

Familiarity with Intercultural Conflicts and Global Work Performance: Testing a Theory of Recognition Primed Decision-Making

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Abstract : Two meta-analyses show that intercultural experience is not related to intercultural adaptation or performance in international assignments. These findings have prompted calls for a deeper grounding of research on international experience in the phenomenon of global work. Two issues, in particular, may limit current understanding of the relationship between international experience and global work performance. First, intercultural experience is too broad a construct that may not sufficiently capture the essence of global work, which to a large part involves sensemaking and managing intercultural conflicts. Second, the psychological mechanisms through which intercultural experience affects performance remains under-explored, resulting in a poor understanding of how experience is translated into learning and performance outcomes. Drawing on recognition primed decision-making (RPD) research, the current study advances a cognitive processing model to highlight the importance of intercultural conflict familiarity. Compared to intercultural experience, intercultural conflict familiarity is a more targeted construct that captures individuals' previous exposure to dealing with intercultural conflicts. Drawing on RPD theory, we argue that individuals' intercultural conflict familiarity enhances their ability to make accurate judgments and generate effective responses when intercultural conflicts arise. In turn, the ability to make accurate situation judgements and effective situation responses is an important predictor of global work performance. A relocation program within a multinational enterprise provided the context to test these hypotheses using a time-lagged, multi-source field study. Participants were 165 employees (46% female; with an average of 5 years of global work experience) from 42 countries who relocated from country to regional offices as part a global restructuring program. Within the first two weeks of transfer to the regional office, employees completed measures of their familiarity with intercultural conflicts, cultural intelligence, cognitive ability, and demographic information. They also completed an intercultural situational judgment test (iSJT) to assess their situation judgment and situation response. The iSJT comprised four validated multimedia vignettes of challenging intercultural work conflicts and prompted employees to provide protocols of their situation judgment and situation response. Two research assistants, trained in intercultural management but blind to the study hypotheses, coded the quality of employee's situation judgment and situation response. Three months later, supervisors rated employees' global work performance. Results using multilevel modeling (vignettes nested within employees) support the hypotheses that greater familiarity with intercultural conflicts is positively associated with better situation judgment, and that situation judgment mediates the effect of intercultural familiarity on situation response quality. Also, aggregated situation judgment and situation response quality both predicted supervisor-rated global work performance. Theoretically, our findings highlight the important but under-explored role of familiarity with intercultural conflicts; a shift in attention from the general nature of international experience assessed in terms of number and length of overseas assignments. Also, our cognitive approach premised on RPD theory offers a new theoretical lens to understand the psychological mechanisms through which intercultural conflict familiarity affects global work performance. Third, and importantly, our study contributes to the global talent identification literature by demonstrating that the cognitive processes engaged in resolving intercultural conflicts predict actual performance in the global workplace.

Keywords : intercultural conflict familiarity, job performance, judgment and decision making, situational judgment test

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