

The Lived Experiences of Expatriate Workers within the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

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Abstract

This study identifies specific factors which contribute to lower levels of organizational commitment for non-UAE nationals. This exploratory study utilized a qualitative phenomenology interview method. This qualitative study method examines the lived experiences of expatriate workers employed within the UAE through interviews. These interviews employ a heuristic approach throughout their analysis. All interviews conducted for this study utilized a semi-structured interview format. All participants in this study self-identified as American. Additionally, social demographic data such as age, business sector, family size and years employed within the UAE. This data was collected prior to the interviews.

This study's findings credited lower levels of organizational commitment reported by expatriates' as the result of prolonged experiences of distinctiveness, othering and weathering. The consequence of these experiences of social categorizing was the resulting feelings of high levels of dissatisfaction with their decision to work and live in the UAE. The final portion of this study recommend a number of interventions designed to reduce the expressed dissatisfaction in the areas identified by the expatriate workers interviewed for this study. Subsequently, the findings from these interviews contributed to the development of policy recommendations intended to support, sustain and retain non-UAE nationals.

Introduction

Workplace culture have been the focus of many studies in recent years. Many of these recent studies have considered the intersection of cultural diversity, multi-nationalism and organizational commitment as expressed within the administrative structures of organizations located within the UAE. The levels of organizational commitment within the UAE workforce have rarely been examined in recent studies. The rich cultural diversity expressed within the UAE workforce provides researchers with a unique opportunity to examine the effects of multiple cultural dynamics within the workplace. The UAE, unlike the United States of America, does not claim to be fortified by its diverse tapestry of expatriate workers. However, the UAE since its very inception, has remained highly dependent on its ability to attract, support, manage and motivate diverse masses of skilled and unskilled workers. The UAE unlike some western countries does not try to blur the lines of identity through the creation of a new unifying nationalist identity. Instead, workers invited to the UAE are allowed, even expected to maintain their own sense of identity, whether that be based on one's nation of origin, geographic affiliations, tribal affiliations, or even one's diaspora affiliations (Al-Jenaibi, 2012).

A recent study found that the UAE continues to be the most attractive country in the Arabian Peninsula/Middle Eastern region for expatriates to live and work, with Dubai most often mentioned as the most desired Emirate for expatriates to live within the UAE. Yet, recently reported job growth numbers may not be simply a favorably reflection of the UAE business environment; instead it may be a pronounced reaction to Europe's, North America's and other Western markets' poor economic outlook. Another issue of concern expressed within the literature is the drastic decrease in UAE nationals entering

and remaining in the private sectors due to the availability of higher salaries in the public sectors as well as an increased sense of purpose. For this reason the UAE is experiencing a large decrease in employment of UAE nationals especially in middle and upper level management positions in the private business sectors.

Literature Review

Large numbers of people of Arabian descent, from other surrounding countries live and work in the UAE. In addition to Arabian populations, there are many Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Filipinos living and working in the United Arab Emirates (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Expatriates represent 90% of the UAE's workforce. As of 2010, Emirati citizens made up only about 12 percent of the population living in the UAE (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). From these statistics it is apparent that non-UAE nationals represent a vast majority of the UAE's human capital. In light of these high numbers of expatriates from diverse ethnic and racial groups, a further study considering the interplay of these factor is highly recommended.

Due to the large number of expatriates currently working within the UAE, it becomes clear that the future economic prosperity of the UAE is directly related to the UAE's ability to acquire high quality workers for hard to fill occupations. Recent studies have shown that high levels of workplace diversity in the UAE have not been a hindrance to productivity. Instead many reports have shown that disconnects within the workplace have often restrained organizations. Many of these factors which are seemingly tertiary in nature both independently and collectively can hinder productivity levels (Al-Jenaibi, 2012).

One study by Al-Jenaibi (2012) credited reported reduced levels of productivity in highly diverse organizations operating within the UAE as the result of noise generated through mis-communications. English is the most common spoken languages in the workplace in the UAE. Commonly spoken levels and the effects of alternating English language proficiency on productivity have yet to be widely considered within the literature. Al-Jenaibi's research (2012) suggested that culture differences often reduce all irrelative communication in extremely diverse workplaces into noise that often obscuring traditional communication channels. Al-Jenaibi (2012) attributes much of this noise to low levels of English language proficiency. Hence, a further understanding of the impact which cultural differences may have on an extremely diverse workforce may not be properly understood until factors such as the effects of communication can be properly isolated within alternative studies. Additionally, non-verbal articulations of cultural differences such as body-language, acceptable physical spatial distances, as well as, physical-hygiene have been considered in the literature. The interaction of these various factors and their effects on workplace productivity have yet to be explored fully.

