



Why do Korean Expatriate Managers Struggle in the U.S.?

**Impact of Hierarchy and Gender Perception on Expatriate
Effectiveness at Korean Multinational Corporations (KMNCs)**

by

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Abstract

While individual expatriate adjustment has been extensively studied in the academic literature, little is known about how elements of the social environment influence expatriate effectiveness and performance. This exploratory study contributes to the understanding of expatriate adjustment and cross-cultural literature by exploring how understanding of hierarchy influence expatriate managers' interaction with local subordinates. Through a series of semi-structured, qualitative interviews with Korean male expatriates working at Korean Multinational Corporations (KMNCs) in Silicon Valley, the study presents four key areas in which Korean expatriates face challenges: 1) diverging understanding of authority and corporate risk management, 2) conflicting objectives in team vs. individual performance and evaluations, 3) distinct preferences in communication styles, and 4) multi-layered barriers Korean females face in expatriate assignments. The research highlights aspects particular to Korean expatriation in the U.S. and in doing so provides valuable insights into how KMNCs can better adapt their expatriate and local employee training programs.

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Introduction

Expatriates play an important role in the management of foreign subsidiaries because they exercise control and coordination, as well as transfer knowledge (Chang et al., 2012; Harzing et al., 2016). Research has found that multinational corporations can gain a competitive advantage in international business operations from expatriates' international knowledge and experience (Zhang & Dodgson, 2007). Furthermore, expatriate assignments have posed effective managerial development opportunities for employees, and therefore, the significance of these assignments have been growing in recent years (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005; Stroh, Black, Mendenhall, & Gregersen, 2005). However, expatriates encounter multiple dimensions of challenges in adapting to novel and complex work and nonwork contexts (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Shin, Morge son, & Campion, 2007) and these challenges are associated with low levels of expatriate adjustment and financial and personnel costs (Sanchez, Spector, & Cooper, 2000). Therefore, it is not surprising that expatriate research has focused on the antecedents of expatriate adjustment. The bulk of expatriate theories and research "tend to revolve around the stress of adjustment and concentrate exclusively on expatriates themselves, rather than other elements of their social environment" (Harrison et al., 2004).

A particularly salient challenge is gaining legitimacy in the host country between the host-country national employees and managers (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005; Tarique et al., 2006). Specifically, when Eastern and Western cultures are brought together in expatriate assignments, there is a diverging understanding of corporate hierarchy making it challenging to work together effectively. Eastern organizations demonstrate seniority-based, authoritative hierarchies, while Western corporate cultures pursue a more even, merit-based form of

hierarchical structure. This difference has resulted in Korean expatriates' inability to effectively perform the assigned task and even premature returns from assignments. Approximately 10 to 20% of managers sent abroad were returned early because of difficulties in adjusting to a foreign country (Black & Gregersen, 1999). When this happens corporations not only incur significant training costs, but also face challenging situations in establishing a strong local presence in the intended foreign market.

By investigating the diverging Eastern and Western understanding of corporate hierarchies in the context of KMNCs operating in the U.S., this study performs an *exploratory study* to develop an understanding of how *misalignment in perception of hierarchy* impacts expatriate performance. Specifically, the study contributes to the understanding of expatriate adjustment and cross-cultural business literature by 1) examining the corporate culture of KMNCs in Korea and the U.S. to understand how misalignment in understanding of hierarchy impacts expatriate-local interaction and 2) analyzing barriers that explain when and how cross-cultural difference in understanding of hierarchy and gender-roles inhibits expatriate effectiveness. The focus on cross-cultural motivation departs from the dominant emphasis on individual factors such as stress and well-being (Harrison et al., 2004) and rather analyzes the mediating barriers that explain how cross-cultural difference causes Korean expatriates to struggle in the U.S. (Earley & Ang, 2003). Considering factors like work adjustment and interaction adjustment measures, the research sheds light the different areas in which Korean expatriates experience difficulty when local employees based in the U.S. are oblivious about the more authoritative and respect-oriented Korean culture. This integrates cultural studies regarding Korean multinationals with expatriate effectiveness to increase the understanding of potential barriers to expatriate performance.

This research provides practical recommendations for corporations and direct suggestions in the expatriate adjustment literature. Long-term expatriate assignments incur high costs and substantial planning to ensure successful adjustment of expatriate employees and to minimize failure (Collings et al., 2007). Several challenges identified in literature include expatriate non-adjustment, lack of job satisfaction, lack of career advancement, and lack of organizational support (Lazarova & Cerdin 2007). As mentioned above, cultural differences and misalignments have resulted in expatriate's inability to effectively perform the assigned task and premature returns from assignments. Therefore, support is important, and support before, during and after the assignment helps to minimize uncertainty for expatriates (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). The results of this exploratory study provide qualitative data on how Korean multinationals can better organize their expatriate training and support programs. By generating more qualitative data, this study encourages further research that will lead to providing insight about how inefficiency caused by hierarchical misalignment can be managed. Lastly, expatriate literature has historically focused on assignments in the U.S. and Europe, analyzing assignments from more developed countries to developing ones. By assessing this unique set of Korean multinational expatriate experience in the U.S. and drawing the connection with hierarchy and gender perception, this research will provide a unique perspective about how KMNCs can better manage future assignments to the U.S.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The diverging understanding of corporate hierarchy has its historical roots in Eastern emphasis on Confucianism and Western emphasis on the Weberian bureaucracy (Chung et al., 1989). Whereas Confucianism places emphasis on seniority, age, and gender roles, the

Weberian bureaucracy is largely merit-based and individualistic. The Hofstede Model captures this difference in the six dimensions of national cultures: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/ Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, Long/Short Term Orientation, and Indulgence/Restraint (Hofstede, 2011). Most Asian cultures demonstrate large power distance where less powerful members of organizations accept and expect the power to be distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2011). Stressing harmony and a sense of belonging, hierarchy means existential inequality. Subordinates expect to be told what to do and older people are both respected and feared. On the other hand, Western cultures demonstrate a small power distance where older people are neither respected nor feared. Ties between individuals are loose and hierarchy means inequality of roles established to facilitate efficient decision making (Hofstede, 2011). Despite its simplicity, the Hofstede Theory has been widely validated and continues to be a major source, particularly in understanding the difference in culture across countries and discerning ways that business is done across different cultures.

Korean emphasis on Confucianism and the U.S. emphasis on the Weberian bureaucracy place Korea and the U.S. on opposite ends of the tight vs. loose spectrum of culture (see Appendix A). As mentioned above, Korean national culture demonstrates collectivism and large power distance (Hofstede, 2011). It promotes respecting elders and power is a basic fact of society antedating good or evil (Hofstede, 2011). Relationship prevails over task, meaning that obeying the elder or superior may be more important than being right. In Korea, hierarchy means existential inequality. In contrast, U.S. national culture portrays individualism and small power distance (Hofstede, 2011). Others are classified as individuals and ties between individuals are loose (Hofstede, 2011). This creates an environment where task prevails over relationship; hierarchy means inequality of roles and performance determines the position of an individual.

Perhaps, it's not a surprise that Americans love music like Sinatra singing about "My Way" whereas Koreans are more infatuated with the collectivist K-pop boy and girl groups.

