; and (3) What is the overall feeling and life experience of American expatriates in their host cultural milieu? The present analysis utilizes verbatim transcripts from face-to-face, in-depth interviews, conducted in South Korea between June and September 2002.

Theoretical Grounding

Guiding this investigation is Y.Y. Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005) Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory. Grounded in an open systems perspective, Y. Y. Kim's theory (1988, 2001, 2005) approaches cross-cultural adaptation not as a specific analytic unit (or variable) but as the entirety of the evolutionary process an individual undergoes vis-à-vis a new and unfamiliar environment. Cross-cultural adaptation is therefore explained in terms of a dynamic interplay of the person and the environment. By placing adaptation at the intersection of the person and the environment, Y. Y. Kim defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (Y. Y. Kim, 2001, p. 31). Implicit in this definition is the goal of achieving an overall person-environment "fit" that entails "almost always a compromise, a vector in the internal structure of culture and the external pressure of environment" (Sahlins, 1964, p. 136).

Based on this systemic conception of cross-cultural adaptation, the theory addresses two basic questions: (1) *What is the essential nature of the adaptation process individual settlers undergo over time?* and (2) *Why are some settlers more successful than others in attaining a level of fitness in the host environment?* The first question is addressed in the form of a *process model* that presents a three-pronged psychological movement Y. Y. Kim refers to as the *stress-adaptation-growth dynamic* — a movement in the generally forward and upward direction of increased chances of success in meeting the demands of the host environment. The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic is not explained as playing out in a smooth, steady, and linear progression, but in a dialectic, cyclic, and continual "draw-back-to-leap" pattern. The spiral model explains that humans, as open systems, have the natural tendency to resist evolution accompanied by the destruction of the old structure. This tendency manifests itself in various forms of psychological resistance, such as selective attention, denial, avoidance and withdrawal, as well as in compulsively altruistic behavior, cynicism and hostility. Yet, no open system can stabilize itself forever. If it were so, nothing would come of evolution. The state of misfit and a heightened awareness in the state of stress serve as the very same forces that propel individuals to overcome the predicament and partake in the active development of new habits. What follows the dynamic stress-adaptation disequilibrium, according to the theory, is subtle *growth*. Periods of stress pass as settlers work out new ways of handling problems, owing to the creative forces of self-reflexivity of human mentation.

Building on the process model, the theory turns to the second basic question: "Why do some settlers adapt faster than others?" or "Given the same length of time, why do some settlers attain a higher level of adaptation?" Integrating various factors addressed by different investigators as constituting and/or predicting differing levels or rates of adaptive change, Y. Y. Kim (1988, 2001, 2005) addresses this question in a structural model, depicted in *Figure 1*. The core of this structure is the dimension of personal communication, or *host communication competence* (Dimension 1), which is defined as the cognitive, affective and operational capacity to communicate in accordance with the host communication symbols and meaning systems. This

dimension serves as the very engine that pushes individuals along the adaptive path. Inseparably linked with host communication competence are the activities of *host social communication* (Dimension 2), through which strangers participate in interpersonal and mass communication activities of the host environment. Activities of *ethnic social communication* (Dimension 3) provide distinct, subcultural experiences of interpersonal and mass communication with fellow co-ethnics. Interacting with the personal and social (host, ethnic) communication activities are the conditions of the *host environment* (Dimension 4), including the degrees of receptivity and conformity pressure in the local population as well as the strength of the ethnic group. The individual's *predisposition* (Dimension 5) — consisting of preparedness for the new environment, proximity (or distance) of the individual's ethnicity to that of the natives, and the adaptive personality attributes of openness, strength, and positivity — influences the subsequent development in personal and social communication activities.

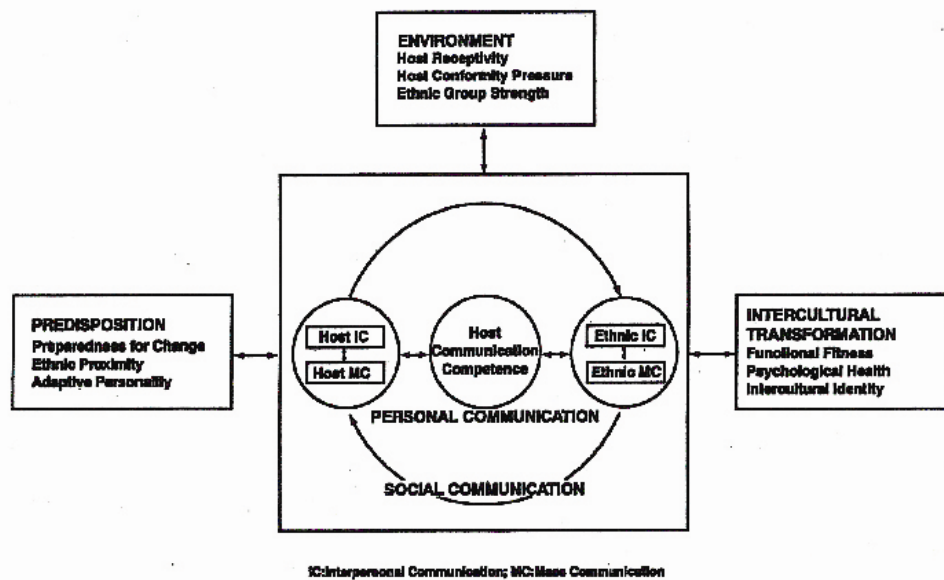


Figure 1. Y. Y. Kim's Structural Model: Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Source: Y. Y. Kim, 2001, p. 87).

