

Academic Paper

The Applicability of Self-Determination Theory for Cross-cultural Coaching: A Study with Assigned and Self-initiated Expatriates

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Abstract

This study explores how cross-cultural coaching supports individuals in their expatriation cycle. Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis was used to explore semi-structured interviews with assigned and self-initiated expatriates. The findings show that individuals express the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness in their expatriation journey and how the relocation to a new socio-cultural environment might hinder individuals' innate tendency to growth and development. The main contribution of this study is to propose the possibility of cross-cultural coaching being informed by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. As a practical implication, organizations should contemplate cross-cultural coaching support for expatriates and their partners.

Keywords

cross-cultural coaching, intercultural coaching, self-determination theory, expatriates, self-initiated expatriates,

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Introduction

According to the United Nations (2020), international migrants in 2020 numbered an estimated 281 million, representing an increase of 60 million since 2010. Europe was the region with the largest number of international migrants in 2020 (87 million), comprising the largest share of intra-regional migration, with 70 per cent of all migrants born in Europe residing in another European country. Despite the disruptions to migration flows due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations might continue to invest in international assignments as a fundamental programme for sustaining overall global business and talent development goals (KPMG, 2019).

The research in cross-cultural (or intercultural) coaching has been mainly focused on executive and managerial coaching in organizations, in contexts such as, for example, expatriate assignment, multicultural teams, international projects, and bi-cultural or mixed background coaching clients (Abbott, 2014). Moreover, the majority of the literature is concentrated on expatriate management (Abbott, Gilbert, & Rosinski, 2013), with some of the conceptual and empirical studies referring also to the population of migrants and “global nomads” (Abbott et al., 2013; Burrus, 2011; Moklyn, 2020; Parish, 2016). Nonetheless, none mention the term ‘self-initiated expatriate’ (SIE), commonly used in the international management literature (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013). This fact could be due to one of two reasons: firstly, the lack of the use of a common language between coaching and management literature in the study of mobile populations; secondly, and most importantly, that cross-cultural coaching for SIEs may not be widespread.

Furthermore, little is known about expatriates’ experience of coaching as there are few empirical studies focusing on the coachees’ perspective (Kiss, 2012; Salomaa, 2015; Salomaa & Makela, 2017). Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore assigned and self-initiated expatriates’ lived experiences of coaching and how this cross-cultural coaching experience supports them in their expatriation cycle. In this study, the terms assigned expatriates (AEs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) are used to denote individuals who have been moved to a different country by an organization or have relocated on their own initiative, respectively, independent of their country of origin (McNulty & Brewster, 2020).

Cross-cultural Coaching

Cross-cultural coaching can be conducted in any genre of coaching when coaches are able to notice the potential role culture may play in a coaching conversation (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) and when culture emerges as a significant variable (Abbott & Salomaa, 2017). The underlying principle of intercultural coaching is that cultural differences may be perceived as an advantage rather than a hindrance (Abbott, 2014; Rosinski, 2003). Hence, coaches, clients and organizations may seek to leverage cultural differences in cross-cultural environments. Furthermore, scholars advocate the integration of culture as a variable in well-known coaching approaches and practices, highlighting that culture should not be considered in isolation in the coaching process (Abbott et al., 2013; Rosinski & Abbott, 2010).

The area of expatriate management is one of the cross-cultural contexts in which coaching seems to be an efficient intervention (Abbott et al., 2013). This may be due to the fact that cultural elements are per se part of the coaching agreement, agenda and process. Abbott and Stening’s (2011) Ten-Phase Expatriate Coaching Framework provides a broad, practical framework for coaches as they work with AEs’ underlying issues that might be significant, including the emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. The objective is to support individuals by considering both their professional and personal lives, as they may also be facing complex situations at home due to relocation. Similarly, Miser and Miser (2011) highlight the importance of the adjustment of the partner and family in the success of an AE’s expatriation. Consequently, the authors argue that there is a gap in expatriate services provided for executives regarding couples coaching for expatriate couples. This approach also covers the life cycle of the expatriate assignment, from clarifying the motivation for accepting the offer, through supporting the family’s transition and assessing local opportunities, to repatriating.

