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## **A Model of the Affective and Cognitive Events in Expatriate Assignments**

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## **A Model of the Affective and Cognitive Events in Expatriate Assignments**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we take a step toward explaining how events occurring within the expatriate assignment are perceived and interpreted. In particular, we consider the conditions under which individuals perceive hassles and uplifts during intercultural interactions as a cognitive or affective event and, how the type of event influences the outcomes associated with a given event. In doing so, we develop a model to propose how characteristics of the perceiver and the event influence whether interactions in the expatriate assignment are perceived as a cognitive or affective event and, how the type of event influences the outcomes associated with a given event.

**Keywords:** Expatriate; Affective; Cognitive; Intercultural Interactions; Hassles; Uplifts.

## **A Model of the Affective and Cognitive Events in Expatriate Assignments**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It has been suggested that emotions may provide a critical link between work environments and employee behavior (Ashkanasy, Härtel & Daus, 2002). However, there is an absence of research in the literature that specifically addresses what work events are and how they impact the thoughts (cognition) and feelings (affect) one experiences. This can also be said for the emotional and cognitive experiences evoked by the intercultural interactions that expatriates must engage in.

In this paper, we take a step toward explaining how events occurring within the expatriate assignment are perceived and interpreted. In particular, we consider the conditions under which individuals perceive hassles and uplifts during intercultural interactions as a cognitive or affective event, and, how the type of event influences the outcomes associated with a given event.

#### **The role of emotions and cognitions in work**

In the rapidly growing research area of emotions at work, Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) remains a popular conceptual starting point (Ashkanasy, Härtel & Daus, 2002). AET asserts that the situations we find ourselves in determine the type and frequency of hassles and uplifts (affective events) we experience in a given situation. These affective events, in turn, evoke affective responses that lead to affect-driven behavior such as helping behavior or negative conflict. The accumulation of these affective responses predicts job attitudes such as job satisfaction, which can influence judgment-driven behavior, such as turnover (Ashkanasy, Härtel & Daus, 2002).

However, AET also recognizes that what makes an event affective is that an individual perceives it as so (Härtel, Hsu & Boyle, 2000). What this implies then is that the same event may be perceived by one person as an affective event but not by another – in other words, individual characteristics matter in the determination of event type (Härtel, Hsu & Boyle, 2000). Some events, however, are likely to be perceived as affective by most people either because their perception and interpretation is shared by people because of cultural norms or, within the organizational context, because of organizational or workgroup norms (Härtel, Hsu & Boyle, 2000). The latter point highlights the importance of context in determining what type an event becomes, and underscores the importance of culture in shaping the likelihood and type of emotional response to any given event.

The fact that the appraisal of an event depends either or both on features of the event and features of the individual highlights the need to identify what and how event features and person features interact. To date, we know that an affective event is more likely to be appraised negatively by a person high on negative affectivity and positively by a person high on positive affectivity (e.g. Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Whether work events are perceived as uplifts or hassles is also affected by national culture, as research has shown that cultures themselves vary in their affectivity, both in terms of strength and direction (White, Härtel & Panipucci, in press).

From this base, we propose a broader-based view of work events, where cognition and affect interact to influence the interpretation of events (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002). Thus events can be affective, or cognitive, or a combination, where both affective and cognitive reactions ensue (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002).

Cognitive reactions arise from the schema and category structure a person uses to respond to an event (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002). Cognitive categories vary in terms of their frequency of use and, therefore, in their accessibility or "ease of retrieval" (Martin & Clark, 1990, pp. 272-273). Experience influences the nature and complexity of our category structures and schemas (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002) and, thus, culture is an important determinant of the perceptual frameworks we have available.

Accessibility affects how much attention is necessary to make judgments about information (Uleman, 1987). Thus, a well-developed category structure and schema allows a person to make judgments without much effort (Härtel & Härtel, 1997). This means that events which we can readily categorize are processed peripherally. The peripheral route uses emotion through the influence of negative or positive cues. Events which we can not easily categorize, in contrast, must be processed centrally. The central processing route involves effortful and conscious decision-making, where information must be evaluated. In the absence of sufficient information for evaluation, it should be noted that people are likely to defer to peripheral processing and reliance on emotional cues (Kim, Lim & Bhargava, 1998; Shiv & Fedorikin, 1999). In this way, a cognitive event can be transferred to an emotional event.