Together, all of the factors identified above directly or indirectly contribute to explaining and predicting differential rates or levels of *intercultural transformation* (Dimension 6) within a given time period. The theory identifies three key facets of intercultural transformation: increased functional fitness, psychological health and the emergence of an identity orientation that reaches beyond a single culture. The level of intercultural transformation, in turn, helps to explain and predict the levels of all other dimensions. The six dimensions of factors together constitute an interactive and functional model, in which all the linkages indicate mutual stimulations (and not unidirectional causations), identified in 21 theorems (see Y. Y. Kim, 2001, pp. 91-92).

Methods

The present study is based on an analysis of verbatim transcripts from in-depth personal interviews conducted with American expatriates in South Korea between June and September 2002.

Participants

The participants in this study were American expatriate employees working in joint ventures, overseas branch offices, and multinational corporations located in South Korea.

For the interview, participants were selected by using a quota sampling method. Twenty American respondents were chosen from among those who had completed a questionnaire survey, based on the respondents' age and length of stay. (A survey of 105 American expatriates was the first stage of research; findings from the survey are not included for this analysis) (See Y.S. Kim, 2003; Kim & Kim, 2004; Kim & Kim, 2005; Kim & Kim (in press) for findings from the survey).

Fifteen respondents out of 20 American interviewees were male (75%) and five were female (25%). The average age of the American interviewees was 35.7 years old ($SD = 11.9$ years; range: 21-61 years old) while the average length of stay in South Korea was 3.9 years ($SD = 3.2$ years; Range: 7 months-14 years). Fourteen interviewees had a bachelor's degree (70%), five had a master's degree (25%) and one had a doctoral degree (5%). Five interviewees (25%) had lived in a foreign country before going to South Korea and eight (40%) had had intercultural training before being assigned to this international assignment.

The Interview Procedures

To avoid interviewer bias and to obtain candid opinions about the American interviewees' individual adaptation experiences as well as frank impressions toward Korean people and Korean society, an American interviewer was recruited, and the investigator and the recruited interviewer had a full day of intensive training. The American interviewer was a 24-year-old male student studying international relations at a university in South Korea. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted person-to-person, and the other five were a focus group interview because of time constraints and interviewees' personal preferences. The interviews mostly took place outside of work, such as at restaurants, coffee shops, or residences, during lunchtime or after work. It took approximately 40 minutes each.

The interviews began with an exchange of personal information (i.e., age, gender, length of stay, education, etc.) after each interviewee had signed the consent form. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in their entirety, with the written consent of the interviewees.

Among the topics covered in the interview, open-ended interview questions dealt with the main research variables in the study: communication ability and communication-related difficulties with local people ("host communication competence"), experiences of interacting with local people ("interpersonal communication"), and overall feelings and positive/unpleasant life experiences in the host country ("psychological health").

Regarding *host communication competence*, questions included different communication styles the interviewees found between communicating with co-ethnics and communicating with host nationals ("It is likely you have opportunities to interact with Korean people both in and outside of your work. Do you find any differences between communicating with Americans and communicating with Koreans?") and communication-related difficulties they experienced when interacting with local people both at work and outside the workplace ("Have you ever experienced difficulties in communicating with Korean people in or outside of the work environment?"). Based on the responses, follow-up questions were used to elicit specific incidents and typical experiences illustrating these differences and difficulties, along with coping strategies used to deal with these difficulties.

With respect to *interpersonal communication*, one question was asked to indicate the amount of daily interaction with host nationals both at work and outside the workplace ("Of

all your daily conversations (at work or outside work), approximately what percentage of them do you have with Korean people?”). Another question was asked about the purpose and nature of these interactions (“In what capacities and for what reasons, both in and out of work, do you interact with Korean people?”), followed by a question about the types of social activities they engage in with host nationals (“What kinds of socializing do you do with Korean people?”).

Concerning *psychological health*, the interviewees were asked to describe their positive and/or unpleasant life experiences while living in the host country (“What are some of the positive/unpleasant experiences you have had while living in South Korea so far?”), their general feelings about their life in the host country (“Overall, how are you feeling about your present life in South Korea as regards your life experiences interacting with Koreans in and outside work?”), and their desire to return to the country after this assignment (“If you have another chance to work overseas in the future, would you like to come back to Korea?”). Follow-up questions were used to allow the respondents to provide specific reasons why they wanted or did not want to return to the host country.

