# Do Expatriates Change their Behavior to Fit a Foreign Culture? A Study of American Expatriates' Strategies of Upward Influence

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# Abstract:

An analysis investigates the differences in Eastern and Western culture regarding strategies of upward influence, and the degree to which foreign culture behavioral tactics are adopted by expatriates. Subjects were Americans working in the US, Americans working in Hong Kong, and Hong Kong Chinese working in Hong Kong. The findings indicate that there truly are cross-cultural differences in upward influence strategies. Also, American expatriates' style of upward influence in Hong Kong follows divergence theory.

In today's age of multicultural, global organizations, superiors and subordinates who must work together are often from different cultures (Mendenhall, Dunbar and Oddou 1987). Much research has already shown that there are differences in the values held by people from various cultures around the world (Evans and Sculli 1981, Hofstede 1980, Hofstede and Bond 1984, 1988, Kelley, Whatley and Worthley 1987, Ralston, Cunniff and Gustafson in press, Ronen and Shenkar 1985, Tung 1991). To accurately assess what motivates employees in a multicultural work environment, managers must understand the differences in values and the resultant behavior patterns of individuals from other cultures (Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung and Terpstra 1992, Ricks, Toyne and Martinez 1990, Schwartz 1992, Tung and Miller 1990).

Understanding the behavior patterns of individuals who are from different cultures is particularly salient for expatriate managers who not only must work with individuals from other cultures, but who also must work in a foreign culture (Mendenhall and Oddou 1985, Shaw 1990). However, the transfer of domestic managers into foreign assignments is not always successful (Gregersen and Black 1992, Tung 1982). In fact, the failure of expatriate managers to adjust to a foreign assignment is a serious problem for many organizations, especially those in the U.S. According to Tung (1981, 1984), 25% to 40% of all expatriates from the United States have failed. Besides lost productivity, the cost to a company for each failure runs into the hundreds of thousands of dollars (O'Boyle 1989).

The success or failure of expatriate adjustment is a complex issue (Armes and Ward 1989, Black 1992, Black and Gregersen 1991, Black and Mendenhall 1990, Black and Stephens 1989, Briody and Chrisman 1991, Everett and Stening 1987, Gomez-Mehia and Balkin 1987, Shaw 1990). To be effective in a foreign culture, expatriate managers must understand both the origin of their own behavior and the congruence of their behavior with that of individuals who are from the foreign culture (Black, Mendenhall and Oddou 1991, Internationalization 1989). Thus, it is important to assess the degree to which home-culture values dominate expatriate managers' behaviors and their perceptions of others (Feather, Volkmer and McKee 1992).

We believe that most researchers and practitioners would agree that an important part of a manager's behavior revolves around the ability to wield influence successfully, whether a

domestic or expatriate manager (Ralston, Gustafson, Mainiero and Umstot 1993, Schermerhorn and Bond 1991, Schriesheim and Hinkin 1990, Yukl and Tracey 1992). And, often times, a manager's critical challenge is to use these influence behaviors effectively with those in the organization who are in a superior position (Ansari and Kapoor 1987, Mowday 1978, Porter, Allen and Angle 1981). To be effective, managers must use influence behaviors that are acceptable to their superiors. Yet the perceived acceptability of particular upward influence behaviors may differ significantly across cultures (Ralston et al. 1993b). Thus, expatriate managers face an additional set of challenges -- cultural differences -- when they attempt to influence superiors who are from a foreign culture.

To date, there appears to be little or no research on whether expatriates do or do not adapt their use of influence strategies to fit the norms of the foreign location. Therefore, our study sets out to explore the degree to which expatriate managers change their influence strategies to accommodate the cultural norms of the host location. Specifically, we will look at American expatriates working in Hong Kong. The question we pose is, "Do these American expatriate managers modify their upwards influence strategies to accommodate the cultural norms of Hong Kong business?"

