

TOWARDS A RECOGNITION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY: THE ROLE PLAYED BY ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

The recognition of cultural diversity is attracting the growing interest of several researchers in the fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology. Indeed, the literature shows that the neglect of cultural specificities leads to the inadaptation of expatriate executives to the new cultural, social and societal context and consequently, to the failure of international operations. Organizational social support is a physical, emotional or symbolic contribution made by the superior, colleagues and the organization of origin on their behalf. It is then a crucial factor in the success of expatriate executives in their international mission. The purpose of this article is to understand the extent to which organizational social support contributes to the consideration of local cultural specificities. The results of an exploratory study conducted among 33 expatriate executives in some subsidiaries located in Tunisia show that in terms of recognition of cultural diversity, the role played by the superior, colleagues and the home organization is limited, insufficient and in some cases non-existent. The managerial implications of the results of this research will be highlighted.

Keywords: Expatriate Executives, Organizational Social Support, Support Of Superior, Support Of Colleagues, Support Of The Home Organization, Cultural Diversity.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the international enterprise is confronted with a dialectic that is both global and specific, which makes it difficult to reconcile the different points of view (Gauthey & Xardel, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2004; Brasseur, 2008). Indeed, the expatriate executive depends largely on the national culture from which he comes, his personality traits and his relations with the members of his community, which lead him to favor one approach over another (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2004). However, neglecting cultural differences in favor of the technical and financial aspects of management leads to misunderstandings, communication problems and relationship difficulties (Mutabazi, 2004 ; Sambasivan et al., 2017).

The recognition of cultural diversity then found a growing echo in the fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology (Sainsaulieu, 1987; Dubar, 2000; Dupriez & Simons (2002); Pierre & Delange, 2004). Intercultural adaptation is closely associated with taking into account the diversity of cultural practices (Frimousse, 2006; Faust, 2017). Bearing in mind that cultural and national environments are different (Gauthey et al., 1988; Jain & Pareek, 2019) and that reconciliation operations between expatriates and locals are complicated and difficult (Gauthey et al., 1988; Gauthey & Xardel, 1991; Barel, 2006; Bakel et al., 2016), the literature on expatriation highlights the importance of implementing international human resource management that takes into account cultural diversity.

Therefore, supporting expatriate executives throughout their international mission and promoting their intercultural adaptation is the objective most often stated by international companies that communicate about the recognition of cultural diversity. With this in mind, the role of organizational social support in reducing the ambiguity inherent in the new organizational, social and societal context as well as in facilitating the adaptation of managers following a transfer has been demonstrated by many authors (Mérignac, 2005; Bakel et al., Der Der Laken 2016; Der Laken et al., 2019). The support provided by the manager, colleagues and the home organization is therefore a crucial factor in international success (Bakel et al., 2016; Der Laken et al., 2019; Canhilal et al., 2022; Kubovcikova & Bakel, 2022); Kubra et al., (2020).

The aim of this paper, which is essentially exploratory in nature, is to better understand the attitudes of expatriate managers towards the social and organizational support provided to them and the role it plays in the recognition of cultural diversity. After a brief presentation of the conceptual framework for the consideration of cultural diversity and organizational social support, we will present the methodological approach. Finally, we will present and discuss the results related to the representations of the support of superiors, colleagues and the organization of origin by expatriate executives in the subsidiaries of some multinationals established in Tunisia. At the managerial level, recommendations likely to design new practices to improve the role of organizational social support in the recognition of cultural diversity will be highlighted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognition of Cultural Diversity: Theoretical Foundations

The literature review highlights the importance of rethinking the question of cultures, identities and management methods in intercultural situations. Such an orientation presupposes the clarification of the notion of culture and its various sources of influence (national culture, regional culture, organizational culture, individual culture). Indeed, each cultural category is based on basic assumptions that allow for a different understanding of concepts related to, for example, the distribution of power, time and the nature of communications (Adler, 1994; Grange, 1997). In addition, each society represents a dynamic and polycultural system marked by particular characteristics such as regional and ethnic specificities, language, religion, gender, generation, social class, and level of education (Barmeyer & Mayrhofer, 2007); Bollinger & Hofstede, (1987).