Results

Interview data were analyzed based on a portion of the qualitative verbal responses which were relevant to the interviewees’ personal adaptation experiences in the host environment. The interviewees’ comments and testimonials in response to the interview questions serve as the basis for addressing the three research questions posed above: (1) to identify the communication-related difficulties that American expatriates experience in relating to local people; (2) to investigate the kinds of contact and communication activities that American expatriates have with local people; (3) to identify the overall feelings that American expatriates have toward their life overseas.

In analyzing qualitative interview data, all questions and responses to open-ended questions were transcribed in their entirety by American transcribers. After transcription, the verbatim data were grouped into common categories based on emerging themes of communication difficulties, interpersonal contact and communication, and overall feelings and intercultural experiences in South Korea.

Profiles of Interviewees

A brief profile of five of the twenty interviewees is presented in the following. These five respondents represent all 20 respondents in terms of line of business.

Interviewee #1. He is a white male in his mid-fifties, holding a master’s degree. His total length of stay in South Korea is 7 years. He came to South Korea and stayed for two years prior to this assignment and had been in South Korea for five years at the time of the interview. His current job title is President and CEO of a language consulting company. His job entails defining marketing strategy, developing products like language training methods and software, managing the customer support process and teaching a foreign language (i.e., English). He had lived in Italy for three years before he went to South Korea and has traveled in 22 different countries to do consulting work. He did not take any intercultural training program before going to South Korea. He was very supportive and open-minded about the interview and knows a lot about Korean culture. He has a variety of interpersonal ties with Koreans through church activities. He speaks a little Korean, but not fluently. In his own cultural journey, he believes that he should change because he is a guest to the Korean culture.

Interviewee #2. He is a white male in his mid-forties. He had been in South Korea for almost ten years at the time of the interview. He has his bachelor’s degree and is President and Executive Director of a consulting company. His job involves consulting about manpower in the

organization including recruiting, networking, and marketing. He had never lived in a foreign country before going to South Korea and never had any intercultural training prior to his international assignment. He knows a little Korean vocabulary and has many Korean friends and a variety of personal networks in and out of his work. Through his intercultural experience for his 10-year stay, he is very insightful and knowledgeable about Korean culture and customs. He even writes about the Korean culture in a Korean newspaper (English version).

Interviewee #3. She is a white female in her early fifties. She has a bachelor's degree and has been in South Korea for almost four years. She is a merchandise and administration manager in a big distribution company, so she is in charge of inventory control, importation, vendor agreement, and new store planning. She had been in China for three years prior to this international assignment in South Korea. Regarding the training/orientation, she has received language training in Spanish. As she works with mostly Korean staff members, she has full interaction with Koreans at her work.

Interviewee #4. She is a white female in her early fifties. She has a bachelor's degree and is an Executive Director of an organization supporting overseas chamber activities. She is responsible for managing day-to-day operation of the organization, which includes supervising a Korean staff and foreign employees for briefings, production, and marketing of all the publications of the company. She has been in South Korea for 14 years and had lived in Germany prior to going to South Korea. She did not have any intercultural training before her international assignment. She does not speak any Korean. She socializes mostly with Koreans, including employees, friends, government officials, etc., in and out of work, and she attributes her very positive experience to her deep friendships with local people.

Interviewee #5. He is a white male in his early thirties, holding a bachelor's degree. He had been in South Korea for seven months at the time of the interview and is an English instructor at a Korean company. He speaks a little Korean – enough to converse with local people. He is single and has a Korean roommate. He had not lived in a foreign country and had not received any intercultural training before he went to South Korea. As an English teacher, he is frequently exposed to the local environment by interacting with Korean students and his supervisor in and out of work. He has a very positive perception of Korean people and culture. However, he comments that he is annoyed by the attitude of local people who treat him only as a tool to practice English.

Results of Interviews with Americans

Communication-related Difficulties

In response to the questions about communication differences and difficulties, most American interviewees comment that even though lack of host language competence presents some difficulty/misunderstandings in daily life (e.g., using taxi), language competence does not pose a serious difficulty because it is not expected by Koreans that much. One interviewee comments that very little pressure is put on foreigners to reach an expected level of competence: “In America, we expect too much concerning a foreigners’ language ability. Koreans are not expecting a non-Korean to speak some Korean even though they would be impressed with you. Whatever you say might be horrible Korean and they would complement you—that’s wonderful...Koreans are very, very nice.”

Most of the challenges come from different verbal/nonverbal behavior and work (business) styles. Regarding verbal behaviors, one American interviewee responds that unclear and ambiguous verbal expression and feedback might be the most frustrating experience in his communicating with Koreans. He describes:

Now I have to say I still once in a while get surprised where I thought something was really

understood because there's the other factor which the typical pride of a Korean businessman will not let him say "I didn't understand what you just said, can you repeat that please." The typical businessman will just sit there, nodding head...pretend to understand and when it's all said and done say "Well, do we have an agreement? Yes." Not exactly. It's not exactly, there's no agreement.

Another interviewee explains it this way:

Sometimes when you may ask a Korean a question, a simple question or a conversation or something and they may say yes. And their yes means something different than it would to Americans. To Americans you would assume that the yes in the conversation means yes I understand, yes, I agree, and yes I will do as you suggested. But with Koreans their yes means perhaps sometimes only yes I hear you.