Corporate Culture of KMNCs

This difference in culture is reflected in Asian and Western corporations. Hierarchy is important regardless of context, but Korean and American corporations embody very different understandings of corporate hierarchy. The nature of Korean corporate culture reinforces hierarchy; when the sense of emotional community has developed sufficiently, a hierarchy emerges naturally (Cho & Yoon, 2001). As seniority is highly emphasized in Korean Confucianism, decisions made by superiors are rarely questioned and orders are accepted to ensure the Confucian value of conflict-free relationships (Paik & Sohn, 1998).

Historically, the Korean economy has relied heavily on big conglomerates, *chaebols* (Samsung, LG, Hyundai, SK Group etc.). They have an incredible amount of economic and social power that the economy cannot be evaluated without their role in the market. Among many features that characterize these *chaebols*, the most important might be the power and leadership of their founders and managers. The values and culture that this structure has led to is demonstrated by dynamic collectivism (see Appendix B). Dynamic collectivism depicts how the paradoxical nature of Korean corporate culture has originated and developed into salient features and facilitated certain types of organizational strategies (Cho & Yoon, 2001). It is understood as a product of turbulent social forces in a developing country that comes from dynamic political and economic situations mixed up with traditional cultural values (Cho & Yoon, 2001). This hierarchical nature may derive from the large emphasis placed on prestige at KMNCs as admission to top colleges is considered as determining one's social status, creating another level of hierarchy at Korean organizations.

The nature of Korean corporate culture is analyzed through a cycle of six behavior norms (see Appendix C): build emotional community; reinforce hierarchy; set competitive goals; break through impossibilities; make sense and release tension; and stick to the corporate way of thinking (Cho & Yoon, 2001). The focus of my study will be on the reinforcement of hierarchy. With the development in the sense of emotional community, a hierarchy naturally emerges in an organization (Cho & Yoon, 2001). Even in formal groups with formal hierarchies, this structured culture is reinforced through emotional bonding. Korean employees adhere to this norm and believe that clear hierarchy is required to achieve a stable corporate environment. This emphasis on hierarchy also gives managers a great deal of formal and informal power. It contributes to vague boundaries between personal and public relationships, encouraging stronger desire for personal ties in business transactions (Yum, 1988). Resulting from this hierarchy are both visible and invisible challenges dealing with higher positions.

As seniority is highly emphasized in Korean Confucianism, decisions made by superiors are rarely questioned to ensure the Confucian value of conflict-free relationships (Paik & Sohn 1998). Conforming to expectations of superiors is essential and maintaining this positive relationship with superiors is considered more important than placing the focus on the self (Yang 2006). This culture is observed in expatriate assignments where certain employees are recommended by seniors to take on foreign assignments. These recommendations are made by maintaining strong connections with higher-level executives at the organization. Until recently, dynamic collectivism has been considered to be beneficial for Korea as a developing country. However, with globalization and localization at these multinational corporations, it is challenging to predict how this concept will be perceived in the perspective of a non-Korean, local employee in a non-hierarchical culture.

Less Hierarchical Organizing: U.S. Corporate Culture

American corporations demonstrate a more decentralized, less authoritative organizational structure. According to the Weberian model of bureaucracy, the ideal organizational structure is one in which agencies are apolitical, hierarchically organized, and governed by formal procedures (Weber, 1905). Hierarchy is maintained to ensure good communication, imposing efficiency, reducing arbitrariness, and ensuring accountability (Hekman, 1983). Research today has also found that managerial hierarchy works to ensure reliable execution of known tasks but inhibits solving complex non-routine problems, especially those that span functional boundaries (Adler, 2001).

Based on these findings, American corporations have been pursuing a flatter organizational structure, where hierarchy comes from one's ability to perform a certain task. Instead of managers directing the work of individuals, corporations have experimented with self-management by granting individual employees' full autonomy over how they would execute their roles (Robertson, 2015). For instance, Tesla and Netflix promote employees based on performance not their tenure or seniority. These companies also rarely recruit candidates based on academic prestige, but rather on their ability to perform the task given at hand. This creates an environment where managers are more accessible, and hierarchy is predominantly established for convenience. Companies like Zappos, Morning Star, and Valve have also successfully experimented and developed this flat culture in order to fundamentally depart from managerial hierarchy (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). As such, many American corporate hierarchies are becoming increasingly flat and decision-making authority and incentives are being pushed further down (Rajan & Wulf, 2005). This understanding of hierarchy and equal organization structure is in direct contrast with the authoritative Korean corporate culture.

Factors that Influence Expatriate Performance

Recognizing the importance of expatriate assignments in multinational corporation management, researchers have found multiple factors that influence expatriate adjustment and assignment effectiveness, including individual, job, and organizational factors (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005). Individual differences such as personality, experience, ability, education, gender have also been found to influence diverse work-related attitudes and behaviors including job satisfaction, performance, and turnover (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). Specifically, cross-cultural adjustment during an expatriate assignment is composed of three dimensions: work adjustment, interaction adjustment, and general life adjustment (Black, 1988). Expatriate research indicates that adjustment may mediate the relationship between various predictors and diverse expatriate assignment effectiveness (Kim, Kirkman, & Chen, 2006). More recent research has also assessed the role of individual differences in more diverse contexts in order to broaden the understanding about valid predictors of expatriate assignment effectiveness (Kim & Slocum Jr., 2008). This literature has examined how individual differences such as self-monitoring, prior USA Experience, and English fluency (see Appendix D) affect cross cultural adjustment and expatriate assignment effectiveness among U.S. based Korean expatriates (Kim & Slocum Jr., 2008).

As explained above, Confucianism affects the culture of Korean corporations and Korean employees' decision to expatriate and repatriate is largely influenced by requests from superiors (Cho, Hutchings & Marchant, 2013). My research will build on this work and examine how an expatriate's understanding hierarchy (instead of prior USA Experience, English Fluency etc.) impacts work adjustment and interaction adjustment, which relates to job satisfaction and individual performance. This understanding of hierarchy will not only stem from the Korean

culture, but also the individual understanding of hierarchy in a different environment. Specifically, I will investigate the contrasting perception of hierarchy between Korean expatriates working at a KMNC in the U.S. and the local U.S. employees (see Appendix E). Furthermore, existing literature has focused heavily on expatriate managers from the U.S., Europe, or Japan assigned to less developed countries. My research on Korean expatriates can serve as a case study in examining whether the results based on such samples could be similarly applied to expatriate managers assigned to more developed countries (Harrison et al. 2004, Ren et al, 2006).

One specific case of the hierarchical dimension is the more conservative and nuanced perception about women in the Korean workplace. Gender discrimination combined with the Korean corporate culture has created a challenging environment for women. Among the OECD countries, Korea has scored lowest in terms of gender equality. For example, only 34% of employees in Korea are women and only 15% of them occupy administrative positions (Cho, 2010). Many argue that this underrepresentation does not stem from discrimination, but rather the persistent perception and expectation that a women's primary responsibility in society is child rearing (Kim & Tung, 2013). Women believe their job was to take care of the household and children and were rarely recruited to jobs that would require managerial positions or international assignments (Kang & Rowley, 2005). This gender-specific perception is also demonstrated in KMNCs and its expatriate selection and assignment processes.