Whether an event is perceived as an affective event will, in part, depend on the perceiver's emotional characteristics (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). These include the level of emotional intelligence (Caruso, Mayer & Salovey, 2001; Ciarrochi, Chan & Caputi, 2000), impulsivity, anxiety and negative or positive affectivity (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Similarly, whether an event is perceived as a cognitive event will, in

part, depend on the perceiver's cognitive characteristics (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002). For example, a perceivers' crystallized intelligence determines the memory resources upon which a person can draw. Fluid intelligence determines the efficiency of information processing. Analytical ability determines how complex a situation is for one and may enable or disable a person from cognitively dealing with an event.

Adding in a cognitive perspective, AET could be redrawn to show that the context can give rise to events that evoke peripheral or automatic processes (Härtel, McColl-Kennedy & Bennett, 2002). That information processing is peripheral or central does not mean that the other is absent. More accurately put, it is that one type of processing dominates the other type. In some cases, however, both types of processing could be involved in perceiving an event (cf. Forgas, 1995; Forgas & George, 2001; Isen & Means, 1983; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). In the next section, we consider how culture shapes meaning and therefore can shape how events are appraised (Tiedens, 2000).

### **The role of culture in affective and cognitive events**

Difference, dissimilarity, novelty, the unexpected – all grab our attention, make us think (Härtel, Panipucci & Fujimoto, 2003). A key affective event, therefore, is exposure to something or someone perceived as different (Härtel, Panipucci & Fujimoto, 2003). Our cognitive appraisal of this new or different stimuli leads us to positive feelings such as excitement or negative feelings such as fear (Härtel, Panipucci & Fujimoto, 2003). Thus, interactions with different others is likely to provoke certain thoughts and feelings.

The characteristics of the event and its context underlie the way in which an event is processed and ultimately perceived. Fineman (2000) notes this point, saying that context is fundamental to the understanding of organizational behavior and that to understand it means to take into account individuals' biographies and unconscious processes as well as social structures and wider cultural and economic processes.

Just as cultures within organizations can be strong or weak (Schein, 1990), with the former having highly formalized and well-established norms, rewards, punishments and procedures (House & Aditya, 1997), so can national cultures be strong or weak. When the organizational culture is strong, it is likely to overshadow any individual effects (Mischel, 1973), thus playing the primary influencer in the interpretation of workplace events. In contrast, in weak cultures, individual dispositions are likely to exert a strong moderating effect on the relationship between an event and its perception as an affective, mixed or cognitive event. We argue that national culture plays a similar role in the interpretation of workplace events.

Just as organizational culture plays a defining role in the display rules or social norms by which one abides, the same holds for national culture (Triandis, 1994). Thus,

culture will overshadow individual differences in national cultures where individuals share highly similar norms (a strong culture) and vice versa for individualistic cultures. For example, in the Chinese culture, the concept of self can be described as self-in-relation-to-others where the self is viewed as part of a social relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This view of the self means that behavior depends to a large extent on how one perceives the 'others' in his or her in-group would think, feel and act. In terms of emotional expression, this means that the Chinese are unlikely to express negative emotions as doing so would be considered a threat to one's important interpersonal relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The surroundings of an event also influence the likely course of event processing. For example, the service-scape and the non-verbal interaction between a customer and service-provider stimulates an emotional reaction (Sundaram & Webster, 2000) and communicates the positioning of the organization. Thus, the characteristics of one's interaction style and the social situation can affect the overall interaction experience and influence whether that person continues to engage or buy from that expatriate.

Also, whether the event is perceived as having goal relevance, goal incongruence and/or ego involvement will impact on the level of emotion experienced. But the translation of this into affect-driven behaviors (expression of emotion) is likely to depend on the perceiver's emotional intelligence, gender (Ollilainen, 2000), cultural norms (e.g. Western cultures express emotion and emotional behaviors more than Eastern cultures) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, the emotionally intelligent person would be expected to be able to transfer an affective event to a cognitive one if they deem this course would lead to a better outcome.