Clearly, this ambiguous or sometimes indirect communication style of Koreans could be connected to their face-saving strategy, and the different verbal norms can cause confusion and misunderstandings for the American expatriate in and outside of work.

In addition, two interviewees reported the lack of social chit-chat as one of the different styles of verbal behavior:

Even though I have lots of Korean friends and I meet with them, we don't have a language problem but we do have a culture problem. Cause we go and we'll go out for the weekend or something and we'll hang out together and just, I want to just chit-chat "how's everything going" but that doesn't exist.

In the United States, I would be very comfortable in sitting down with somebody, we call it 'chit-chat' for two or three minutes, and then we can get to the heart of the matter...There's no concept of chit-chatting...You know, the foreigner says "Hey, how ya doing, how's everything going?" It's very friendly, it's inclusive, it draws you into the conversation and immediately feel good and feel relaxed, that concept doesn't exist. So that's something that's really hard to overcome.

In addition to the lack of clarity in Korean verbal behavior, one American interviewee points out that the use of proper language based on status is a source of difficulty in communicating with people of different positions in the organization. To many Americans, it is challenging to show greater restraint when addressing someone of higher status.

Yeah, there are some differences. I think you have to be more careful of who you're speaking to in Korean because if there's somebody that is like, has a higher position or something, you have to be very careful what you say. And in the U.S., I sometimes feel like you can be a little more frank about if something is wrong. Or something. But yeah, it's difficult to tell someone they're wrong if they're a superior.

Another interviewee explained:

I think the levels of the language. Yeah, honorifics, that kind of things, because of course in English, you don't speak to like an elderly person exactly the same as you speak to your friend. But it's not as defined and clear-cut as Korean, like you can really offend someone in Korea by just...YOU...Yes, if you say 'you' to them. It seems like uh...it's harder for people to get closer to each other.

Obviously, addressing a person properly according to different positions in Korean business firms is one of the very important social rules in Korean society, which emphasizes hierarchy. The violation of this norm could inhibit furthering the relationship and effective communication.

Along with verbal behavior, one interview expressed his frustration regarding personal space (nonverbal behavior):

In the United States, your personal space extends out about 18" from you. If anybody gets closer than 18" from you, it's perceived as an invasion...yea you feel threatened...I am talking about just the ordinary, everyday moving along the street kind of thing. In Korea, there isn't any such thing. My personal space ends at my skin. ...the business of brushing up against people in the street. When I go back to the United States, I've got to be very, very careful to maintain my two foot personal space because I don't think anything now of bumping up against somebody in the elevator or on the street...if you do that in the United States, you better turn

around and say “Oh excuse me” or you might get shot.

In addition, Americans identify different work (business) styles as challenging. An American interviewee comments that the work style of Koreans is relationship-oriented. Thus, in South Korea, it is important to establish a personal relationship before one delves into a discussion of business matters. He states:

It’s much more difficult here because we have to establish a relationship here first..., for the first two or three meetings to really be insubstantial in terms of business; we’re feeling each other out, learning how to relate to each other, that sort of thing...One is the Korean culture tends to emphasize the relationship and to say “we’ll push the details off until we have to solve them.” The Western culture tends to look at the details upfront and try to say “If A, then B, if C then D, if E then F.” And my Korean friends look at me really weird and says “Hey, wait a minute, we’re friends aren’t we?” Well, figure that one out and we’ll do what’s right, and that can cause problems if either one of us is insistent on doing things our way.

Another interviewee reported his experience in more detail:

It was a consulting contract here in Korea...we negotiated a very defined set of deliverables on the project and we got about 18 months into this project and some of the deliverables started to come due and my counterpart on the Korean side started saying things like “you must do this.” And I said, “wait a minute, that’s not in the contract.” “I don’t care, you must do this, because I need it now.” And finally after about 3 months of increasingly acrimonious discussions, my Korean counterpart said “you know, let me just tell you something. I’ve never read the contract. I don’t care what the contract says, this is what I need.” And that point a light bulb went off in my head and I said “Oh, he’d never read the contract.” I’m sitting here operating on the assumption that my customer is going to be upset if I don’t deliver A,B, C and D because that’s what’s in the contract. And my customer is saying, I don’t need A and B anymore, I need G and H...So there was this cultural difference in communication. Fortunately, we had been out and had enough meals together and had enough relationship that we got through that but I can easily imagine a different situation, different scenario, where that would have resulted in just a blow-up of a relationship.

It is clear that in Korean business culture, to establish a relationship in the initial stage is an important step in doing business. As a result, there are unclear or blurred boundaries between public and private affairs, and formal business and friendship could be intermingled into a single business domain. American expatriates could view this as very ineffective and incomprehensible, since they tend to emphasize directness and a clear distinction between public and private affairs.