According to Jain & Pareek (2019), diversity has two dimensions. Indeed, the first is related to age, gender and sexual orientations that differentiate an individual from others. The second-dimension concerns religion, the education system, geography, etc. Cultural diversity then translates into varied cultures characterizing a specific region or country (Jain & Pareek, 2019). The issue of cultural differences seems to be a difficult and delicate one (Gauthey & Xardel, 1990; Lu, 2006; Sambasivan et al., 2017).

However, the literature notes that studies of cultural diversity are not only about identifying ways of adapting the original culture and its management methods to make them acceptable to the new cultural context. This work is also based on the search for the right methods to help leverage the new crop (Barel, 2006; Faust, 2017). Therefore, to study and understand the diversity of economic agents in order to identify what unites them and act accordingly are now a central concern (Grange, 1997; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2004; Faust, 2017; Sambasivan et al., 2017).

Indeed, national traditions specific to each country and stemming from the political and religious foundations that inspire them (D'Iribarne, 1989; Frimousse, 2007) are active and can run counter to the principles of total quality, management by objectives, matrix organizations and, more generally, management tools (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2004). Neglect of cultural specificities leads to failure because managers who do not take into account local particularities risk coming up against

dysfunctions (Chrétien, 2003). As D'Iribarne et al. (1998) point out, these specificities are inherent in a history, a mode of social organization as well as a political and legal context specific to each society.

Pierre (2004) considers that the development of new identities and mentalities based on the recognition of differences and the collective development of projects helps to meet the challenge of interculturalism. For his part, Sainsaulieu (1987) is based on a polemical approach to exchange that states that each individual necessarily needs to recognize and accept the other who is different from him in order to experience his sense of existence and effectively accomplish his mission.

Sociologists (Sainsaulieu, 1987; Dubar, 2000; Pierre, 2004) are giving increasing importance to the concept of organizational socialization. Within the organization, expatriate managers and locals need to establish positive relationships based on the adoption of common action, the recognition of collective identities and the sharing of the same representations. Frimousse and Peretti (2006) emphasize that management no longer has a single economic aspect. For these researchers, managerial practices also integrate ethical and social considerations. This idea is also shared by Mutabazi (2008), Barel (2006) and Brasseur (2008), who have stressed the importance of understanding cultural differences as sources of enrichment, complementarity and open-mindedness.

Cultural diversity is thus a good opportunity to take advantage of the specificities of each culture by exchanging new and richer ideas (Gérard, 2005); Argyris et al., (1988). To this end, Faust (2017) and Sambasivan et al. (2017) give increasing importance to the concept of intercultural competences, defined as the ability to understand the particularities of a situation of intercultural interaction and to adopt the most appropriate behavior for each specificity.

Organizational Social Support

According to Walter & Marks (1981); Waxin & Barmeyer (2008); Yukl, (2002); Sarason et al. (1983), support is defined as "the existence or availability of people we can rely on who let us know that they care for us, appreciate us, and love us." For Waxin & Chandon (2003), Giauque et al. (2016); Canhilal et al. (2020), organizational social support is a physical, emotional, or symbolic contribution made to individuals to improve their ability to face change. According to these researchers, this variable helps expatriate executives to overcome uncertainties and situations that generate stress and worry.

Ramos et al. (2017) also consider that social support helps with group belonging, which builds self-confidence and promotes psychological well-being in the new context. As noted by Aryee & Stone (1996), supervisor and colleagues are the most cited variables in international framework support. However, Cerdin (2012); Cerdin (1999); Chevrier, (2004); D'Iribarne, (1989); D'Iribarne et al., (1989) points out that in addition to these variables, the support of the originating organization must be taken into consideration Inkson et al., (1997). Indeed, the advice and support provided by the expatriate who has had several international experiences mainly in the host country also helps expatriate managers in their intercultural adaptation (Pierre, 2006).