### **Affective Events and Difference**

Prejudice refers to a disliking of someone different. In other words, a prejudiced person likes those perceived as similar to him/herself and dislikes those perceived as dissimilar (Härtel, Panipucci & Fujimoto, 2003). The perception of a different other then constitutes an affective event (Härtel, Panipucci & Fujimoto, 2003).

We adopt the view that while all persons have knowledge of cultural stereotypes, not all accept or endorse the stereotype (Devine, 1989). In other words, while individuals tend to dislike persons who are dissimilar, some will choose not to act out that feeling and may even actively try to feel differently (Ashmore & Lee, 1997; Bazerman, Tenbrunsel & Wade-Benzoni, 1998).

In a study of East-West collaboration, Fisher and Härtel (2004) showed that the interactants came together assuming the other was different and assuming that the other viewed them as different. Interestingly, the key actual difference turned out to be the centrality that the socio-emotional aspects of the interaction was given by the respective parties. In particular, the Thai interactants viewed effective performance as comprising both high levels of task and contextual performance in contrast to the Westerners' prime emphasis on task. Adding to this finding is work by White, Härtel and Panipucci (in press), which found that Easterners' emphasis on the socio-emotional aspects of an East-West negotiation gave rise to multiple small misunderstandings, which were 'set aside' by the Western interactant but which brought the Eastern interactant to a point of avoiding contact. Fujimoto and Härtel (2004) found that these different emphases also present themselves in workgroups comprised of individualists and collectivists. Such differences can, as Ayoko, Härtel and Callan (2003) show, turn into the kind of

constructive conflict that propels innovation or turn into the kind of destructive conflict that impedes performance and breaks teams down and apart.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

It is also vital that research into expatriate effectiveness and well-being consider the role of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence may be defined as “the perception, assimilation, understanding, and management of emotions” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 198, cited in Jordan, Ashkanasy, Härtel & Hooper, 2002). In research by Barker and Härtel (2004), service providers who were emotionally competent and open to diversity were less inclined to engage in differential service treatment. Thus, emotional intelligence and diversity openness may be related to expatriate effectiveness. This point is returned to in our discussion of recommendations for the selection, management and training of employees.

## **THEORY DEVELOPMENT**

Given the importance of understanding the role of culture in affective and cognitive events, we present here a model of the Affective and Cognitive Events in Expatriate Assignments (See Figure 1). Before we explain how the model works in relation to an Australian expatriate in China, we must first describe the model’s components. The model begins with the host national’s and expatriate’s cultural norms. The processing of these norms, which may be affective, cognitive or mixed, is influenced by one of two factors: the host national’s and expatriate’s *emotional* intelligence and characteristics; or the host national’s and expatriate’s *cognitive* intelligence and characteristics. As the model continues through a number of other factors, such as moods, emotions, stereotypes and job attitudes, it is evident that there is a second influence. At this stage, the

processing may be influenced by: *cultural emotional display rules and norms*; or *cultural heuristics and procedures*. These then determine whether the behavior by the host national or expatriate is affect-driven, or judgment-driven.