Even though research proves that hiring female managers has a positive effect on performance when they reach upper levels of management, there is still a heavy preference for male managers (Siegel, Pyun, Cheon 2019). The strategic decision made by multinationals

results from both beliefs about efficiency of homogeneous male leadership teams and patterns of social expectations and mutual obligations in male executive networks (Siegel et al., 2019). Studies on female expatriates have focused on investigating explanations for why so few women hold international positions. Adler (1984a, 1984b) identified three myths in the academic literature and among practitioners: (1) women do not want to be international managers; (2) companies refuse to send women abroad; and (3) foreigners' prejudice against women renders them ineffective. The empirical test results have demonstrated that only the second argument was grounded (Adler, 1984b, 1994). Adler's work has profoundly influenced the literature on female expatriates over the last two decades, directing research towards the investigation of the structural barriers that female expatriates face during foreign assignments (e.g., Harris, 1995; Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Mayrhofer & Scullion, 2002; Stroh, Varma, & Valy-Durbin, 2000).

However, these studies have only focused on analyzing female expatriates in the Western culture such as the U.S. and Germany. My research topic contributes to the literature by promoting research on a non-typical, rarely examined expatriate sample: Korean female expatriates from a less developed country (Korea) to a more developed one (U.S.) (Harrison et al. 2004, Ren et al, 2006). Also, it provides insight to why companies are still reluctant to send female managers abroad despite academic proof that male and female expatriates perform equally well in international assignments regardless of the country's predisposition to women in management (Caligiuri & Tung 1999). The study also examines whether sending female expatriates to the U.S. generates a positive net effect and/or encourages more assignment of female managers in the host country. To understand how the Korean national culture impacts Korean female expatriate assignment decisions and their performance, more information is needed regarding Korean female expatriates. It will not only allow KMNCs to understand the

challenges faced by Korean female expatriates, but also realize the benefits from widening their expatriate candidate pool to include talented Korean women.

Overall, Korean corporate culture still maintains an authoritative and strictly hierarchical, male-dominant structure while U.S. corporations are becoming flatter. By isolating the individual factor to understanding of hierarchy and examining its impact on expatriate adaptiveness, my study explores the contrasting perception of corporate hierarchy between Korean expatriates and the local U.S. employees (see Exhibit F). It examines the corporate culture of KMNCs that is largely influenced by the national culture to develop an understanding of how misalignment in understanding of hierarchy and gender perception impacts expatriate interaction. This integrates studies on cross-cultural communication and expatriate effectiveness to identify key areas of conflict between expatriate managers and local subordinates (see Exhibits E, F). The study presents the mediating barriers and explains how and when cross-cultural difference in understanding of hierarchy inhibits expatriate effectiveness. Focusing on the environmental, cultural factors and integrating hierarchical perception with female Korean expatriate selection, my study results explore how these factors influence expatriate effectiveness.

Methodology

To explore why Korean expatriate managers struggle during U.S. assignments, I decided to interview several Korean expatriates who are currently working at a technology KMNC in the U.S. Semi-structured interviews were performed with a set of guiding questions and open-ended questions about expatriates' experiences. Initially, the interview started off like a natural conversation and questions were modified to suit the candidate's specific experiences. These discovery processes serve as a guide to a more structured interview format and allow respondents

to talk in depth, choosing their own words (Adams, 2015). This helps develop a real sense of the expatriate's true perception of an experience (Adams, 2015). Furthermore, this structure increases validity because it gives the interviewer the opportunity to probe for a deeper understanding, ask for clarification, and allow the participant to steer the direction of the interview (Adams, 2015). Surveys were not used to collect data as it does not fit the objective of the study. Due to the exploratory nature of the thesis, it was more effective to perform several in-depth analyses rather than close-ended or coded questions. Interviews were conducted in Korean and lasted for 1-1.5 hours.

Interview Participants

As mentioned in previous sections, this research specifically focuses on Korean expatriates working at KMNCs in the U.S. and their interaction with U.S. local employees (see Appendix E). In order to minimize variance in experience among the interviewees, employees were sampled from the largest technology *chaebols* (conglomerates) with local offices in the U.S., specifically Silicon Valley. This includes companies like Samsung, LG Electronics, SK, Hyundai, and Kumho Asiana. Target participants were both male and female expatriates; unfortunately, I was not able to locate any Korean female expatriates which forced me to focus the study on interviewing male expatriates only. The interviewees had more than 10 years of experience working in Korea and more than 3 years working as an expatriate in the U.S. Participants also held positions of manager level or above, all performing a role that requires interaction with headquarters. This is to ensure that there is consistency in the expected reporting responsibilities of the expatriate.

These are the type of questions that were asked during the qualitative interviews:

Male Expatriates

1. What are/were the biggest challenges of working as a Korean expatriate in the U.S.?
2. Do you think there is a big difference between corporate culture in Korea versus the U.S.? If so, what are some of the differences?
3. Has there been any cultural misunderstandings with local, non-Korean employees when it comes to working culture (working hours, social interactions, communication style etc.)?
4. What training did you receive in regard to cross-cultural adjustment? Do you think it was helpful especially in understanding the local employees and work culture?
5. Why do you think there are very few women expatriate assignments? Even compared to the male vs. female employee ratio in Korea, are there less opportunities for women to take on an assignment abroad?

* Interview Questions for Female Expatriates were prepared, but sample KMNCs had no or very few Korean female expatriates (see Appendix G).

** Based on interviewee's responses, interview questions were adjusted accordingly, and findings were triangulated to proposed frameworks.

Interview Strategies & Protocols

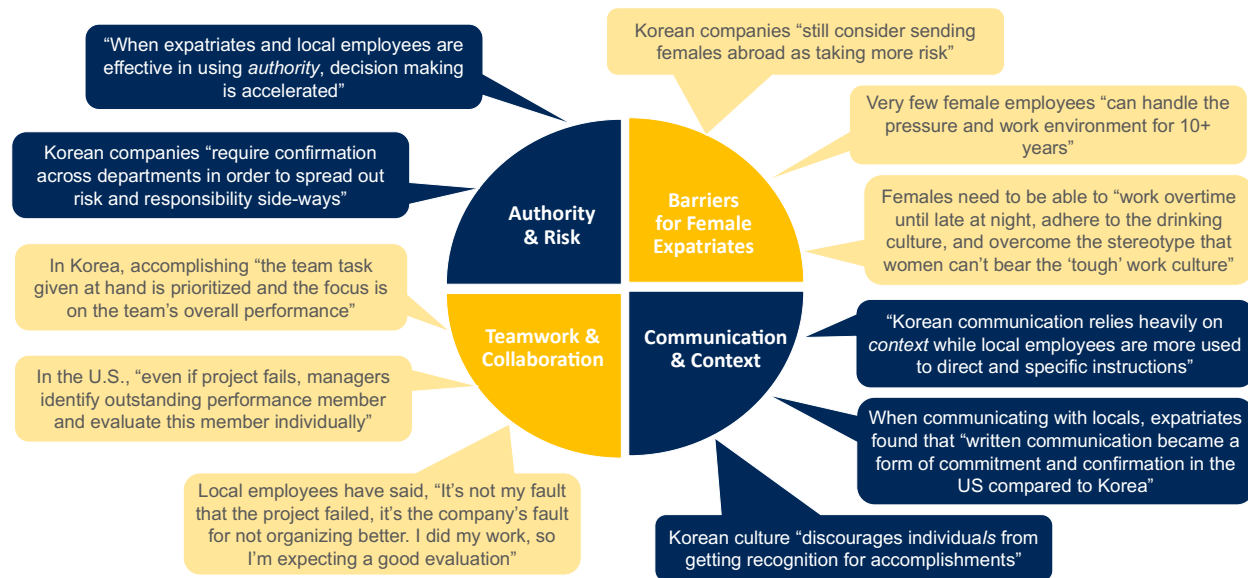
Prior to the interview, interviewees were asked the language in which they prefer to be interviewed in – either Korean or English. Based on their comfort level articulating experiences, the interviewee had the opportunity to select the language these interviews will be performed in. Interviewees were also asked to fill out the consent form that verified their willingness to participate in the interviews (see Appendix H). Interviews were not recorded as it could include personal and confidential information regarding the interviewee or the corporation. Potentially related to ego protection, conversations about hierarchy, performance, and assignments may be