If the American expatriates adopt the values and behaviors indicative of the Hong Kong culture, we may conclude that they are exhibiting convergent tendencies. Conversely, if they steadfastly conform to their home-culture values and influence behaviors, they will be portraying divergent tendencies (Kelley et al. 1987). Between these two extremes is crossvergent behavior -- a new group of behaviors borrowing from both cultures and forming a unique middle ground (Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung and Terpstra 1993).

# The Upward Influence Literature

The upward influence literature can be categorized according to its cultural context as Western, Eastern or Cross-cultural research. The great majority of this research has come from the West, with notably less from the Eastern cultures, or on cross-cultural comparisons (Pye 1985, Ralston et al. 1994b). Thus, we began building a foundation for our study of cross-cultural differences in upward influence strategies using the Western literature base.

# Western Research

A number of studies have examined the type of influence strategies or tactics used by subordinates (Chacko 1990, Giacalone and Rosenfeld 1991, Kipnis and Schmidt 1988, Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson 1980, Mowday 1978, Ralston 1985, Schillit and Locke 1982, Schmidt and Kipnis 1984, Schreisheim and Hinkin 1990, Yukl and Falbe 1990, 1991, Yukl and Tracey 1992). These studies, while not identifying a universally accepted list of influence tactics, do report a substantial degree of similarity of influence tactics. For example, Schillit and Locke (1982) identify the influence methods of rational persuasion, informal exchange, formal exchange, adherence to rules, upward appeal, manipulation, formation of coalitions, and assertiveness, while Yukl and Tracy (1992) identify rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, consultation, integration, exchange, personal appeal, coalition, legitimating, and pressure.

#### **Eastern Research**

Our review found only two studies that examined upward influence strategies with respect to Eastern culture. In one of these studies, Lutfy (1988) reported that the changing values of younger Japanese are resulting in increased employee pressure on companies to provide better opportunities for career advancement and greater respect for employees' desires to have a fulfilling personal life.

Chow's study (1989) of upward influence strategies in China identified, in descending order of popularity, the following strategies: rationality, coalition, assertiveness, upward appeal, exchange of benefits, ingratiating, and blocking. However, with no data or comparative information available, it is difficult to evaluate the significance of the results.

# **Cross-Cultural Research**

Suzuki and Narapareddy's (1988) study of U.S. and Japanese female executives found that the U.S. subjects put more emphasis upon having a mentor and using the formal evaluation system as a means to attain influence than did their Japanese counterparts.

Schermerhorn and Bond (1991) compared the upward influence tactics of U.S. and Hong Kong subjects. Using a single scenario, they asked respondents to rate their preference for each of the tactics identified by these researchers. The results showed that the U.S. subjects, overall,

were more likely to use ingratiation, rationality, and exchange to influence others, while the Hong Kong Chinese subjects were more likely to select assertiveness as an influence tactic. However, the only major cultural difference found was that American subjects preferred ingratiation more than their Hong Kong Chinese counterparts for influencing superiors.

# **Hypotheses**

As noted, this study was designed to investigate the question, "Does having to function in a foreign work environment affect a manager's perception of the acceptability of influence strategies or do home-culture values continue to be the primary determinant of behavior?" To establish a baseline of cultural differences between American and Hong Kong managers, we first have to answer the question: "On what influence tactics, and in which direction, do American managers working in the U.S. differ from Hong Kong Chinese managers working in Hong Kong?" Once these differences are identified, we can then focus on the differing tactics to determine whether the American expatriates were exhibiting convergent, divergent, or crossvergent behavior. We operationalize these two questions with the following hypotheses.

# Hypothesis 1: Identification of Influence Tactics Differences between U.S. and Hong Kong Managers

The findings of Hofstede (1980) and subsequent researchers confirm that the culture in the U.S. can be described as individualistic with a low power distance, while the Hong Kong culture is collectivistic with a high power distance. Therefore, we propose that respondents from individualistic cultures, such as the United States, will prefer tactics that permit them to showcase their individual skills and abilities. Similarly, due to the low power distance, they likely will prefer more overt tactics involving image management.