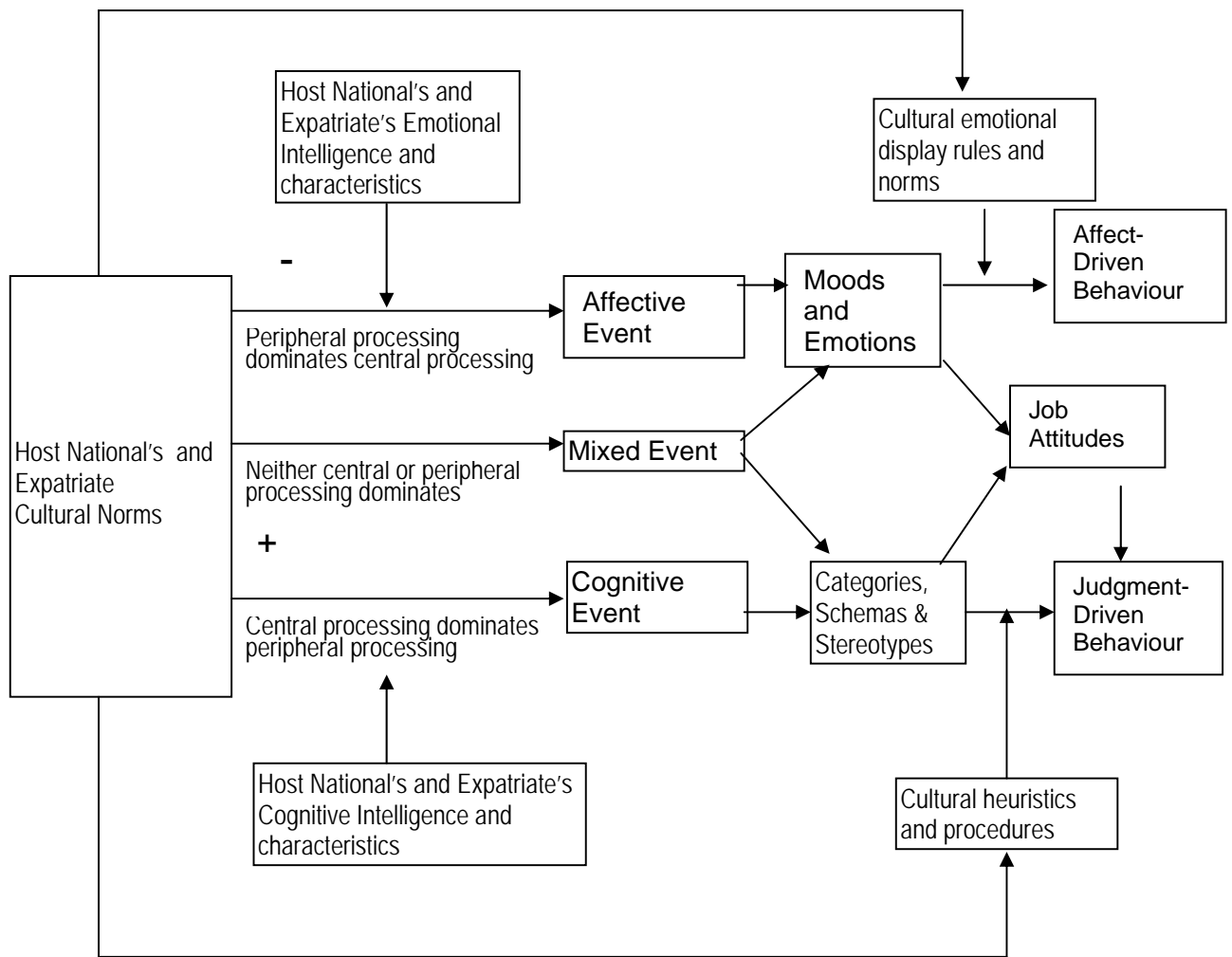
Next, we illustrate this model within the context of an Australian expatriate assignment in China. First, however, it is necessary to provide an overview of Chinese history. Following this overview, we relate several case studies to the model to describe, at each stage, how organizations can better understand the experience of Australian expatriates in China. This theory development is pertinent to better understanding of the ways in which organizations can increase the success rate of expatriate assignments, particularly given the financial and human costs involved.

#### **ILLUSTRATING THE THEORY: AN AUSTRALIAN EXPATRIATE IN CHINA**

When Westerners decide to do business in China, they must understand the many difficulties they may encounter. Differences in the language, culture and the custom faced at the business level will definitely challenge the communication, interaction, and negotiation of the Westerner. This could have profound management implications.

Before conducting business in China, there are several factors to consider, understand, and prepare for about the Chinese. The Eastern way of conducting business is very different to the West, and one of the largest reasons that business, in particular, negotiations, between Australia and China fails is because Australians do not understand, or fully appreciate, the importance placed upon several factors within the Chinese' history, and their role in business today.