In addition, one interviewee comments on the different communication style in Korean corporate culture:

Westerners, at least my experience is, that difficult issues are brought up. Okay, it’s better to bring them out in the open and then tackle them. So, it’s not about, I don’t bring an issue up to damage someone, we bring it up so that we can discuss it and come to a common solution. Where here it’s very hierarchical; there are lots of fear in terms of saying something that might damage your reputation and relationship. Also there’s protocol here -- protocol which is interesting. I would say [in the U.S.] it’s not uncommon for someone who is a lower level manager, for example, to be able to go and say something to a president or vice-president. Not a problem. It’s an open door type environment. Where in Korea there’s a chain of command. So the manager reports you know to the senior manager and eventually it gets to the top.

Host Interpersonal Communication (Contact and Communication Activities)

When examining host interpersonal ties, the Americans report having a variety of interactions with Koreans in and out_of_work contexts. Social activities that Americans have with Koreans include a wide range of activities, such as dinner, golf, movies, trips, parties, and church. Most of the American interviewees express that all their interpersonal relationships with Koreans are very meaningful in their life in South Korea. Most of the Americans indicate that

the meaningful friendships and hospitality of local people are the most positive and pleasant experiences contributing to their life satisfaction overseas. The Americans stipulate that even though it is not easy to get to know Koreans in the initial stage, after becoming friends, the relationships are very meaningful. With this positive experience, most of the American interviewees imply that they would be interested in coming back to work in South Korea in the future.

Two interviewees comment on different concepts of friendship in Korea:

I think the friendship thing is a big difference in that Americans sometimes might think that Koreans are cold and distant or that we know that they don't want to make friends but that is really part of their culture whereas the definition of a friend in Korean is different than the definition of a friend in America. We [Americans] call a friend a general acquaintance...Koreans are very guarded with who they call a friend, who they make a friend, who they talk to, who they share with, so that the friends are much more in-depth. So much more of a commitment and much more of a long-term relationship. You know that once you made it, it is established. That's it. For life. So that is a big difference. So they slowly let you in to that type friendship but once you have it, it is there for life. And the Americans have had really good experience with this once they have made a good Korean friend that has kept in touch with them. They have been friends for life. They really care about each other. So that is a new experience I think for Americans."

Well first of all I think they treat us better than we treat them and that is because of our individualist society thinking, which is pretty common in America versus the Korean more what we call "*Chung*" ("*tender feelings*") in Korea, more true friendships and more caring of the community or groups. So those cultural difference mean something.

Several interviewees comment about their experience with relationships/friendships with local people:

Some of the Korean friends I've made are, I think, among the truest of the friends I have. There again, the sense of how you get to friend is different but once you're there, the sense of bonding and the strength of the relationship is stronger. It's almost the same as a brother in the United States.

The positive is almost all about the people. Um, they let you know they're just supportive; they'll do things for you. Once you know them they're so awesome, they can be the warmest people in the world I think... Korean people are great...I would want to go someplace else. But I'll always have a warm place in my heart for Koreans. Not so much for KOREA but for KOREANS.

Every day is a positive experience. I had back surgery here. And my family was in the United States. I had so many Korean people come to the hospital, volunteer to come to stay with me at my house, or come to my house every day. Even total strangers, when you're walking on a street, if you look lost, if you're looking at a map, Koreans will stop and help you.

I think people are generally nicer, more complimentary. It's appreciative. I've had incredibly deep friendships. I think deeper because they're expected to go deep as opposed to...I think Americans have casual, shallow relationships. Friendships here MEAN SOMETHING.

Clearly, the Americans have a variety of personal contacts and relationships with local Korean people both in and outside the work context. The Americans are satisfied with the personal relationships with local people at the deep friendship level. The deep friendship and hospitality of local people clearly relates to the fact that Americans are welcomed and perceived positively in South Korea, and Korean society provides Americans with full interaction potential.

While American respondents indicate meaningful relationships as a positive life experience, many American interviewees also perceive themselves as outsiders, not mingling into Korean society. Some interviewees express their feelings on this issue:

I think sometimes that the Koreans are...kind of weird. Say like in Korea we say that there are no minorities because the Koreans are the majorities. So they separate it more like Koreans or foreigners. So there are some people that like to separate the two and like just think that you know. We are the Koreans of our country, you are foreigners, you are visitors here.

There is a perceived benefit to the relationship, then Koreans like you...People will reach out to you and say "Oh let me be your friend." But it's, it's what I say, is that's human nature, it is amplified by the Confusion ethic of being the in-group or the out-group. Those two groups are so far apart on the spectrum and there's no middle ground."

If in America, you will be treated as an American, there's no particular American face...There's an Asian American Korean, you know African Americans, and what have you, where here there's just Korean and non-Korean and so there's automatic distinction...Korean means Korean facial features.

So, yeah, I am always aware that I am a foreigner. There's no way that I have a sense that I've blended into the society and people...And there's no way that I can accomplish that in Korean society. Even if I could speak with a flawless Korean accent, unless I'm just talking on the telephone, I'd still stand out."