Regarding practitioners, scholars differ with respect to the capabilities that might facilitate the coaching process exhibited by coaches working in an intercultural context. Some authors highlight that the coach must have personal experience of cultural adaptation and acculturation (Abbott, 2014; Salomaa, 2015) and share the same ethnic group (Moklyn, 2020) when working with minorities or underrepresented groups (Baron & Azizollah, 2008). However, van Nieuwerburgh (2017) argues that coaches might be able to practise in cross-cultural contexts without having

personal experience as expatriates, by developing other capabilities such as, for example, “intercultural sensitivity”. Intercultural sensitivity in coaching may be described as the ability to remain attentive to the possible role of culture in each coaching interaction and how to integrate it into the process (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). There is agreement across the literature that practitioners need to become aware of, and reflect on, their own “cultural baggage” (St. Claire-Ostwald, 2007, p.50), cultural values, assumptions and biases (Abbott, 2014; Baron & Azizollah, 2008; Passmore & Law, 2013), so as to resist the susceptibility to adopting an ethnocentric perspective in their coaching relationship (Abbott & Salomaa, 2017).

Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore AEs’ and SIEs’ experiences of coaching and to understand and interpret these through the meaning they ascribe to the phenomena. The philosophical assumptions underlying the choice of topic regard reality as constructed through individuals’ perceptions and supported by their interactions with others, following a social constructivist paradigm (Denscombe, 2010; Creswell, 1998).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected as the methodological approach due to its alignment with the research paradigm. IPA research is “an interpretation of the meaning for a particular person in a particular context” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013, p.195). IPA researchers adopt a role as co-creators, rejecting the possibility of bracketing their own experience, as their understanding of the phenomena is associated with their interpretation of them (Bachkirova, Rose, & Noon, 2020). Scholars underline the use of this methodological approach in coaching research (Bachkirova et al., 2020; Cox, 2020; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Rajasinghe, 2019).

Participant Selection

As IPA studies are concerned mainly with providing a full understanding of each participant’s account (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), these studies usually use purposively select small samples (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Eatough & Smith, 2017). Based on the research objective, the criterion adopted to recruit a homogeneous sample was of AEs and SIEs that have received coaching in the last five years.

Initially, in February 2020, I adopted a referral strategy and contacted organizations based in Warsaw so I would be able to conduct face-to-face interviews. Later, with the COVID-19 outbreak, I had to change my strategy from face-to face to online interviews. As Cox (2020) emphasizes, it is beneficial to employ multiple methods for recruiting participants. Therefore, in April, I shared my research project with my network in LinkedIn and with several Facebook groups for expatriates in an attempt to contact coachees directly.

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Pseudonym	Nationality	Host countries	Expatriation	Type of Coaching	Age group
Julia	Austrian	Denmark and Belgium	SIE and AE	Developmental/ Career coaching	30–49
Anne	American	Switzerland, Colombia, Belgium and South Africa	AE	Life/ Career coaching	30–49
Michaela	Czech	Netherlands, Taiwan and Germany	SIE and AE	Life/ Career coaching	30–49
Paul	French	United Kingdom	AE	Executive/ Leadership coaching	30-49

To ensure an ethical approach to the research process, participants’ anonymity was safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms (Ciuk & Latusek, 2018), the use of age groups, the concealment of

their profession and sector of activity, and the change of some country names. The participants' demographics are described in Table 1.

Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews (Yeo, Keegan, Nichols, & Lewis, 2014) associated with photo-elicitation (Lapenta, 2011) were employed as the method of data collection. Interviews in interpretive phenomenological studies might be complemented by other “authentic” modes of data collection such as, for example, photographs (Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick, & Lavoie-Tremblay, 2020, p.4). Photo elicitation allows the researcher to gain a “phenomenological sense” (Bates, McCann, Kaye, & Taylor, 2017, p.461) of what the subject of the image represents to the participant. According to Bates et al. (2017), a research-driven format might be inappropriate for an IPA study because the images selected by the researcher may not be an illustration of the participant's own experience. Therefore, I adopted a participant-driven approach and asked participants to provide any pictures or images that for them represented their experience of receiving coaching as an expatriate, and to send them to me by e-mail prior to the interview date. Asking participants to provide the images allowed them to reflect about and engage with the subject before the interview took place.

The interviews were conducted online from May to July 2020 and lasted 60–90 minutes (an average of 80 minutes). This is at the upper end of the spectrum recommended for IPA studies (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2013). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Findings

Three superordinate themes emerged from the data analysis. These themes are presented separately to structure the text, but they are inter-related as is discussed in the next three sections.

Defining my Trajectory

Expatriates have experienced their sense of autonomy in different ways and, in some cases, have expressed variations in their level of perceived autonomy during their expatriation cycle. This theme is presented in a chronological way in order to emphasize the paths that the participants have taken, either in a predicted or unpredicted way.

Individuals in intercultural relationships might chose to move to their partner's home country, as SIEs, driven by the possibility of joining them and expressing commitment to their relationships. Julia and Michaela decided to relocate to join their boyfriends at that time. In both cases, this relocation was a result of their own decision where they evaluated their language proficiency and their professional prospects in the local job market. However, in some circumstances, SIEs might have to relocate again to a different country. Julia's and Michaela's intercultural relationships evolved into marriage, and both of them had to relocate again, this time as AEs accompanying spouses. Each of these participants had a different perception of their personal autonomy in taking this decision. For Julia, this move was received with enthusiasm as an opportunity for herself as she has always been interested in languages and living abroad. By contrast, Michaela expresses her lack of excitement. She perceives this new move as an extrinsic motivation that she does not accept as her own as she was facing some difficulties in her marriage at that time and felt that she had little choice in making this important decision.

Despite Julia's initial excitement, she was unable to find a position that interested her professionally due to her lack of language proficiency. Additionally, she and her husband made a transition to parenthood while he was assuming a leadership position in his company. Julia expresses her

frustration and overwhelm as she felt unable to foster her development according to her own needs and that she had lost control over the direction of her life. Although Julia and Michaela initially moved as SIEs, both decided to receive coaching for the first time while living as AEs. Their coaching processes helped them to see that they could have a choice and could decide the trajectory of their expatriation journey. Through co-active coaching, Julia was able to see a new perspective:

I think that's really where coaching leads to anyway – it's becoming a self-leader and being more in charge of what you go through, (...) of your experience of life and your emotions and this awareness that you always have a choice.

Paul is from France and was sent to the United Kingdom as an AE to lead the implementation of an important project in his organization. He emphasizes that, with his wife, they were both very interested in the British culture. Paul's expatriation lasted three years, and now he is back with his family in their home country. For him, from the start, he had a sense of control over the duration of his contract overseas: "For me, it was a chance really to get to know a culture without any risks, because I knew 'I have got a return ticket in my pocket'".

However, Paul experienced a "culture shock" and emphasizes several cultural differences that he noticed between his home and host countries. This challenging context generated a sense of loss of control in the execution of the project and cast self-doubt in his ability to deliver it. Nonetheless, he does not seem to have lost his sense of autonomy as he ponders the different alternatives that he might have, such as, for example, leaving the corporate world. Furthermore, through the coaching process he realized his fulfilment with his profession: "I really like what I'm doing in the normal world. It is just going absolutely lunatic at the moment, but in principle this is what I want to do."