In contrast, we propose that the Hong Kong Chinese respondents will prefer tactics that better fit their collectivistic, high power distance culture. From the teachings of Confucius, a saying has evolved: "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." Thus, we hypothesize that the Chinese involve their family and trusted friends to obtain information and influence to help them to succeed (Ralston et al. 1993b).

- **H1**<sub>a</sub>: Americans in the U.S. will view Rational Persuasion, Ingratiation, and Image Management tactics as low risk ways to influence superiors.
- H1<sub>b</sub>: Hong Kong Chinese in Hong Kong will view Information Control and Personal Networking tactics as low risk ways to influence superiors.

# Hypothesis 2: Identification of Convergent, Divergent, or Crossvergent Behavior of American Expatriates in Hong Kong

The debate on the convergence, divergence, or crossvergence of values provides a theoretical foundation upon which to propose alternative hypotheses of expatriates' influence tactics. The convergence view proposes that the work environment will influence a person's values and behavior. Thus, the convergence perspective would be supported by findings that show American expatriate managers adopt the Hong Kong Chinese strategies of upward influence.

The divergence view suggests that a person's culture, not the work environment, will determine the values and behavior of that person (Kelley et al. 1987). Adler, Doktor and Redding (1986) note that due to the increasing prevalence of common technologies across industrialized nations, the most profound cross cultural behavioral differences will occur at the informal rather than formal organizational level. Since upward influence tactics incorporate many informal behaviors, divergence findings might be expected. The divergence perspective would be supported by results showing that American expatriate managers maintain the traditional American strategies of upward influence.

Crossvergence occurs when individuals "blend" their cultural values with the work environment influences to develop a unique set of behaviors that borrow from both culture and work environment (Ralston et al., 1993a). The crossvergence perspective would be supported by results that find American expatriates integrating the tactics of both cultures to develop a unique approach to upward influence. Based on previous research, divergent or crossvergent outcomes appear the more likely (Adler et al. 1986, Ralston et al. 1993a).

- **H2a:** Convergence The influence strategy scores of American expatriates' will be significantly different from those of Americans working in the U.S., and will approach the scores of the Hong Kong Chinese.
- **H2<sub>b</sub>:** Divergence The influence strategy scores of American expatriates will be significantly different from Hong Kong Chinese, and will approach the scores of the Americans working in the U.S.
- **H2<sub>c</sub>:** Crossvergence The influence strategy scores of American expatriates' will be significantly different from both those of Americans working in the U.S. and Hong Kong Chinese, with mean scores located between the means of Americans in the U.S. and Hong Kong Chinese.

#### Method

# Subjects

The subjects were full-time professionals in the U.S. (n=181) and Hong Kong (n = 344). The Hong Kong subjects were split into two groups: American expatriates (n = 17) and native Hong Kong Chinese (n=177). The average age of the American subjects working in the U.S. was 32.9 years. In Hong Kong, the average age of the American expatriates was 39.6 years and the average age of the Hong Kong Chinese subjects was 33.2 years. Table 1 presents demographic data for the three groups.

insert Table 1 about here

#### Instrument

The 38-item Strategies of Upward Influence (SUI) instrument was used to assess influence tactics. For each of the 38 short-scenario items, the subjects were asked to respond to the degree of Risk that they perceived associated with each tactic. The 38 scenarios were measured on a 4-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from "highly risky" to "highly safe". The higher the score, the more risky a scenario was seen to be. These scenarios cluster to form the seven dimensions of

the analysis: Good Soldier, Rational Persuasion, Image Management, Ingratiation, Personal Networking, Information Control, and Strong-Arm Coercion.

#### **Procedure**

Potential participants were mailed a survey with cover letter and postage-paid return envelope. The return rates were 34% in Hong Kong and 41% in the U.S. These response rates are considered reasonable (Dillman 1978). The instructions accompanying the instrument asked subjects to think of their work experiences when responding to the questions. The instructions also told the subjects that there were no right or wrong answers, and that it was their perceptions that were important.