Even if you're close with people, I mean, you don't get like in the U.S...If there is...a holiday, you would invite that person [stranger] to spend Easter with you or to spend Christmas or Thanksgiving Day with you...Has anybody here been invited to *Chusuk* [Korean Thanksgiving Day] or to *Sul-Nal* [Lunar New Year Holiday]? No! Right? It's like we feel bad for you but we're not going to invite you to the family gathering. You will never, you know, be a part of it.

While Americans are highly welcomed and well treated by Koreans, Americans perceive themselves as foreigners and not as an integrated part of the Korean society, based on a clear distinction between Koreans and Americans.

Psychological health

Most American respondents reported that their life in South Korea is very positive and rewarding. In their own personal examples, they feel they are welcomed and treated very well by Koreans. Not only are Americans favorably treated, but also in being American there is prestige and the privilege to receive special treatment. The interviewees even feel that Koreans treat them much better than Koreans treat other Koreans.

One interviewee explains:

Me as an American? Um, I feel like it's usually positive. The interaction. But I also feel like I'm an American I get treated a little bit more specially... positively and not equally....I think mainly because...in social linguistics we learned about like prestige and because there's an attitude that there's English speakers that are American and are white are viewed more positively by Koreans overall...one of the most frequent ones they want is to learn English from you. Mostly English."

Three interviewees provide their own impressions about being American and the favoritism and hospitality toward Americans in South Korea:

My first impression was one of astonishing warmth. I just think about just every day, getting on the elevator for example, people will, in my apartment complex, people will almost always defer, say 'you go first.' There are a few exceptions. So it's hard to pinpoint it because it's mostly in attitude or a smile where I'll see somebody will smile at me but I notice that they won't smile at the next person [Koreans]. So that's how I differentiate that there's this attitudinal difference.

The people are very warm. I think they have generally been very interested and very hospitable to Americans. More than Americans are hospitable to them [Koreans] when they come to America.

So I have felt very welcome in that aspect, that just because I am American, you know, I sort of represent something because I am from America. But that is maybe less with the younger

people.

One interviewee reported that the most pleasant experience is the relationship with her co-workers during her sojourn:

The most memorable and most positive to me are when I can know that I've had a positive influence in someone's life and one of my Korean co-workers has shared with me that she doesn't want me to leave. She wants me to stay. She feels that I have been such a good mentor to her that it is actually a really warm relationship and you know I could only think such nice things. When you could know that you've impacted someone's life like that, where it's their life tomorrow and in the future not only of work but with their family and all their relationships is forever changed because you had a small part in their life, it can be so meaningful. Such a very positive thing.

In contrast to this positive life experience, however, most Americans are keenly aware that the business environment is tough, and those are the factors contributing to a challenging life experience. With regard to the business environment, two respondents describe their impressions thus:

While employees [Korean co-workers] at my company are very open, communicative, friendly and cooperative, government policy towards multi-nationals is non-transparent and hostile. If I was therefore asked about the business climate or foreign investment opportunities, my responses would be overwhelmingly negative.

Well, the last one from a business point of view, is the constantly changing regulations. Actually that's not really true. It's the constantly changing interpretations of the regulations. Because the people you go to, if they don't know, rather than ask or look it up, they make it up. And so it's very difficult to figure out what to do...because I know how to do business in the United States, I can pick up the phone and you know, there's central information places where I can call and find out what do I do, how do I do this. You can't do that here. There's nobody to call. There's nowhere to go.... Even something like, officially has a function, the Ombudsman in Seoul...I've been totally frustrated with both the Ombudsman and the Seoul Metropolitan Office. Not that people weren't trying to be helpful because they definitely were. But they couldn't give the answer I wanted or that I needed...It has to do with the lack of meshing of the governmental approach in Korea versus the United States....And that's a constant irritant to me as a business man.

Discussion

The purpose of the present analysis has been to examine the communication experience of American expatriates in South Korea in the process of individual adaptation. Y. Y. Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005) Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory has served as the basis for examining communication activities which have been posed as three research questions: (1) What kinds of contact and communication activities do American expatriates have with local people? (2) What kind of communication-related difficulties do American expatriates have? and (3) What is the overall feeling and life experience of American expatriates in their host cultural milieu?

The present analysis is based on the data from face-to-face in-depth personal interviews conducted in South Korea between June and September 2002. The results of the study show that for American interviewees, cultural differences have played out in different verbal/nonverbal behaviors and work (business) styles, which present intercultural challenges. In verbal behaviors, the indirect/ambiguous communication style and the degree of formality in use of language depending on the position in an organization are revealed as sources of communication difficulty. Different rules in proxemics in Korean culture frustrate American respondents.

Culture differences are also reflected in work styles, as the relationship-oriented business style presents a challenge to American respondents who are more used to individualistic culture, emphasizing clear boundaries between life in and outside work and between private life and public affairs (i.e., work). This American cultural orientation even played out during the

interview process. When the interviewer had an interview with American business people, most of the interviews took place at a restaurant, a hotel coffee shop, the respondent's residence, or an office during lunch hours or after work. This reflects the American culture, which sets a clear distinction between private life and organizational tasks. In addition, the typical hierarchical structure in Korean corporate culture presents a challenge to American respondents who are used to egalitarian, individualistic American culture.