Conversely, Anne's expatriation due to her husband's international assignments "grew organically". Although they had not planned it from the start, they have been AEs for the last 12 years and have lived in four different countries. Nonetheless, Anne expresses the idea that her life has taken a trajectory she felt she was not in control of. Furthermore, she mentions that if she had not left her home country and been exposed to successive relocations, she might not have needed to search for coaching.

The timing for reaching out for coaching might vary. For some, it can happen in the initial years of the first expatriation, while for others it can take more time until individuals notice that they might be in need of some professional help. Michaela and Anne received coaching after 5 and 10 years as AEs, respectively. For both, in the latest years of their expatriation, coaching has helped them to reinforce their sense of autonomy and to determine what they wanted to do next. However, they realized through the coaching process the impact that successive relocations had had on them over time: "There were a lot of things that needed to be unpacked on my side that I didn't know happened over ten years" (Anne).

Relating to Others on the Journey

The participants in this study have relocated abroad as couples, either in intercultural relationships or not. A key theme refers to the idea of "the couple as a team", and being in alignment about their goals is perceived to be an important aspect for initiating and sustaining a couple's expatriation. In that sense, both male and female participants have expressed whether or not, they have pondered with their partners, about the expatriation assignment so as to create a common goal for the couple. The absence of this common project compromised the adjustment of one of the participants, leading to divorce.

The adjustment of the executive's family is also an important aspect for the expatriation cycle. Executives might not be able to focus completely on their mission if they are apprehensive about the adjustment of their partner and children to the new environment. For Paul, his coaching process has helped him to separate the professional issues related to the expatriation from the personal ones:

It helped me certainly to distinguish cultural, business, people topics and perhaps as well, my own distractions in my head by being in a different country, by being worried that my family doesn't feel good.

Expatriate couples also require an improved level of communication. Participants who relocated due to their husband's career said that coaching has supported them in raising their awareness about what they wanted and to become more assertive in the way they communicate with their partners, family, friends and local communities. Michaela has received Cognitive Behavioural Coaching and has done exercises so as to identify her needs, to understand if they were being met and to learn how to communicate them to others. She has learned to apply these new abilities in her current relationships:

Because many times we have needs that we are not aware of, but we want them from others, and if we don't get them, we scream and we fight. So, I have learned to identify my needs and also probably to communicate them to my current partner or my friends [so] that you are clearer about your boundaries and your wishes.

To learn more about the cultural differences between his home and host countries, Paul started his coaching process by doing exercises about his values ("his personal brand") and has become more aware regarding how to translate these in his relationship with his team. Additionally, he did the same kind of exercise with his direct reports to identify their own values and how they could cooperate together as a team:

He said: "Okay, now, do the same for your group leaders to describe what their brand values would be." And that was then getting the link, how much can I build on one or the other? How does that work together? (...) Does it work together because it's diverse but it gives the complete picture, or is it diverse in the meaning of clashing?

A key theme that emerged from the data is the participants' supportive relationships with their coaches. One of the most important aspects is the perception of a good rapport with the coach, as Julia highlights:

So, you need to be able to feel trust to that person and feel safe to open up and talk about everything basically because the coach typically will know more about you than your best friends and family will.

Another important aspect is the coach's ability to adapt the coaching session according to the coachees' needs and the importance of the coach following the coachee's agenda even in an organizational setting, as Paul underscores: "He never laid any words in my mouth. So, it was really about what is in my head and not what is in his head." In contrast, he mentions another coaching experience he perceived when that the coach was trying to impose his own thinking.

Coaches might be selected for diverse reasons. For Michaela, as she was in a depressed state, she hired a coach with a background in psychotherapy. At the beginning of the coaching process, they focused on her relationship with her husband and then on herself. In some cases, life-experience affinity, such as coaches' experiences as expatriates themselves, was valued. Likewise, coaches can be recognized as having useful expertise in interpreting the environment. Paul's coach was suggested by his organization, and Paul perceived him as someone able to support him dealing with his culture shock as he was English, had worked for the same company previously

and had lived in France: “I get the feeling that there was a very good understanding because he understood the world I’m coming from and he understood the world I’m acting in at the moment.” Additionally, Paul recognized his coach’s appreciation of his particular circumstances in giving him few tasks to think about outside the sessions, as he was overloaded with work.