**Figure 1. A Model of the Affective and Cognitive Events in Expatriate Assignments**



### Chinese History

In trying to understand the Chinese and how they communicate or conduct business, we must attempt to gain an understanding of Chinese history. It is important to realize that when the Chinese talk about 'Culture', they often also refer to history. As in the mind of a Chinese, it is impossible to discuss culture without the knowledge of the thousands of years of Chinese history. It is also important to appreciate the significant

influence of political leadership over time and its effect on the way business is conducted in China.

Chinese history is very complicated, and it is impossible to have a full understanding of its complexity without years of study. This is evident after searching for information on Chinese history. There is no short concise digest on the history. Indeed, numerous accounts of China's Dynasties, its political struggles and leadership changes are documented.

The Chinese are very proud business people, and forming relationships with their colleagues and peers ensures a smooth working life and success in doing business. Superiors command respect from their subordinates, which accords to the five cardinal relationships described in Confucianism (Goh Bee Chen, 1996). In general, these relationships all reflect the fact that one will always respect their superior or someone more senior in age. Next, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions study is explored as this identifies the major differences between East and West culture.

### **Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Model**

According to Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions Model, China has a 'Collectivist' culture, and the emphasis is on the group or organization's interest as a whole rather than the individual's gain. According to Blackman (1997) and Goh Bee Chen (1996), the Chinese tightly adhere to management's agenda, and are more inclined to turn others away from chasing their own goals. In China, business is based on fierce competition and gaining competitive advantage. Westerners, who typically come from an 'Individualistic' culture, need to be aware of this and adjust their negotiation style accordingly.

## **Differences between the East and the West**

In the Chinese culture, 'face' is an essential factor in interacting with the Chinese. This is particularly important in negotiation and reputation building. The Chinese business people are highly competitive and yet, at the same time, place great importance on gaining face. 'Face refers to a person's reputation, the respect by which he is held by others'. According to Blackman (1997), it is with utter importance that people should understand that losing face can be thought of as failure. Losing face is possibly the worst thing that could happen to the Chinese.

In today's Chinese society, views of superiority are still present in some individuals. It is to be expected that status within an organization is important and that inferior individuals (in terms of their organizational positions) must respect their superiors. It is particularly important for Westerners to understand this attitude. For example, Westerners need to understand that Chinese respect age and wisdom, and thus must be culturally sensitive and show respect to the Chinese head of delegation. It is also important to have a business card with details in English on one side and Chinese on the other, and to present the card to the most senior Chinese counterpart with both hands and with the Chinese side facing upward towards the recipient. When receiving their card, it is important to examine it carefully for a few minutes, and to not put it away without examining it, as this can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. It is vital to engage in small talk with the Chinese counterpart in order to build the relationship. In addition, one must demonstrate patience, show little emotion, and be able to calmly accept that there might be possible delays. Lastly, Westerners must be sincere and earn trust, as good relationships are a major determinant of successful business dealings in China.

The Chinese believe in 'building a relationship with the other parties involved' before they talk business or even negotiate. They tend not to express personal opinions when negotiating and depend on gaining 'face' from other business counterparts. Blackman (1997), believes that 'face' is present in a business environment, but is also expected in both family settings and social occasions. This goes back to the early Chinese history where hierarchical order was part of Confucius teaching. The Western business counterpart must understand that Confucianism is still widely respected in China, and when speaking to the Chinese at different levels, one should show respect to those more senior than themselves.

It is to be noted that, in comparison to the Chinese way of doing business, other countries might also have their own unique way of negotiating and communicating when they participate in foreign trade. According to Blackman (1997), Americans tend to want to do business quickly as do the Australians, as 'Time is money'. Even though these can be viewed as general stereotypes of cultures, it is useful for the Western Business-person to note the possible cultural differences in the way the Chinese counterpart conducts business, and to demonstrate patience.

It is common for the Chinese business counterpart to bring an entourage when attending meetings and negotiating. In fact, most of the time there are two negotiating teams: one commercial and one technical. The technical team concentrates on the details of the products to be purchased and services sought, and the commercial team focuses on the contract agreement details of the meeting. The Western business counterpart should bear in mind that only the person with the highest authority from the Chinese side will speak and then only to the senior person from the other party. The Chinese tend to not

acknowledge those inferior to themselves, and usually let their colleagues communicate with the others. Decisions will be made by the most superior of the Chinese party. Any decisions, agreements, and outcomes from the meetings will likely change and thus the Western counterpart should be cautious about concluding a decision is final. The whole negotiation process could take weeks, or even months to close. Even afterwards, the chances are that more changes to the contract will happen.