sensitive topics that interviewees may not directly want to talk about. In order to navigate this challenge, projective techniques were used to ask specific questions, allowing participants to project their own thoughts onto someone other than themselves. Rather than asking questions that directly address the participant, the interviewee was able to speculate the posed question on other people or situations (Stricker, 2001). For instance, questions like “In your experience, what have been the biggest challenges of working with local U.S. employees?” were asked more indirectly – “What advice would you give me (or a U.S. employee) if I were to go and work at a Korean multinational corporation in Korea vs. U.S.?”

Results – Major Findings

In order to organize the interview findings, key insights were distilled into four areas in the literature review that are particularly important based on the interviewee responses: 1) Risk & Authority, 2) Teamwork & Collaboration, 3) Communication & Context, and 4) Barriers for Korean Female Expatriates. Each area illustrates different aspects of the research goal and questions.

Sources of cultural difference creating inefficiencies (from the perspective of Korean expatriates when interacting with local employees)



* Interview results are also categorized and summarized in a chart (see Appendix I). How this topic relates to the research questions will be analyzed in more detail in the discussion section.

Risk & Authority

One major finding was that lower-level managers get more authority and responsibility in the U.S. compared to Korea. In the interviews, several respondents pointed out the diverging understanding of authority granted to the local managers. According to the Korean managers, "if expatriates and local employees are effective in using this authority, decision making is accelerated" (Shin). It can reduce levels of decisions making and time consumed between communication channels, while minimizing complicated reporting procedures. Other expatriates said that "employee ownership, loyalty, and flexibility are increased, which leads to higher employee motivation" (Lee). They are "not motivated by other people's requests," but rather "rely on the individual's ability to use their own authority to make decisions" (Seo).

While the Korean expatriates were well-aware of the numerous benefits of the streamlined decision-making process, they still required the local employees to follow the multi-

step confirmation process. Expatriates said that this step is “required” in Korean organizations because “it spreads out the risk side-ways, across multiple stakeholders and departments” (Kim1). According to Kim1 and Oh, “one person is never fully responsible for a decision” in Korean organizations. The potential risk of the power being abused is too large as it becomes a “huge compliance and liability risk” (Lee). Expatriates have also observed that this leads to increased costs, because employees don’t consider the financial impact of their decisions when they don’t have to get approval from their superiors. Compared to a “more authoritative, structured Korean process,” the more lenient U.S. organizational culture increases expenditure drastically (Kim1). Based on Kim1’s statements, U.S. managers with more discretion care less about expenditure because they don’t need to report or get approval from their superiors.

Teamwork & Collaboration

The next major finding was that Korean culture emphasizes “group” and “teamwork” whereas U.S. culture rewards individual achievement more. When expatriates first encountered the locals, they were surprised at how “individualistic and carefree” employees were of other team members (Kim2). In Korean organizational culture, performance evaluation is heavily based on the team’s overall performance. Expatriates said that “the group task given at hand is prioritized and the focus is on the team’s overall performance” (Shin). Specifically, in terms of low performance, “individual performance cannot be good when the team performance wasn’t great” (Park). On the other hand, U.S. organizational culture is “more lenient about freedom of failure” (Oh). Expatriates have noticed that companies in Silicon Valley, especially, value learning from failure compared to other regions. As a result, “even if a project fails, managers identify outstanding performance members and evaluate these members differently” (Lee). One expatriate described that they hear local employees say “It’s not my fault that the project failed,

it's the company or manager's fault for not organizing better. I completed my responsibilities, so I am expecting a good performance evaluation [regardless of the team's performance]" (Park).

Expatriates also noticed that local U.S. employees are more vocal about appealing their contributions compared to Korean employees and sometimes even seemed "too aggressive" when expressing their contribution level (Lee). Expatriates identified the long-term impact of this cultural difference; Korean engineers at the technology KMNCs "are recognized for being very skilled, smart, and knowledgeable, but they aren't seen at higher level management" (Park). Compared to locals or even international employees from other Asian countries such as India and China, Koreans "rarely talk about their own accomplishments in teams" (Shin). Managers believe that this is due to the fact that Korean culture "discourages individuals from standing out and receiving recognition for individual accomplishments" (Kim2).

Communication & Context

In addition to the difference in understanding of collaboration, expatriates have noticed significant divergence in communication styles and expectations. The most outstanding difference in working style was the "explicit guidelines and work standards in the U.S. environment" (Seo). When communicating with local employees, expatriates found that "written communication became a form of commitment and confirmation compared to Korea" (Shin). Expatriates were more cautious when crafting an email as "it is taken as a form of commitment and promise" in the U.S. (Seo). Another expatriate expressed that "Korean communication relies heavily on context while local employees are more used to clear and specific instructions" (Lee). As a result, local employees often do not "understand their responsibilities after team meetings and are confused about the ambiguous interpretations of assignments" (Park).

Working hours was also a key source of conflict between the expatriates and local employees. Korean employees are used to working overtime and there is an “unspoken culture” that the lower-level employees need to stay at work until the senior person leaves. Several expatriates were very surprised to see local employees “leave right at 6pm” (Kim2). They expressed that this “could have had a negative impact on the relationship between the expatriate and the employee,” potentially resulting in the U.S. employee receiving a lower performance score (Shin). Korean received training regarding these liabilities prior to coming to the U.S., but the “limited communication hours and methods were major barriers preventing efficient interaction” from the perspective of Korean expatriates (Oh).