#### **Design and Analysis**

The first step consisted of a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The MANOVA had three levels (Americans working in the U.S., Americans working in Hong Kong, Hong Kong Chinese working in Hong Kong). The dependent variables for the analysis were the seven dimensions of the SUI.

If a significant effect was found with the MANOVA, the second step was to calculate the univariate analyses (ANOVAs) for the seven dimensions. Finally, significant effects found in the univariate analyses were further tested for differences among the three groups using Duncan multiple comparison tests (Kirk 1982).

### **Results**

A significant Wilks' lambda effect was found for the MANOVA ( $\lambda$  = 0.67, df = 6,2,522, p<0.001). Thus, univariate ANOVAs and relevant Duncan multiple comparison tests were calculated to determine the significance and direction of each of the seven tactics dimensions.

# Hypothesis 1: Differences between U.S. and Hong Kong Managers

The ANOVAs were significant for Good Soldier, Rational Persuasion, Image Management, Personal Networking, Information Control, and Strong-Arm Coercion. No significant difference was found for Image Management. The means, standard deviation, and univariate F-test results are presented in Table 2. The internal reliability (Chronbach's Alpha) was 0.63 or greater on each dimension for the three groups.

# Hypothesis 2: Convergent, Divergent, or Crossvergent Behavior

The Duncan multiple comparison tests for the six significantly different dimensions are also reported in Table 3. For all six dimensions -- Good Soldier, Rational Persuasion, Ingratiation, Personal Networking, Information Control, Strong-Arm Coercion -- the Americans working in Hong Kong differed significantly from the Hong Kong Chinese group, but did not differ significantly from the Americans working in the U.S.

insert Tables 2 & 3 about here

#### Discussion

The results of this study allow us to draw some general conclusions about the data. The Wilks's lambda indicates that our taxonomy of the tactics dimensions explains a sizable portion of the variance. Also, a comparison of the means for the significant differences found between U.S. American and Hong Kong Chinese respondents indicates that these differences are best described as differences in intensity or emphasis, and not polar-different response.

# Hypothesis 1: Differences between U.S. and Hong Kong Managers

The findings partially support the relationships proposed in the first hypothesis. The hypothesis is supported by the findings that the American managers perceived Rational Persuasion and Integratiation as less risky or more acceptable. Also, in clear support of our first hypothesis was the finding that both Personal Networking and Information Control were seen as more acceptable (less risky) by the Hong Kong Chinese managers. While not hypothesized, the finding that Americans scored Good Soldier as more acceptable may reflect traditional Chinese loyalties that place the family over the company. Concerns with the repatriation of Hong Kong by China in 1997 may have intensified the loyalty to family rather than to the job.

Hypothesis 1 identified significant differences between U.S. American and Hong Kong

Chinese managers on six of the seven dimensions tested. Therefore, a baseline for comparison is
set for the focus of our study, namely the convergent, divergent, or crossvergent behavior of

American expatriates. Thus, Hypothesis 2 analyses will be limited to the six dimensions that were found to be significantly different across these cultures.

# Hypothesis 2: Convergent, Divergent, or Crossvergent Behavior

All six of the significantly different dimensions supported the divergent perspective that culture will be the more significant influence over one's values and behaviors. That is, the American expatriates' tactics were significantly different from those of the Hong Kong Chinese but were basically similar (i. e., not significantly different) from those of the American group working in the U.S.

While the divergent perspective is the one clearly supported by our findings, the strength of this trend most likely should be tempered by the nature of our group of American expatriates. On average, the expatriate respondents in our study had been working in Hong Kong for 1.9 years (SD = 0.42). U.S. overseas assignment are typically for three or fewer years. The relatively short tenure of our subjects, in concert with the perspective that overseas assignments are temporary and not a means to "climb the corporate ladder," may have influenced our expatriates' view of the importance of learning and using the accepted upward influence strategy norms of Hong Kong business (Mendenhall, Dunbar and Oddou 1987, Tung 1988).