Finally, the federal government's policy of Emeritization (the quota system which places priority on the employment of UAE nationals) and its effects on the diverse community of expatriate workers within the UAE requires additional review. High levels of unemployment experienced by UAE nationals since the economic recession of 2008 have lead to the development of governmental policies based on quotas. Studies conducted by Forstenlechner, Lettice, & Özbilgin's, (2012) have explored the effects of these types of quota styled governmental policies on the productivity of the expatriate workforce. Their resulting research went further to draw a direct correlation between the government's policies on Emeritization to reduced levels of organizational commitment and productivity in expatriate workers (Forstenlechner, Lettice, & Özbilgin's, 2012). This study went further to explain that many expatriate workers found the governmental quota systems to be a demotivating factor which hindered perceptions of future growth opportunities.

The diverse workforce currently residing within the UAE is relevant to the UAE's future success simply because of the sheer numerical mass this demographic represents. Not only does this massive workforce contribute to the economic success of the UAE through the expansion of its production capabilities (a result of the increased numbers of available of workers regionally), this large expatriate workforce also provides specializations often uncommon or readily unavailable within the region to support new business development and continued growth. The direct benefactors of this economic growth are the indigenous population which simply lacks the number of people to support the rapid level of sustained continuous growth which the UAE has experienced over the past 20 years.

Methodology

This sample collected for this study was a convenience sample, participants were recruited via word of mouth. Ideally, a sample would be distributed equally across the study's target populations, region and years of work experience within the UAE. However, due to limited resources such as time and the difficulty of locating willing interview participants from the target population, alternative recruitment methods were utilized. Seven interviews were conducted with non-UAE nationals from America. Americans who participated in this study were allowed to self-identify.

Interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo. Once this data had been collected and analyzed, it was then organized into relevant thematic strands. These themes were then analyzed and sequenced by their level of relevance to the research question;

1. What is the lived experience of non-UAE nationals working in the UAE?
2. How do work life experiences inform the personal lives of non-UAE nationals?

Hence, this study was designed to inform us of the why and how. Meaning was structured through the lived experiences of non-UAE nationals participating in this study. With a better understanding of how and what informs meaning in the lives of these non-UAE nationalists, this study then proposed recommendations to further support non-UAE nationals considering the transition to professional positions within the UAE.

Analysis

The data accumulated for the purpose of this study were collected from American expatriate workers. All participants included in this study were living in the UAE at the time their interview was conducted. All participants were also working in the UAE during the time these interviews were conducted. The seven participants interviewed for this study included three men and four women.

Data collected for the purpose of this study were analyzed using Phenomenological research techniques. Phenomenological research techniques systematically codes which then categorizes raw data into manageable units. These units are then analyzed in order to isolate and organize these natural emerging categories, themes and patterns (Patton, 2002). Transcripts were reviewed by professional peers. A preliminary list of codes and definitions were developed and refined continuously throughout the research process. Codes were extracted from the transcripts to illustrate the identified themes.

The interviews were designed to address four different categories. These separate four dimensions include: work motivation, culture inclusion, power relation and health security. Work motivation consisted of questions which attempted to address core issues which motivated work seeking and work commitment behaviors. The section on cultural inclusion considers factors which addresses American expatriate efforts to acculturation themselves within the cultural practices of the UAE. The questions on power relations spoke to the participants' ability to establish relationships which supports professional progress and personal security. Lastly, the section on health security asked participants to acknowledge their experiences with the health care systems while living in the UAE.

Results

The seven interviews conducted were analyzed using phenomenological method. The qualitative process specific to phenomenology is differentiated from other qualitative research methods in its persistent search for the answer to the question *why*. Phenomenology was first used to analyze biblical texts (Patton, 2002) and has since evolved as a technique to examine the lived experiences of individuals as reported in the written word. Thus, the questions of why and how the lived experiences are understood by the observer drive the phenomenological research method (Manen, 1990). Phenomenology, like most qualitative research methods, requires an acknowledgement of the researcher's personal bias. Hence, through a process of bracketing the researcher's subjectivity, one allows for the objective analysis of the subject matter. What follows, although somewhat reductive in nature, is a critical evaluation of the narratives which have been researched and gathered together for this paper. The goal of this critique of interviews was to isolate the ethos of the subject until the essence of the phenomenon is revealed (Lumadue & Waller, 2013).