Barriers for Korean Female Expatriates

Lastly, male expatriates provided insight into the potential causes of the lack of Korean female expatriates in the U.S. According to the interviews, there were four major reasons contributing to this phenomenon:

First, there is a very small pool of Korean female employees even at headquarters. Compared to other industries, the technology conglomerates have a lower percentage of female employees in the organization. In addition to the limited number of entry-level female employees, very few female employees “can handle the pressure and work environment for 10+ years” (Lee). Korean employees need to meet a certain criterion to become an expatriate candidate: usually 10+ years of experience holding a title of senior manager or above. In order to get to this level, female employees need to be able to “work overtime until late at night, adhere to the drinking culture in Korean organizations and overcome the stereotype that women can’t handle the ‘tough’ work culture” (Kim2). This leads to very few Korean females taking on

leadership roles and thus the chances of females getting an expatriate role in the U.S. is significantly lower.

There was also a personal dimension where Korean female employees are forced to choose between family and the expatriate assignment. Male expatriates expressed that “if a female employee is married, it’s very difficult for them to accept an assignment abroad because the husband - who is usually working, considered head of household - would have to quit his job for the wife” (Kim1). Also, according to Shin, when female expatriates come to the U.S. by themselves, it has historically resulted in them being “less psychologically stable.”

From the organizational perspective, Korean technology conglomerates “have been putting more and more effort into retaining female employees” (Shin). More companies are recognizing the need to promote women to management as a part of their “diversity initiatives.” Although companies usually have four- or five-year terms when they see an increase in the number of female expatriates, Park pointed out that companies still “consider sending females abroad as taking more risk.” According to Park, challenging experiences with previous female expatriate assignments contributed greatly to the recent decline in female positions at his organization. From the company’s perspective, this situation was very challenging to manage as they lost the very important “middle” person for more than four months. Previous experiences with female expatriates have contributed to this reluctance for companies to send Korean female employees to assignments in the U.S.

A common theme that was brought up during the interviews were how the male expatriates always encourage female colleagues to “get through” the tough couple years. Many expatriates emphasized “once you get to a certain level, you will be ‘sought out’ by the company

and will benefit from the advantages of being one of the few female managers in a male-dominated environment” (Park).

Discussion

Prior research on expatriates have focused on facets of individual expatriate adjustability and adaptability. These studies have analyzed individual differences that influence the expatriate’s adaptability to the local environment. As mentioned in the introduction, the goal of this research is to examine how factors of the social environment such as national and organizational culture, specifically related to hierarchy, influences the relationship between expatriates and local employees (see Appendix E, F). It assesses how cultural and organizational differences can have the greatest impact on the nature of the interaction between expatriates and local employees. By interviewing Korean expatriates, this study sheds light on the challenges of adapting and collaborating with U.S. locals from the expatriate’s perspective. The study is more specific to differences between Eastern (Korea) vs Western (USA) culture and confirms that the culture of origin cultural distance is a significant predictor of adjustment and suggests that organizations may need to revise international staffing policies and training. Four areas with the greatest sources of conflict were: 1) difference in authority-level of lower-level employees, 2) attitudes towards collaboration and teamwork, and 3) communication styles and methods, and 4) barriers Korean females face in expatriate assignments.

First, the diverging expectations about authority and organizational risk-management contribute to reduced autonomy and increased sentiments of distrust among local U.S. employees towards expatriate managers and the Korean organization. As lower-level employees get less authority in Korean organizations, local U.S. employees express dissatisfaction about the extra approval processes they need to go through during decision-making. From a practical point of

view, local employees consider the step unnecessary and inconvenient to get approval every single time. Local employees experience increased sentiments of disconnection and believe that their superiors don't trust their abilities. According to a local U.S. employee that works under a Korean manager, trying to check at every step of the process "feels like an intrusion" (Schechtman).

On the other hand, Korean expatriates support the multi-level, structured reporting process in order to manage risk and spread responsibility among multiple stakeholders. With cross-checking, they can "reduce expenses and minimize unnecessary spending," which is their way of protecting employees (Shin). This tendency to manage risk is not only rooted in the collectivistic Korean national culture, but the corporate structure of *chaebols* in Korea. Conglomerates are owned by families and serve as the backbone of the Korean economy (Cho & Yoon, 2001). As a result, the organizational culture is largely interdependent and multi-step, cross-departmental communication is preferred to a streamlined decision-making process. This misalignment in the level of authority granted to local employees challenges expatriates and results in relationship conflict – personal and negative emotional interactions that develop over disagreements and differences.

Next, the difference in understanding of collaboration and teamwork change expectations about performance evaluations, which becomes a key source of struggle for expatriate managers. Korean culture recognizes "effort" and "processes" more than the U.S. – specifically Silicon Valley – culture where the focus is more on individual success and achievement. Korean organizational culture also demonstrates stronger in- vs. out-group culture where employees are discouraged from standing out from the crowd. Due to these differences, expatriates are in a

difficult position as they need to apply varying standards when evaluating their local subordinates.

As mentioned above, I argue that there is a strong connection between organizational and national culture: organizational culture is an integral part of national culture (Exhibit E). Values, symbols, histories of a nation are starting points in shaping the cultures of organizations operating in that geographic area. Having an organized, hierarchical structure that emphasizes collectivism is an integral aspect of demonstrating strong organizational culture in Korea. When these values are projected out to the U.S. employees, it can easily backfire. Expatriates struggle as they need to carefully consider and appropriately adjust to the diverging emphasis placed on team vs. individual work effort and contribution. When an expatriate supervisor is in charge of giving the local subordinate his or her assignments, they are playing the moderating role of “workplace reporting relationship.” Managers are challenged to be very attentive to evaluations and performance ratings as these metrics often lead to very important decisions regarding compensation and promotions.

Third, the context-based communication style in Korean organizations compared to the direct communication style in the U.S. result in misunderstandings and process losses. When Korean expatriate managers communicate in a Korean setting, they heavily rely on context-based verbal and non-verbal cues. From the perspective of U.S. employees, this serves as a barrier in interpreting the exact assignment or instruction. Challenges arise between expatriates and local subordinates whenever there is a deviation from expectations. For instance, in the more objective-oriented cultural setting, local U.S. managers struggle because Korean expatriates see leaving work early as a sign of “less effort and engagement” (Park). As such, the established

expectations related to context and communication contribute to the increased challenge in the interaction between Korean expatriates and the U.S. local employees..

Lastly, expatriate research has found that technical expertise and domestic track record are dominant selection criteria in expatriate recruitment (Schneider & Tung, 2001). However, this statement did not seem to hold among Korean female expatriate assignments. Based on the male expatriates' interview results, the challenges Korean females face in expatriate assignments were identified to be multi-layered. Females not only need to overcome stereotypes and “survive” the hierarchical, male-dominated corporate culture, but also manage their personal priorities between family and career. These factors combined together serve as a significant barrier to Korean female employees, limiting their ability to take on international assignments.

In order to mitigate these differences, expatriates devote significant time and resources to explain the reasoning behind Korean policies. From the organizational perspective, this is extremely “inefficient” as it is very marginally related to their key role of serving as intermediary decision-maker between headquarters and the host country. Expatriates stated that his Korean team “spend hours trying to explain their motivation for the multi-step cross-departmental approval process” (Kim). According to Park, however, this process has not been effective because “I am their boss and local team members already think that me asking them to get approval from different department leaders means that I don't trust them.” As such, there is a lack of understanding on how expatriates can effectively communicate these differences to local employees, minimizing the source of conflict.