It is also important for the Western counterpart to understand that there is a big difference in the role of women in Chinese society. Traditionally, Confucius mentions the hierarchical order of father and son; and older brother and younger brother. Women are only mentioned as 'wife'. Even though women are becoming more educated and aggressive in the workplace, and are now more respected and recognized for what they can do, there is still a large gap between the way women are treated in the Western culture to the way women are treated in the Chinese culture. Some traditional Chinese still hold the belief that women should not be in a management position, but rather work as personal assistants or secretaries. If the Western business counterpart sends a female member on the negotiating team, they need to be aware of possible cultural differences in interactions with women and not be offended. With greater understanding and more open-mindedness, one hopes business ventures between the Western and the Chinese counterparts will be more successful.

## **UNDERSTANDING AUSTRALIAN EXPATRIATES IN CHINA USING THE MODEL**

Now that the Chinese history and culture has been discussed, and differences clearly identified, it is possible to relate a real-life example, witnessed by the first author, to the model developed earlier.

The first case described is that of an Australian brewery company with an interest in purchasing a few small-scale Chinese breweries in the Shandong province in China. This was a strategy the Australian brewery wished to employ to break into the Chinese market utilizing the existing manufacturing facilities and established brand name. They decided to send a consultant with background in law and finance to conduct a feasibility study. The team also included technical personnel, a Singapore born Mandarin-speaking Australian businessman and an Australian Chinese who was the link to the local contact in China. As soon as the team arrived in China, the Australian consultant 'wanted to get down to business'. He immediately requested meetings to examine supporting financial documents. In contrast, the Chinese wanted to be hospitable and entertain the team with great banquets, in the hope of building a relationship and getting to know each other better. The Chinese were quite surprised by the speed at which the Australian consultant negotiated. The Australian consultant became impatient with the endless Chinese lunches and dinners that accompanied the negotiations. The business venture did not go through to fruition, even though the project had strong support from local governments and financial institutions. Failing to consider the norms and the cognitive and emotional display rules of the Chinese culture as prescribed in the proposed model ensured that a 'Win-Win' solution was not obtained.

The Western counterpart in this case needed to be patient and follow through the Chinese process of negotiating. The failure to identify and respond to the emotional display rules of the Chinese culture led to behaviours that only could cause bad feelings or a negative affective event in the interaction. Further, the Western counterpart acted in ignorance of Chinese cultural heuristics and procedures for business transactions, and thus failed to demonstrate the cognitive intelligence and heuristics identified in the proposed model as a requirement of effective host national- expatriate interactions.

Ignoring the cultural differences in a negotiation can lead to difficulties, and make the process even longer. The Chinese will only be comfortable to conduct business if they feel a strong relationship with the other business counterpart is in place.

Another example is when a Western businessman had gone to a local bank in China to obtain a loan on behalf of his company for the purchase of plant and equipment. After the loan was applied for, the man waited days without a reply. Upon enquiry, the man found out from the bank officer that the loan was rejected without any given explanation. The bank manager refused to overturn the decision made by the bank officer. It was later discovered that the particular bank officer that rejected the loan was recruited by the bank manager's superior. It was not until a relationship was formed between all parties concerned that the loan was approved.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although it has been suggested that a feature of work environments is affective events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), the notion of cognitive events has not been explicitly recognized. Further, there is an absence of research in the literature that

specifically addresses what work events are and how they impact the cognitive-affective interplay that ensues. This is also true in the expatriate literature.

In this paper, we argue that a more complete picture of events is required in order to better manage the cross-cultural relationships that occur in the expatriate assignment. The model presented here, demonstrates that the notion of affective events and its complement, cognitive events, holds the promise of better understanding what underlies an event being a cognitive or affective event and, how the type of event influences the outcomes associated with a given event.

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