In summation, our findings show that Hong Kong Chinese and Americans exhibited significant differences in their perceptions of the risk associated with a variety of tactics for influencing superiors. Additionally, the findings indicate that the Americans in our study had similar perceptions of the risk involved in using the various strategies for influence, regardless of whether they were working in the U.S. or Hong Kong. Thus, we believe that it is reasonable to say that the typical American on assignment in Hong Kong does little to fit the influence strategy norms of Hong Kong business. However, we also would speculate that expatriate managers with long-term commitments to living in another country might move from a pure divergent perspective to a crossvergent one. Our present sample does not permit this investigation, but it might be an interesting project for future research.

## **Conclusions**

One of the challenges facing those who work in multicultural settings is the ability to recognize and adjust to the consequences stemming from the absence of a relatively uniform set of values and behaviors. This is particularly important in the context of strategies for gaining upward influence in organizations. Those who fail to recognize the potential for divergent behavior may find the actions of their superiors and subordinates who come from a different culture to be confusing, and perhaps even frightening. The result may be failure -- either ineffectiveness in the position, the loss of the position, or both. Therefore, to work effectively in a culturally mixed environment, it is necessary to understand the forces that motivate individuals from other cultures as well as the tactics that they use to attain their goals within the organization.

The implications of our findings apply to both superiors and subordinates working in a culturally mixed workplace. Also, with the increasing numbers of ethnic minorities entering the workforces of many developed countries, these issues are relevant for superiors and subordinates who have no plans or desires to work abroad, but who work for companies that are culturally diverse. Thus, further exploration of culturally based influence strategies is needed, not only because of the importance of understanding these behaviors for expatriate success, but also due to increasing cultural diversity in the domestic workforces around the world.

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**Table 1. Demographic Data for the Three Groups** 

		Americans Working In the U.S.	Americans working in Hong Kong	HK Chinese working in Hong Kong
Age:	Mean SD	32.9 5.9	39.6 9.0	33.2 6.4
Gender:	% Male	63	80	58
Marital Status:	% Married	52	66	58
Years Employed:	Mean SD	8.4 5.4	15.6 9.2	9.9 6.1
Number of Employees in the Company	% under 100 % 100 or more	24 76	31 69	30 70

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations and F-test Results for the Seven Tactics Dimensions of the Measure of Risk

Dimensions N	Nationality Loc	ation	Mean	SD	F
Good Soldier	American American HK-Chinese	U.S. Hong Kong Hong Kong	1.62 1.57 1.83	0.35 0.36 0.41	23.92.***
Rational Persuasion	American American HK-Chinese	U.S. Hong Kong Hong Kong	1.55 1.55 1.71	0.30 0.35 0.42	13.18***
Image Management	American American HK-Chinese	U.S. Hong Kong Hong Kong	2.11 2.11 2.15	0.37 0.34 0.37	0.64
Ingratiation	American American HK-Chinese	U.S. Hong Kong Hong Kong	1.92 1.87 2.12	0.41 0.40 0.43	7.01***
Personal Networking	American American HK-Chinese	U.S. Hong Kong Hong Kong	2.49 2.47 2.33	0.35 0.36 0.37	8.97***
Information Control	American American HK-Chinese	U.S. Hong Kong Hong Kong	3.35 3.33 3.09	0.30 0.37 0.35	34.17***
Strong-Arm Coercion	American American HK-Chinese	U.S. Hong Kong Hong Kong	3.77 3.71 3.41	0.25 0.38 0.45	49.15***

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> p<.001

**Table 3. Duncan Multiple Comparison Test Results for the Significant Dimensions** 

	Groups Compared			
Dimensions	Groups 1 and 2	Groups 1 and 3	Groups 2 and 3	Hypotheses Supported
Good Soldier		*	*	Divergence
Rational Persuasion		*	*	Divergence
Ingratiation		*	*	Divergence
Personal Networking		*	*	Divergence
Informational Control		*	*	Divergence
Strong-Arm Coercion		*	*	Divergence