Expatriates also demonstrate varying degrees of adjustment in the four categories with some adapting to these differences more quickly than others. One expatriate shared that clear and straightforward instructions bring the best performance out of local employees, so “just make

sure to let them know exactly what you want” (Park). Successful managers were able to address these conflicts openly and even went beyond these four areas to openly discuss the differences. They have mitigated the struggle by “granting more authority to local managers and convincing Korean headquarters” in order to test out the efficiency of a more streamlined decision-making process. As such, the willingness of expatriates to partially concede their traditional, highly authoritative custom to adapt to the local was a key success metric for Korean expatriates.

Limitations

Although the exploratory study provides original and valuable insight, the research has some notable limitations. First, there is a small sample size that may impact the reliability and validity of the conclusions drawn. The small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study prevents from making general statements about Korean expatriates. Ideally, with the larger sample of expatriates and quantitative data, we would be able to perform a regression analysis on how hierarchy and gender perception influences the effectiveness and performance of Korean expatriates. However, the goal of the study was to gather experiential data to motivate future research. The interview results build upon the current framework and address important challenges impacting the effectiveness of Korean expatriates in the Silicon Valley area.

Next, summarizing the interview results and focusing on the similarities between the responses, this study identified the “corporate culture” of Korean companies under one big umbrella. The assumption being made here is that there is consistent corporate culture among the technology KMNCs based in Silicon Valley. However, this generalization may be misleading as there may be variability between companies; company specific reporting structures and confirmation requirements can contribute to existing perceptions of hierarchy in organizations.

Interviews have demonstrated that many Korean expatriates share very similar challenges and experiences due to the consistent structure expatriate assignments and responsibilities. As a result, the findings pertaining to contextual influences were validated through multiple interviews, but additional contextual influences on expatriate effectiveness may have influenced expatriates' experience at various levels. It will be important to identify these key variables that may have contributed to an expatriate's cross-cultural motivation.

Third, expatriates were not studied over a period of time; adjustment and performance were analyzed from a certain point in time during their assignments. Harrison et al.'s (2004) review pointed out the lack of longitudinal research on expatriates. Analyzing the different responses of expatriates based on their experience level or adjustment period could serve as an important extension of findings by shedding more light on possible influences of expatriate work and hierarchical organizational structures.

Finally, the study on Korean female expatriates and the challenges they face regarding assignments were strictly analyzed from the perspective of male expatriates. Although there was significant effort put into identifying Korean female expatriates, there were not very many working in the U.S. at the moment. While the interview results provide preliminary insight into the organizational barriers from the male co-worker's perspective, the results may differ when directly analyzed from the perspective of Korean female employees.

Suggestions for Future Research

As mentioned above, this exploratory study makes some important contributions in the cross-cultural expatriate effectiveness literature. However, further investigation is needed to

better understand specific factors that caused the inefficiencies that arise from the diverging understanding of culture and organizational hierarchy. Regarding the important role of local employees, this study raises the question of whether it may be beneficial to implement formalized training programs - specifically related to perception of hierarchy - for local employees who will be working or interacting with expatriates.

Previous literature has focused on providing general adaptation strategies for expatriates, regardless of cultural context. While there is no doubt that better pre-assignment planning, selection, and training can help organizations find individuals who are better suited to expatriate assignments, the role of locals and the social environment has been understudied. The perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of locals can have a significant effect on the expatriates' experience, from adjustment to work success, to understanding local norms and practices (Toh et al., 2004). As Black (1988) notes, locals are usually the best source of information for the expatriate when it comes to learning about local work practices, culture, and the local organization itself. As such, there is abundant research about cross-cultural training for *expatriates*, but no effort has been made to educate and train *local employees* for the transition. Implementing a training program for the local employees will set expectations from both sides, contributing to a more open and deeper understanding of where each perspective is coming from. What kind of processes should be taken from the company's perspective to address the four key areas of conflict? What are ways to quantify the effectiveness of training programs to assess whether it will be worth implementing these two-way training programs?

Secondly, the study can be extended to directly study Korean female expatriates. Although the limited availability did not allow for this study to interview Korean female expatriates in the U.S., it will be insightful to explore whether the same barriers are identified

from the female's perspective. If there are no Korean female expatriates available in the U.S., studies can be performed with female employees working in Korea to investigate the barriers they encounter in taking on the foreign assignments.

Lastly, this study can be scaled up to investigate its applicability in a more generalized setting. It will be insightful to research conglomerates or subsidiaries outside of the technology industry to analyze whether similar trends are observed in Korean non-technology organizations. Future studies should also use larger samples and compare and contrast the experiences and attitudes of expatriates from other Asian multinationals toward living and working in the U.S. as well as other developed markets. This will allow research to isolate the cause of a certain action to more specifically the influence of "Korean culture" rather than an "Asian" one. The study was conducted in the context of Korean and American cultures, so the findings may have limited generalizability in other cross-cultural contexts. Future research can extend the scope of this subject beyond just the two countries included in the study to compare and contrast the impact of the results.

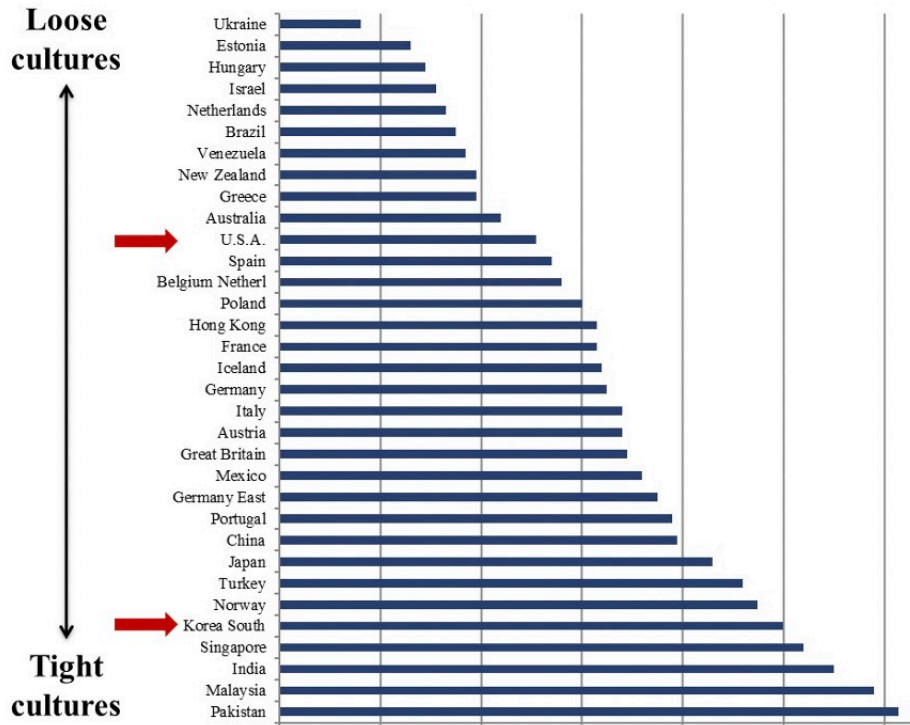
Conclusion

This exploratory study presented a new dimension in the cross-cultural expatriate literature by examining how misalignment in understanding of hierarchy impacts expatriate performance at KMNCs operating in the U.S. By assessing the social and environmental factors that influence the Korean expatriate and the local U.S. employee, the interview results presented four key areas that prevented the two groups from working together effectively. Diverging understanding of authority and corporate risk management, conflicting objectives in team performance and evaluations, distinct preferences in communication styles, and multi-layered