Host language competence (i.e., Korean) is revealed as not being a source of communication difficulty for American expatriates. As reported in other research (Kim & Kim, 2004), coupled with strong ethnic group strength and national power and low host conformity pressure in Korean society, the language competence is not a big stumbling block that hinders intercultural communication. Most American expatriates speak English to communicate with people during their stay in Korea.

In their interaction with host nationals, American expatriates seem to have a variety of personal contacts and relationships with local people both in and outside the work context. The Americans are satisfied with their personal relationships with local people at the deep friendship level. The deep friendship and hospitality of local people clearly relates to the fact that Americans are welcomed and perceived positively in South Korea, and Korean society provides Americans with full interaction potential, which creates an impetus to maintaining meaningful relationships.

Regardless of the extreme favoritism and friendliness toward Americans, however, many Americans feel that they are not able to ever blend into Korean society and become a part of it. Based on collectivism rooted from Confucian ideology, which clearly separates in- and out-groups, it is obvious that Korean society still sees Americans as foreigners and not as part of the Korean society.

Most of the American interviewees perceived their life overseas as very positive and rewarding. They reported warm and nice treatment and receptivity toward Americans and meaningful relationships with local people, while also expressing some concerns, like tough business environments.

Theoretically, even though expatriates as short-term sojourners might have different motivations as compared with long-term immigrants, the study clearly shows that cross-cultural adaptation occurs through communicative interaction vis-à-vis their host cultural milieu.

Most of the American interviewees said that interpersonal communication and relationships with local people are related to their overall positive life experience in Korea, and it seemed that knowledge about the target culture (i.e., business styles and verbal/nonverbal behavior) was important in coping with difficulty and frustration during their overseas assignment. As predicted by Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory, communication was shown to be central in the expatriates' process of adaptation. There is a reciprocal relationship between communication and psychological health.

Even though American expatriates are not under great stress to exactly follow the "Korean way," one American interviewee's comment should be noted in that it clearly shows how significant the cultural strangers' adaptive motivation is in his successful adaptation process.

I went through a period about three years ago which I sort of said I've had it and said I can't take Korea and I can't take Koreans anymore, the constant zipping in front in the mind and the language difficulties and it just sort of got to me. But from a business point of view, I said there's no way to leave right now, short of destroying the whole mind away and so I just deliberately changed my attitude. And I said, you know what, this is my problem. This is not Korea's problem, this is my problem... For some strange reason I started getting to believe that Koreans ought to do things my way. I'm the visitor. I'm the foreigner. So that's not right.

And so I began, both my wife and I began to just consciously say that we needed to change our attitude...I think I'm very honest about Korea. I see the great parts and I see the not so great parts. And I see that in any culture I've ever been in.

Methodologically, the present study uses interviews to describe the communication and life experiences of American expatriates in the South Korean cultural milieu. This emic perspective of using in-depth personal interviews yields richer information on the practical aspects of participatory experience in the field and allows the researcher to have a clearer understanding of the participants' reality, i.e., the personal and authentic experiences of expatriates living in a different host cultural milieu. This provides accounts from the expatriates themselves, which is closer to the interviewees' own reality and helps illuminate some relevant facets of the concrete everyday reality in which expatriates find themselves.

Practically, the present study provides some insights into adaptation experiences in a different host cultural environment. The findings show that the expatriates' knowledge and understanding of their host culture and active involvement in interpersonal communication with host nationals will help them to meet intercultural challenges arising from the process of adjustment. Training programs for international firms should therefore focus on knowledge and understanding of the host culture and communication systems. In addition, enhancement of active involvement in host interpersonal communication in and outside work could be part of training programs, particularly for American expatriates who relocate themselves in a non-Western context. The globalizing trend in business organizations makes the need for cross-cultural competency more important than ever before (Gertsen, 1990; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Nauman, 1992). International firms could improve retention by offering comprehensively designed, extensive training programs to their employees, leading to more successful overseas business experiences.

Because of the small sample size, the present findings are to be interpreted and generalized with some caution. They can, however, be made less problematic as consistent findings are obtained over time across different studies, involving a wider range of nationalities working in different countries (e.g., American employees in Indonesia or Swedish employees in Japan). Furthermore, studies can be done regarding different types of sojourner groups (e.g., refugees, immigrants, and international students) in different countries (particularly, non-Western cultural contexts). Finally, in addition to communication activities, the study would be more complete if predisposition and environmental factors were included in future studies.