Finding Myself

Participants have expressed the relevance of their sense of competence and how it reflects on their self-confidence during the expatriation. Participants can be seen to have experienced their sense of competence across a continuum, from a feeling of being completely irrelevant or inadequate to being capable and at ease. Consequently, all the participants expressed the experience of being ‘lost’ at certain point in the journey, to a greater or lesser extent.

For Paul, unexpected issues regarding the business and cultural differences, together with his concerns regarding his family’s adjustment, led to him to feeling unable to accomplish his mission:

That was an element of losing a bit of self-confidence: ‘If I can’t do that, I can’t deliver what people expect me to, how do I deal with that? What am I good at then?’ (...) I had a phase in between where I really thought: ‘I just give up. It’s going to kill me. I have to give up.’

The women that followed their partner’s careers gradually lost their self-confidence as the expatriation progressed and expressed a feeling of uneasiness with this situation. Michaela expressed a strong sense of discomfort within herself at the beginning of the coaching process:

The one thing that I remember from the first coaching experience was, it probably had to do with the sadness that I felt at the time when it started. I remember I couldn’t make eye contact with the coach, and it was so weird; of course, it probably also had to do with the lower self-confidence. (...) I remember I wasn’t even aware of it.

Coaching supported all the participants to rebuild their self-confidence: “I think it has taught me that I’m much more capable than I gave myself credit for” (Anne); to find a new path: “Starting my own business, it was also an act of self-confidence” (Julia); to be accountable: “I’m more relaxed, but also you feel more responsibility when you want to do certain things; you have to work for them, but all those things aren’t so scary anymore” (Michaela); and to gradually overcome these challenging circumstances: “For me at the time that was one of the important enablers really to get through that phase” (Paul).

To achieve that objective, the coaching processes involved work with various topics, such as, for example, values, strengths, purpose, intuition and skills, depending on the coachees’ needs. Paul refers to the two images he had shared for this study to explain his structured coaching process and its outcome (Appendix):

You’ve got this mess and actually it’s a proper shape and it’s got different branches and different routes. Where there are different things happening, but you just can’t see it. You’ve got all in front of you and you just don’t have the energy, the time to sort it yourself in your head. [...]. And by really asking very specific questions and making sure to trigger certain thought processes in my head, this helped me to develop the different branches and make sure to understand, where I’m lost at the moment and where I need to put my efforts. And in the end, my experience from the past, it was there. I just couldn’t apply it because I couldn’t find the different areas where to link it to. And these little links I needed to establish by like thinking through those questions. And then all of a sudden, I had the orientation again and I knew what to do.

The three participants that had put their careers on hold, and were performing only one role (family one) and expressed feelings of stagnation and frustration. Coaching has supported them to reflect on their values and strengths so as to identify their aims for the future and to become accountable for themselves. Consequently, these participants have acquired new skills and professional paths and recognize that their coaching experience has helped them in this transition so as to integrate the new roles that they have developed during their expatriation.

As a final consideration, participants shared their perceptions of the personal challenges that expatriation might engender due to an environment full of restrictions, which triggers the necessity to develop resiliency. Anne refers to the image she has shared for the study referring to self-development in an arid environment:

There's a little plant growing through sand (...). Sand is not a really easy place to grow, and so when you're growing and you're not in a super good base, and you can still find ways to grow out of that, I find that to be very empowering.