In this article, the recurring questions, interests and expressed concerns that manifested in a majority of the interviews were first isolated based on repetition of the themes within various interviews. Once these pertinent areas of interest were identified, all interviews, were then reviewed again and evaluated based on the criteria established in these interviews. For the purpose of this study, these areas are reduced into the following categories; distinctiveness, othering and weathering.

Discussion

The results of the interviews suggested that all interviews experienced some level of discomfort as a result of their expatriate status. The main factors which were discussed played a large role in the expatriates' decision to remain or leave the UAE. Even though, many of the interviews were organized into the separate four dimensions of work motivation, cultural inclusion, power relation and health security; surprisingly these four categorizes failed to directly address the major influences which played the greatest role in determining how soon or if the expatriates interviewed for this study would depart from the UAE. Hence, for the purpose of this study the various forms of discomfort experienced by these expatriates have been organized into the following three categorizes of distinctiveness, othering and weathering and are further discussed below.

The term "distinctiveness" speaks to one's public experience of being different. Distinctiveness more specifically addresses how well one perceives their fit within their larger cultural-contexts. The further one is out of alignment with the greater body-politic, the higher the level of distinctiveness experienced by the individual. Hence, distinctiveness can address the feelings one associates with being identified as distinct from the majority population for many different reasons, including members of alternative religions practices, alternative views of acceptable behaviors for women as well as culturally appropriate responses to power distance.

Although the experience of being distinctive is usually the result of being stigmatized by others, the feelings caused by this experience of being identified as someone who is distinctive within a community tends to remain far after any public incidence has transpired. The implicit difference of being identified as distinctive within a community is that it is often seen as a personal indictment and traditionally based on some characteristic which are out of one's personal control. The uncontrollable and random nature of the characteristics which distinguish someone as different (body shape or size, material status, intelligence level, class distinction, etc.) often leave the individuals who are identified as distinctive within a community feeling as if their differences are not random, but predestined. This perception of being distinctive can often result in the development of damaging internal narratives which attempt to rationalize the experience of being defined within a community as distinctive.

Analysis of the data found that interviewees reported high levels of distinctiveness. None reported being told the reason why they were treated in a hostile and demonstrative fashion in both professional settings as well as outside in the general public. All interviews reported similar experiences. The experiences were broad in range. One of the interviewees explained that she was yelled at by the Arabic language instructor who she was paying for language classes. The language instructor said, she could not understand why this young women and her family wanted to learn Arabic. Another interviewee said that she stood at a counter waiting for assistant for an unusually long time period. Other people walked up to the counter and were assisted immediately, while she waited. Once she realized that she was simply being ignored she left the establishment. However, both interviewees' experiences fall into the category of distinctiveness. Both interviewees also went further to explain that they had never been the recipient of such treatment while living in the United States.

Many of the interviewees described this feeling of distinctiveness. This major theme was woven throughout the entirety of their experiences while living within the UAE. Interaction between non-western communities became routine in nature. The interviewees explained that levels of distinctiveness tended to be reduced when in the company of people from their own culture accordingly many expatriates reduced their interactions with non-westerns. One interviewee referred to this level of cultural emergence with people from one's own culture as the "drug of loneliness." Such was this particular interview's way of liking the strong desire to interact with people from one's own culture as similar to that of a drug addicts need for drugs. Hence, the motivation behind this high level of immersion with individuals from one's own

culture was essential motivated by the desire to avoid interacting with other people from other cultural backgrounds who might have promoted further feelings of distinctiveness.

Additionally, many interviewees reported the experience of extreme social isolation. Many of the interviewees explained that they felt that they did not have a connection to the greater community as a whole. A majority of the interviewees described a heightened sense of social isolation and directly attributed these feelings to their inability to comfortably integrate into the social fabric of the greater community. Thus, the process of norming is not only seen as defining the communal norms, but also speaks to ones' ability to comfortably fit into a collectivist framework. Those who fail to fit into this framework are often defined as others. Othering is not only about difference, but the experience of being defined as extremely different. The very word is about the creation of another designation or category to define someone whose behaviors fall *too* far outside of the socially defined norms. Hence, this term is not only about socially acceptable norms, but also about the power to delegate who will be placed within this category of the other. This ability to determine which differences count and which ones do not warrant public scrutiny alternatively speaks to communal structures of power.

Furthermore, othering addresses the adjudication of systems of power as well as the structures which support and reinforce power as administered systematically. The very nature of othering indirectly focuses attention on the supportive systems which have the power to structure and prioritize relationships which may seem disconnected, invisible, un-authorized and random (possibly by design.) The more divine the formation of a structure, the less likely this power structure is to be questioned. Hence, the more normal and appropriate this structural organization of the norms may appear.