House (1981), Der Laken et al. (2016, 2019); Kubovcikova & Bakel, (2022) emphasize that the social-emotional support provided by supervisor and colleagues and its intensity are important determinants of organizational behavior. These different types of support were mainly studied in the areas of leadership (Yulk, 1981) and group dynamics (Shaw, 1971). The scope of social support also extends to three different levels when expatriate managers are exposed to a stressful situation: by acting directly on the source of stress, by limiting the effects of stress in terms of the tensions suffered, or through the buffering effect, by interposing itself between the source of stress and the person who is the victim of it (Sears et al., 1983; Giauque et al., 2016; Lung-Tan, 2006).

The literature highlights two approaches that can be used to analyze the social network and the support that emanates from it. Indeed, the functional approach describes the form and modality that social support takes as well as the function it fulfills (Mérignac, 2005). In this respect, Fenlason & Beehr (1994), Bakel et al. (2016) and Ramos et al. (2017); Roussel & Wacheux (2005); Point et al., (2012) distinguish between emotional social support which translates into listening, attention, demonstrations of friendship, intimacy, aggression and empathy and instrumental social support corresponding to concrete actions to

facilitate work and life in the host country (service rendered, loan of money, advice, useful information). As for the structural approach, it focuses on the people who are at the origin of the social support (Mérignac, 2005). In this context, Bakel et al. (2016) highlight the important role of locals in the accompaniment of expatriate managers as well as in informational, emotional and educational support in their favor.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this exploratory study is to gain as complete a picture as possible of the attitudes of expatriate managers towards the social and organizational support provided to them, the degree of its importance and the role it plays in the recognition of cultural diversity. To do this, we chose the semi-structured interview, which seems to us to be the most appropriate and most adapted to the objectives of our research.

Preparing for interviews involves developing an interview guide with open-ended questions. The first theme is based on the collection of information on the expatriate and his local subsidiary: nationality, age, gender, hierarchical level, period lived in Tunisia, marital status, expatriation decision (requested, proposed, imposed) and sector of activity of the local subsidiary. The second theme focuses on expatriate managers' perceptions of the support provided by their line manager. For the third theme, it is based on expatriate managers' perceptions of the support of their colleagues. The fourth theme focuses on expatriate executives' perceptions of support from their home organizations.

Based on the approach of Wacheux (1996), we opted for a thematic content analysis that consists of focusing on a methodological combination integrating a vertical and cross-sectional thematic analysis. Interviews take place according to the following stages: presentation (interaction), development (conventional speeches), deepening (more personal speeches) and conclusion (collection of final remarks) (Giannelloni & Vernet, 2019). To conduct our interviews, we turned to the Investment Promotion Agency which, through its database, allowed us to select a list of companies whose main characteristics are illustrated in Table 1. We used semi-structured interviews lasting around 50 to 70 minutes on the date and time chosen by the expatriate executives interviewed. The latter require the recording of interview data on manually written cards.

A trade-off between the design of the exploratory study and the feasibility in the field allowed us to determine the size of the sample, which consists of 33 predominantly male expatriate managers (3 women and 30 men) characterized by a certain diversity in terms of their nationalities (13 French, 11 Italian and 9 Belgian), family situations, sectors of activity and ages (the age of the interviewees being between 30 and 55 years old). The 33 expatriate executives are mainly senior executives, mention that the expatriation decision is proposed and declare that they have spent a period of between 20 and 60 months in Tunisia.

Entreprise	Sector of activity	Number of expatriate executives	Nationality
1	Electrical Industries	3	French
2	Electrical Industries	2	French
3	Electrical Industries	3	French
4	Mechanical Industries	2	Italian

5	Mechanical Industries	3	Italian
6	Mechanical Industries	1	Italian
7	Textile and clothing industries	3	Italian
8	Textile and clothing industries	2	French
9	Textile and clothing industries	3	Belgian
10	Textile and clothing industries	2	Belgian
11	Leather Industries	1	Italian
12	Leather Industries	1	French
13	Large-scale distribution	2	Belgian
14	Large-scale distribution	2	Belgian
15	Services	2	French
16	Services	1	Italian

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The study of the content of the comments collected from expatriate managers allowed us to highlight three fundamental axes that have contributed to describing the social and organizational support provided to them and the role it has played in the recognition of cultural diversity.