Discussion

In an IPA study, it is usual that unexpected directions might emerge from the analysis of data, entailing the introduction of new literature at the discussion phase (Smith et al., 2013). Wherefore, the findings were also compared to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory – SDT (1985). According to SDT, individuals aim for the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs that are essential for optimal psychological growth and wellbeing: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Whereas SDT recognises the existence of these innate tendencies, it also recognises the “organismic-dialectic” of human experience (Spence & Oades, 2011, p.46). This tension involves individuals' inherent growth orientation and the disruptive influence of different socio-contextual factors that might hinder or suspend these positive developmental predispositions (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

Findings in the Light of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The three main themes that emerged from the data – ‘Defining my trajectory’, ‘Relating to others in the journey’ and ‘Finding myself’ – are closely related to the SDT needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence, respectively.

Autonomy

The results have shown that individuals' sense of personal autonomy plays an important role for expatriates. As the participants were in couples, it is crucial to understand how the dynamics of the relationship might impact both their motivation to relocate and their perception of autonomy over time.

In their first relocation to a specific country, as SIEs or AEs, participants perceive this movement as self-determined and as the result of a personal choice, based on their autonomous motivations. After this initial experience, executives alongside their families might decide whether to develop an international career or to return to their home countries. Nonetheless, participants who relocate again due to their partner's career might demonstrate different reactions to the new move. According to SDT theory, when faced with extrinsic motivations, individuals might undertake, or not, a process of internalization and integration of these motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). This process may lead to a well-internalized extrinsic motivation so as to achieve increased levels of autonomous motivation, where individuals display a greater “sense of choice, willingness, and volition” (Spence & Deci, 2013, p.91-92). By contrast, if individuals do not undertake this process, they might perceive this extrinsic motivation as a controlled motivation and may act because they

feel pressurised to do so “whether through seduction (e.g. the offer of a reward) or coercion (e.g. the threat of punishment)” (Spence & Deci, 2013, p.92). Additionally, individuals’ behaviour can be supported by an internal or external locus of causality and be self-determined (internal locus of causality) or non-self-determined (external locus of causality) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, there might exist extrinsic motivations that have an internal locus of causality (for example, self-determined extrinsic motivations) which might be connected with some of the positive results related to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Individuals who are relocating again due to their partner’s career might perceive this new expatriation, driven by an external locus of causality, as self-determined or non-self-determined and respond as a well-internalized autonomous motivation or as a controlled motivation, respectively (Spence & Deci, 2013). Some participants have undertaken the process of internalization, which has led to different levels of ownership of this extrinsic motivation. One participant had initially identified herself with this extrinsic motivation and endorsed the expatriation for her own goals of living abroad as a self-determined extrinsic motivation. However, over time, the environment had hindered both her sense of personal development and autonomy and, consequently, the internalization of the extrinsic motivated behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). In another case, the internalization process had grown organically, and, after multiple relocations, the participant has integrated the expatriation as an important facet of her family and as a lifestyle. These results are aligned with SDT, which states that extrinsically motivated behaviours might become more self-endorsed over time through the integration process (Spence & Oades, 2011).

In contrast, however, due to the absence of a common goal for the couple, the relocation for one participant was perceived as a non-self-determined extrinsic motivation provoked by her partner. In this case of a controlled motivation, individuals might decide between complying with the controlling contingencies or defying the controls (Spence and Deci, 2013). For compliance, they might attempt to internalize the controlled motivation for an external or introjected reason. The former implies obtaining a reward or avoiding a punishment while the latter involves a sense of obligation. Therefore, the participant has introjected this motivation and felt she should accompany her partner as they were a couple. However, as they went through a matrimonial crisis, she decided to divorce her husband afterwards.

These results support three SDT concepts. Firstly, if individuals introject a regulation and therefore feel controlled by it, this will adversely affect their feelings of being self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Secondly, satisfying the need for autonomy is significant as it determines whether there will be identification or integration of their extrinsic motivation, as a self-determined extrinsic motivation will occur (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Thirdly, satisfaction of the need for relatedness is also critical for the internalisation process of extrinsic motivation (Visser, 2010). This was particularly apparent in case of the participant whose partner determined their move, and then the subsequent breakdown of their marriage.