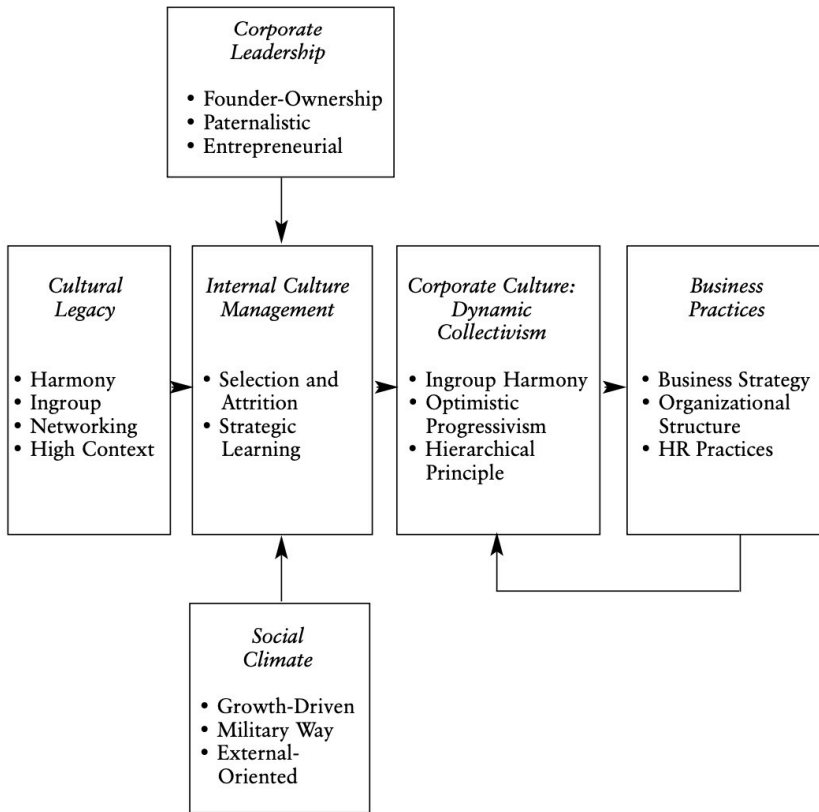
barriers Korean females face in expatriate assignments. These conflicts in the four dimensions have contributed to the struggle Korean expatriates experience during their assignments. Overall, the perceived impact these cultural differences has on both the expatriate and the local employee needs to be analyzed further. It is important to understand the impact of such cultural differences as many Korean multinationals send expatriates on a regular basis to oversee the operations of many locations in the U.S. By focusing specifically on the misalignment in understanding of hierarchy, this research provides preliminary direction for corporations to adapt their cross-cultural training programs for U.S.-bound Korean expatriates and local employees.

Appendices

Appendix A: Loose vs Tight Culture Scale - Korea vs United States



Appendix B: Model for Korean Corporate Culture - Dynamic Collectivism

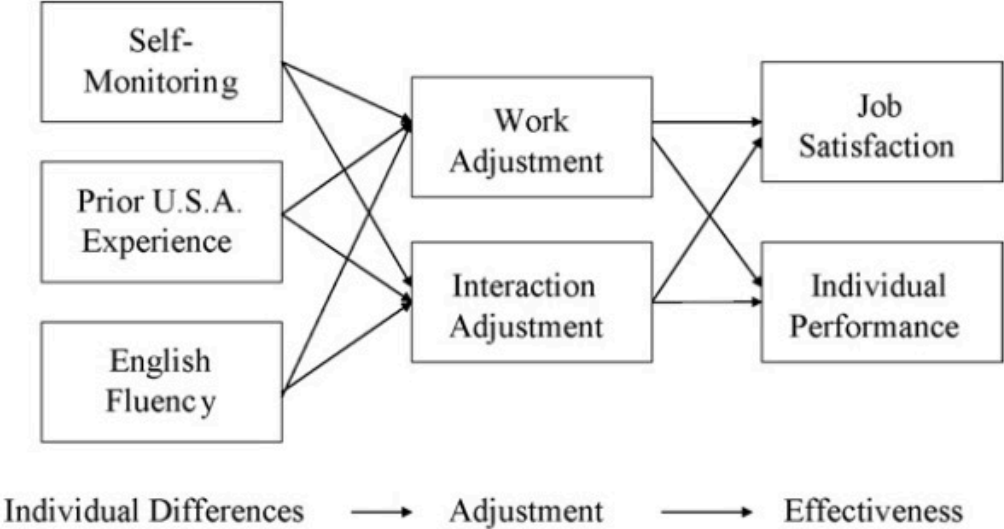


Appendix C: A Cycle of Dominant Behavioral Norms in Korean Firms

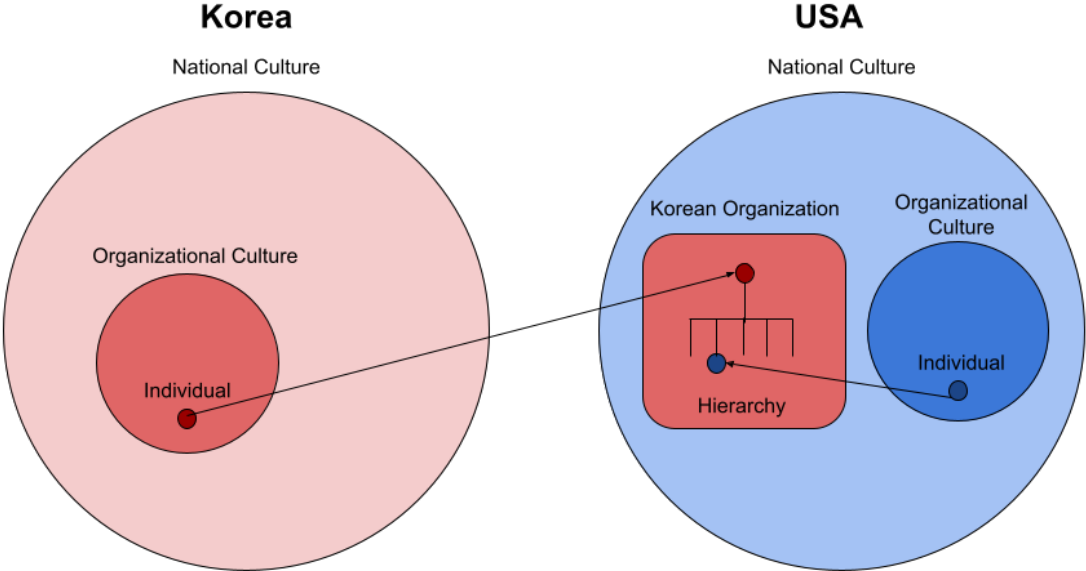


Appendix D: Relationship between Individual Differences and Expatriate Assignment