Superior support: purely professional support Most interviewees said that their supervisor helped them to do their job effectively and improve their performance. While some respondents stressed that the support provided by their Supervisor is essentially emotional, most managers agree that it is important for them to benefit from both emotional and informational support. The main explanations that emerged from the interviews came from the advice, encouragement and actions of supervision, assistance and communication that were the main forms of professional support offered by the direct supervisor in their favor:

"I can never forget the help given by my direct supervisor in my favor. His advice and emotional and informational support helped me a lot to overcome some work-related problems," "At first, I was very stressed and upset. I had problems with the workers. Frankly, my supervisor mentored me and accompanied me with his remarks and encouragement to overcome all this." As a result, the support provided by the supervisor is entirely professional and does not extend beyond the scope of the company.

It was also clear from the interviews that the role of this type of support in the recognition of cultural diversity is in most cases non-existent. Indeed, the strong novelty of the country and its significant impact on the organizational culture contribute to an increase in the directives imposed by the head office, which leads to an increase in the problems encountered by the superior. The latter is confronted with an institutional duality, as Kostova & Roth (2002) point out. According to the interviewees, the supervisor is obliged to submit to both the organizational pressures of headquarters and those of the local institutional environment (legal, national, regional, economic, political, social, etc.).

As a result, personal and professional overload with all the stress it generates is likely to limit the contours of support provided by the superior. In this regard, one of the expatriate managers summarized the essence of what was said by his colleagues interviewed: "My supervisor is so stressed and overworked that in some cases he is unable to support me properly in my work. In fact, the strict orders of the siege resulting from the importance of local cultural

and societal differences, the way of living and working, and the mentalities of the people here that even vary from region to region have led him to be tougher with everyone without exception."

Colleague support: The majority of interviewees consider that the support provided by their local colleagues and those of the same nationality is essentially informational and relational. It takes the form of advice and support and guidance actions likely to help them better interact with the premises within the company. In this respect, the following statements show that it is through co-workers that expatriates interact with local staff. "I would like to thank Sami, the HR Director, Peter and the whole team who made me learn several words of the Tunisian dialect and helped me to better interact with the local workers" "It was thanks to the advice given by my French and Tunisian colleagues that I stopped making certain facial expressions and gestures that were considered normal to me but which were misinterpreted by the Tunisian staff."

The main explanation given by all interviewees stems from the benevolence of local and expatriate colleagues and their predisposition to support them mainly in their interaction with local staff. Another explanation is linked to the lack of knowledge of the Arabic language and the Tunisian dialect and more specifically, of the dialect specific to each Tunisian region, which has reinforced, in the context of a strong novelty of the country, the relational support provided by the colleagues. "I'm Belgian and I don't speak your language. Fortunately, the involvement of my co-workers, as translators and mediators, helped me a lot to better interact with the local staff only. I insist a lot on this point", "At the beginning of my expatriation in Tunisia, I worked in Sousse. After two years, I was assigned to our French company based in Mateur. Although I was trained in Arabic, it was difficult for me to understand your national dialect and especially the one specific to each of the regions mentioned above. Frankly, my colleagues at both companies have helped me a lot in building relationships with locals in general" However, a certain vigilance towards local colleagues leads most of the interviewees to limit the support given to them to the professional framework alone: "It is true that my Tunisian colleagues helped me to interact with the workers, but this support must not go beyond the framework of the company. Still, I'm vigilant and I don't want to confuse my professional life with my personal one." This observation from the interviews is also that of Adler (1994) and Barel (2006), who considered that the reinforcement of the temptation to protect oneself from the other and mistrust make it difficult to establish relationships with members of different cultural roots. It is therefore clear from the interviews that the role of colleague support in the recognition of cultural diversity is insufficient because it is generally informational and relational and is limited to only professional setting.

Support from the home organization: insufficient informational and logistical support However, The interviews show that the informational and material support provided by the sending organization is not likely to reduce the stress and problems encountered in the host country. Indeed, all the expatriates interviewed said they had not been in direct contact "The big Italian boss or one of his collaborators sometimes visits us to make sure the work is being done properly", "It is rare to receive an e-ticket from the general management to expose and discuss certain cases and persistent problems" and permanent and regular indirect with the sending organization "I exchange information with the head office via e-mail, but it is still insufficient", "My home organization does not always inform me of all its new developments", "We are most often forced to solve a problem or control a delicate situation without informing the head office".