References

- Aycan, Z. (1997). Acculturation of expatriate managers: a process model of adjustment and performance. In D. M. Saunders (Series Ed.) & Z. Aycan (Vol. Ed.), *New approaches to employee management: Vol. 4. Expatriate management: Theory and research* (pp. 1-40). Greenwich, CT: Jai Press, Inc.
- Black, J. (1992). Coming home: the relationship of expatriate expectations with repatriation adjustment and job performance. *Human Relations, 45*, 177-192.
- Black, J., & Gregersen, H. (1991). Antecedents to cross-cultural adjustment for expatriates in Pacific Rim assignments. *Human Relations, 44*, 497-515.
- Black, J., & Gregersen, H. (1999). The right way to manage expatriates. *Harvard Business Review, 77*, 52-62.
- Black, J., Mendenhall, M. (1991). The U-curve adjustment hypothesis revisited : A review and theoretical framework. *Journal of International Business Studies, 22*, 225-247.
- Black, J., Mendenhall, M., & Oddou, G. (1991). Toward a comprehensive model of international adjustment: an integration of multiple theoretical perspectives. *Academy of Management Review, 16*, 291-317.
- Copeland, L., & Griggs, L. (1985). *Going International*. New York: Random House.
- Dunbar, E. (1994). The German executive in the U.S. work and social environment: Exploring role demands. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18*, 277-291.
- Gertsen, M. (1990, December). Intercultural competence and expatriates. *International Journal of Human Research Management, 341-361*.
- Gomez-Meija, L., & Balkin, E. (1987). The determinants of managerial satisfaction with the expatriation and repatriation process. *Journal of Management Development, 6*, 7-17.
- Guy, B., & Patton, W. (1996). Managing the effects of culture shock and sojourner adjustment on the expatriate industrial sales force. *Industrial Marketing Management, 25*, 385-393.
- Harrison, J., Chadwick, M., & Scales, M. (1996). The relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and the personality variables of self-efficacy and self-monitoring. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 20*, 167-188.
- Kealey, D. (1996). The challenge of international personnel selection. In D. Landis & B. S. Bhagat (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (2nd ed.) (pp. 383-399). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kim, Y. S. (2003). *Host Environment, Communication, and Psychological Health: A Study of Cross-cultural Adaptation Comparing Korean Expatriates in the United States with American Expatriates in South Korea*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.
- Kim, Y.S., & Kim, Y. Y. (in press). Communication patterns and psychological health in the process of cross-cultural adaptation: a study of American and Korean expatriate workers. *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*.
- Kim, Y.S., & Kim, Y. Y. (2005). *Communication patterns and psychological health in the process of cross-cultural adaptation: a study of American and Korean expatriate workers*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Boston, MA.
- Kim, Y. Y., & Kim, Y.S. (2004). The role of host environment in cross-cultural adaptation: a comparison of American expatriates in South Korea and their Korean counterparts in the United States. *Asian Communication Research, 3*, 5-25.

- Kim, Y. Y. (1988). *Communication and cross-cultural adaptation: an integrative theory*. Clevedon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming Intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2005). Adapting to a new culture: An integrative communication theory. In W. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 375-400). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kramer, M., & Wayne, S. (2004). An examination of perceived organizational support as a multidimensional construct in the context of an expatriate assignment. *Journal of Management*, 30, 209-237.
- Krell, E. (2005). Budding Relationships. *HRMagazine*, 50, 114-118.
- Kramer, M., Wayne, S., & Jaworski, R. (2001). Sources of support and expatriate performance: The mediating role of expatriate adjustment. *Personal Psychology*, 54, 71-101.
- Mendenhall, M., & Oddou, G. (1985). The dimensions of expatriate acculturation: A review. *Academy of Management Review*, 10, 39-48.
- Naumann, E. (1992). A conceptual model of expatriate turnover. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 23, 499-531.
- Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural Shock: Adjustment at new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7, 177-182.
- Sahlins, M. (1964). Culture and Environment: The Study of Cultural Ecology. In S. Tax (Ed.), *Horizons of Anthropology* (pp. 132-147). Chicago: Aldine.
- Selmer, J. (2002). Practice makes perfect? International experience and expatriate adjustment. *Management International Review*, 42, 71-88.
- Shaffer, M., Gregersen, H., & Harrison, D. (2006). You can take it with you: individual differences and expatriate effectiveness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91, 109-125.
- Shaffer, M., Harrison, D., & Gilley, K. (1999). Dimensions, determinants, and differences in the expatriate adjustment process. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 30, 53-73.
- Shannonhouse, R. (1996, November 8). Overseas-assignment failures. *USA Today/International edition*, p. 8A.
- Stroh, L. (1995). Predicting turnover among repatriates: Can organizations affect retention rates? *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 6, 443-457.
- Stroh, L., Dennis, L., & Cramer, T. (1994). Predictors of expatriate adjustment. *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 2, 176-192.
- Takeuchi, R., Tesluk, P., & Yun, S. (2005). An integrative view of international experience. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, 85-100.
- Torbiorn, I. (1982). *Living abroad: Personal adjustment and personnel policy in the overseas setting*. New York: Wiley.
- Tung, R. (1988). *The new expatriates*. Cambridge: Balinger.
- Van Vianen, A., De APater, I., & Kristof-Brown, A. (2004). Fitting-in: surface- and deep-level cultural differences and expatriates' adjustment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 697-709.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The Psychology of Culture Shock*. Philadelphia: Routledge.
- Windham International and National Foreign Trade Council, Inc. (1998, June). *Global*

relocation trends: 1998 survey report. New York: Windham International.