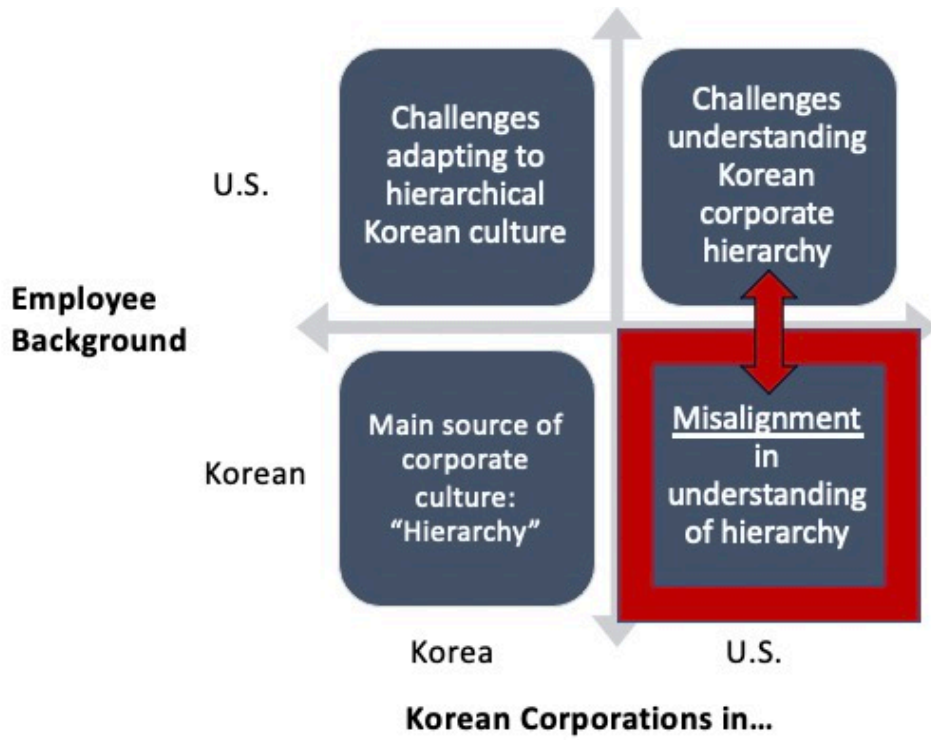
Effectiveness



Appendix E: Research Scope Identification – Cultural Influence



Appendix F: Research Scope Identification – Individual Relationships



Appendix G: Proposed Questions for Korean Female Expatriates

Female Expatriates

1. What are/were the biggest challenges of working as a female in Korea?
2. What are some challenges of working as a Korean female expatriate in the US?
3. How are expatriate assignments usually perceived as (favorable, opportunity for children's education, opportunity for promotion) between Korean female employees?
4. Why do you think there are very few women expatriate assignments? What do you think are the main barriers that prevent women from taking on these assignments?
5. Are Korean men more often offered these opportunities or is it that women decline the offer even when they are offered to assignments abroad?
6. What training did you receive in regard to cross-cultural adjustment? Do you think it was helpful, especially in understanding the local employees and work culture?

Appendix H: Interviewee Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study about the impact of hierarchy and gender perception in expatriate performance at Korean Multinational Corporations.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to answer questions about your experience as a Korean expatriate in the U.S. You may also be asked to share your opinion about how hierarchy and gender perception has affected you while adapting to the new environment.

Benefits of the Research

This research will develop an understanding of how misalignment in perception of hierarchy impacts expatriate performance. Focusing on the cultural differences that define hierarchy, the study will propose future research questions regarding hierarchy and gender in the expatriate literature. It can also propose ways for Korean corporations to change their expatriate training programs to better fit the needs of Korean expatriates.

Risks and Discomforts

Psychological or Emotional risk: Talking about the challenges of working as an expatriate in a different culture may be discomfoting. Discussion of conflict with local employees may be discomfoting.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer any interview questions or continue with the interview for any reason.

We will protect the confidentiality of your research records by 1) not recording any audio or video interviews, 2) not disclosing names and positions of interviewees, and 3) not associating names with responses when requested.

Information collected in this project may be shared with other researchers, but we will not share any information that could identify you.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Christine Oh, chroh@umich.edu or Michael Jensen, michjen@umich.edu

As part of their review, the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences has determined that this study is no more than minimal risk and exempt from on-going IRB oversight.

Appendix I: Interview Results– Summary and Implications

Key Themes	Korean Expatriates	Local U.S. Employee	Hierarchy/Organizational Structure Implications
Authority & Risk	<p>Mitigate corporate risk through multi-step, cross-departmental approval processes</p> <p>Goal is to reduce risk and possibility of failure by not giving one person too much authority or decision-making power</p> <p>Required to follow instructions from superior</p> <p>Corporate culture discourages risk-taking decisions</p>	<p>Lower-level employees have more authority, decision-making power</p> <p>Simpler, streamlined decision-making process: less requirements leading to accelerated approval confirmations</p> <p>Culture encourages individual (employee) risk-taking in decision-making</p>	<p><u>Organizational-level culture</u> Conglomerate: interconnectivity, reduced compliance & regulatory risk</p> <p><u>National-level culture</u> Authority creates structure and reinforces hierarchy</p> <p>Local U.S. employees experience reduced autonomy and increased sentiments of distrust towards expatriate managers as lower-level employees get less authority in Korean organizations</p>
Teamwork & Collaboration	<p>Collectivist culture</p> <p>Group success/failure prioritized in evaluations</p> <p>Individual team members are willing to sacrifice for recognition of team’s success</p> <p>Culture discourages employees who stand out</p>	<p>Individualistic culture</p> <p>Personal rewards & benefits prioritized</p> <p>Despite team failure, individual employees want to be recognized for work accomplished</p> <p>Employees are more proactive in speaking up about own contribution to project</p>	<p><u>Organizational-level culture</u> Expatriates perceived as out-group among local employees</p> <p><u>National-level culture</u> Group performance vs individual performance prioritization</p> <p>Expatriates adapt varying standards in performance and promotion evaluations between Korean vs. U.S. employees as Korean culture recognizes “effort” and “processes” more than individual achievement.</p>

<p>Communication & Context</p>	<p>Largely relies on context-based verbal and written communication</p> <p>Email used as informal, preliminary confirmation</p> <p>Very common to work over-time, need to be flexible to adapt to need of superior: unspoken culture not to go home before boss leaves</p>	<p>Preference for direct, straightforward instructions and directions from expatriate</p> <p>Email used as a formal confirmation, “confirmation”</p> <p>Not accustomed to working over 6pm, communication after work hours viewed as crossing the boundary</p>	<p>Context-based communication styles in Korean organizations as opposed to more direct, written confirmation processes in the U.S. result in both top-down and bottom-up misinterpretations and process losses.</p>
<p>Barriers for Korean Female Expatriates</p>	<p>Multi-layered, heavily hierarchy-dependent challenges: 1) small pool of female employees in Korea, 2) willingness to bear 10+ years of tough Korean work culture, 3) choice between family and career, 4) “risky” previous female expatriate assignments</p>		

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