Respondents also agree that the material and logistical support provided by their home organizations (assistance in finding accommodation, agreements with restaurants, hazard pay,

allowances) remains inadequate. The main explanation given by all interviewees is related to a certain neglect of the importance of the differences between the culture of the country of origin and that of the host country. The stronger the novelty of the country, the more the home organization will be concerned not to support its expatriates so that they can take into account cultural differences but rather to achieve its ultimate goal which is the success of its international operations.

In terms of the recognition of cultural diversity, the role of the support provided by the home organization is therefore limited because of the pressures exerted on its subsidiaries and more specifically, on its expatriate executives. "The ultimate goal of the headquarters is to drive international success. The importance of local cultural and societal differences is a major problem and calls on our organization to strengthen and diversify its support for us. However, the issue of interculturalism is not one of its priorities. What matters most to her is to improve the level of performance of expatriates and maximize their performance at work."

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITS AND EXTENSIONS

In view of the results obtained, the sending organizations must now opt for innovative practices in terms of organizational social support in order to promote the success of the executives assigned to Tunisia in their mission. Indeed, taking into account the novelty of the country and the recognition of cultural diversity present itself as a real challenge to be met in the context of the social responsibility of the international company and the promotion of the organizational social support provided to its expatriate executives. Neglecting this diversity could then negatively affect the successful and total fulfillment of their mission and would be detrimental in the long term to the company's objectives and the success of its international operations.

The main conclusion of our exploratory study of 33 expatriate managers highlights the insufficient and reduced role of support provided by superiors, colleagues and the home organization in the recognition of cultural diversity. It is therefore important that this support be emotional, material and informational ongoing. This includes the development of formal mentoring programs as well as the creation of communication and information networks that can help expatriate managers to solve their intercultural problems, interact better with locals and integrate into the new society (Canhilal et al., 2020). Indeed, the relational and psychological aspect of the support provided by these various stakeholders plays a crucial role in reducing feelings of confinement, anxiety and stress resulting from the strong novelty of the country.

Another recommendation is the importance given to the promotion of intercultural coaching, the main objective of which is the success of the international experience and the knowledge of others and oneself (Zheng & Yang, 2006). It is then necessary to go beyond routine support programs and follow the expatriate on site based on the real experience of a previous coach or an expert or local coach and even coordinate between these stakeholders to make the support more effective.

Indeed, the direct accompaniment and follow-up of expatriate executives throughout their mission, whether by a mentor, a specialized or local coach, promotes their psychological well-being and helps them recognize cultural diversity (Song et al., 2019). The provision of diverse, rigorous and relevant intercultural training programs could certainly promote the organizational social support provided to expatriate managers and their families. Indeed, the timing, duration and purpose of these programs must take into account the novelty of the country, the extent of the cultural differences observed, the nature of the mission and the degree of interaction between

expatriate managers and locals, which constitutes an innovative socially responsible practice (Lawson & Shepherd, 2019); Lu, L-T, (2006).

Several actors, whether they are locals, mentors, home organizations, colleagues, superiors, expatriate communities abroad, etc. play a very important role in this framework and need to show much more commitment, hospitality, support and collaboration with expatriate executives. As such, we believe that the deployment of more flexible legislative and administrative measures, the facilities granted to expatriates and the emotional, informational and relational support provided inside and outside the company are likely to promote the organizational social support provided to them and consequently help them to recognize cultural diversity and succeed in their international mission.

Today, the emergence of new forms of international mobility, such as international commuters, raises several questions about living and working conditions that seem to be less favorable than those related to long-term expatriation and the physiological and psychological costs that result from it, which vary according to the extent of cultural differences (Desmarais et al., 2012). Therefore, it would be relevant to conduct empirical studies whose objective is to question the design of new organizational social support programs adapted to the evolution of international mobility and likely to promote the recognition of cultural diversity.

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