Although many of the interviewees did not use the term othering during their interviews to describe their experiences, many of the challenges which they identified described the process of being defined as the other. Some interviewees explained that their managers refused to allow them the same opportunity to participate in work place initiatives and access work place privileges simply because of they were viewed as other. Many interviewees who did not have this experience personally, yet viewed colleagues who had believed that they would have to leave the UAE sooner than later due to their perception of these behaviors as a violation of individuals' human rights as well as the harsh juxtaposition these behaviors presented to their personal sense of social justice.

The interviewees detailed experiences of discrimination. Although unclear as to why they received the treatment detailed in their interviews (what they themselves described as discriminatory treatment) from multiple populations, all interviewees reported some level of discriminatory treatment. Their treatment either at stores or work left many of the interviews with feelings of confusion, anger and violation. Although many of the interviewees explained that they had experienced discrimination within their own countries, most felt disempowered due to their unfamiliarity with the legal system and procedures of the UAE.

The term "weathering" refers to the process of extreme exposure to high levels of discriminatory practices. Recent research conducted by Geronimus, Hickens, Keene, and Bound (2006) suggests the continuation exposure to discriminatory practices as experienced over a long periods of time, can result in negative overall health consequences (both physical and psychological). Similar to any natural material that is left to experiences high levels of exposure to corrosive extremes such as temperature, weather, or ultra-violet rays, the human psyche and human body similarly reflects deterioration as a result of high levels of exposure to discriminatory practices (Geronimus, Hickens, Keene, & Bound, 2006). Geronimus et al. (2006) found the effects of weathering to be more profound in individuals "engaged in high-effort coping" (p. 826). This notion of "weathering" is to acknowledge discrimination as comparable to any other form of physical and psychological violence, possible differentiating itself only in the speed of its articulations and the quality of respect which those who are victimized by it (Geronimus et al., 2006).

Conclusion

The inability to improve the experiences reported by American expatriates working within the UAE will more than likely result in high levels of unplanned repatriation. Higher levels of repatriation often contribute to increased expenses associated with recruitment, relocation and retention. The promotion of negative experiences by returning expatriates through various media outlets might also lead to a

reduction of access to skilled professionals within certain sectors as well as increasing the cost of those who are willing to relocate to the UAE due to the perceived challenges associated with living in the UAE.

The challenges outlined within this study are not unique to the UAE, however the high number of expatriate workers who currently reside within the UAE have the possibility of creating a perfect storm: a perfect storm being the immediate reduction in the numbers of available workers. This shift in available workers can be the result of any number of factors, such as political unrest in the region as well as shifting oil pricing. These as well as other factors have the ability to quickly reduce economic incentives for the larger communities of expatriate workers currently residing within the UAE. It is for this reason that the challenges outlined within this study bear ample consideration. The development of social roots is one means by which expatriate workers might be convinced to remain within the UAE through good and bad economic times, regardless of their country of origins. Hence, the development of a sense of social cohesion with the surrounding community supports the development of other types of loyalties. These impact the ability of organization's located within the UAE seeking to maintain and continue recruitment of expatriate workers.

Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest the importance of community activities designed to further extend transnational understanding of social differences outside of judgmental stereotypical frameworks. Although The UAE has sustained a strong relationship with the west over the past twenty years, many of the interviewees reported experiencing an extreme amount of noise within their communication with non-westerners. Much of the noise appeared to be the result of stereotypes and prejudices embedded within and reinforced by western media. The transmission of these prejudices and stereotypes through media channels was believed to be one of the major undelaying causes attributed to many of the interviewees' high level of discomforts while living in the UAE. Reduction of stereotypes might be achieved through the development of community events which stress two-way interaction between the diverse expatriate communities living and working within the UAE. These activities needed to be designed in ways which emphasize social exchange and foster, not only an understanding and sharing of rich cultural differences, but also why and how they have developed.

The availability of supportive materials which convey the extent of the cultural differences between many western countries and the UAE, as well as, may other GCC countries needs to be further disseminated to newly recruited workers, before they are offered an opportunity to work in the UAE. Clarification of the legal system's organization and structures with regards to housing, banking, health and even basic social interactions, as well as the nuanced tacit rules which inform these interactions, should be defined to newly recruited expatriate workers. This extra levels of explanation might reduce the culture-shock experienced by newly arriving expatriate workers. Without doubt, planned response to lessen the impact of the forces of differentiations, othering and weathering holds the potential to help attract and retain expatriate workers.

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