This study findings contribute to the literature that emphasizes how coaching might enhance coachees’ autonomy. Scholars have stressed that coaching positions clients at the heart of the whole decision-making process, fostering a sense of personal agency (Pearson, 2011), ownership of goals, learning and development (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017; Spence & Oades, 2011), and self-endorsement of clients’ actions (Anstiss & Passmore, 2013). Additionally, coaches have created a space for reflection, assisting clients to feel sincerely “acknowledged as well as acknowledging their own feelings” about their goals (Spence & Deci, 2013, p.103) so as to engage in their situation with a better sense of choice. Furthermore, coaches have helped expatriates to deal with their challenges (Gabriel, Moran, & Gregory, 2014), and facilitated the expatriates’ own solutions rather than dictating them, enabling coachees to take ownership of their behaviour change process in alignment with their values (Denneson, Ono, Trevino, Kenyon, & Dobscha, 2020).

Relatedness

This study corroborates how the coaching process supports clients' psychological needs for relatedness. Scholars have argued that coaching is mainly founded on person-centred principles of acceptance and respect for the clients (Spence & Deci, 2013; Gabriel et. al, 2014). Expatriates have experienced a strong rapport with the coach, which has helped stimulate reflective conversations in an interpersonal safe environment that made them feel supported (Denneson et al., 2020; Pearson, 2011). Moreover, coaches have helped clients' connections outside the coaching relationship regarding their partners, children, teams and communities, by inviting them to define solutions in interactional terms regarding these relationships (Visser, 2010). As Spence and Oades (2011, p.45) underscore, "Whilst a coachee may have close relationships outside coaching, s/he may not consistently feel heard, understood, valued and/or genuinely supported within those relationships." Moreover, expatriates may try to connect with others by behaving in accordance with others' preferences rather than their own. The coaching process has enabled them to explore more self-concordant forms of interactions and to handle the effects of such interactions (Spence & Oades, 2011). Furthermore, the presence of a coach might represent an improvement in the challenging context of the expatriate.

Competence

The data has shown that the satisfaction with the needs of competence may also fluctuate during expatriation as it occurs with autonomy. Some individuals might not fulfil their need for competence due to a perceived decrease in self-confidence and effectiveness or a lack of opportunities to apply their knowledge and capabilities. Moreover, all participants have displayed the tendency to be unaware of their own signature strengths, values and beliefs in a new environment (Law, 2008). The results corroborate the SDT principle that different aspects of a new socio-cultural environment might thwart not only the individuals' need for autonomy but also for competence and their tendencies to personal development (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

The findings are aligned with the literature regarding different ways that the coaching process might support, acknowledge and encourage clients to apply their competences. Scholars have argued that coaching is underlined by the assumption that individuals are fundamentally capable and possess intrinsic potential that will develop in supportive conditions (Spence & Deci, 2011; Pearson, 2011). Through the coaching relationship, practitioners have helped expatriates to recognise and develop their own current competent behaviours (Spence & Oades, 2011). Clients are invited to identify the strengths they have used in past circumstances and how they can be applied in a new country (Visser, 2010). For individuals that had put their careers on hold, coaches have assisted them through developing new skills and improving their self-efficacy so as to start a career change and switch into entrepreneurship (Archer & Yates, 2017; Yates, Oginni, Olway, & Petzold, 2017). Consequently, expatriates build their confidence in their ability to achieve their goals and even face extended challenges through their interactions with new social and physical environments (Denneson et.al, 2020; Pearson, 2011) and learn from their experience (Bennett & Campone, 2017).

Role of Findings for Cross-cultural Coaching

This study corroborates different aspects of the cross-cultural coaching literature. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that the literature does not mention any framework or approach underpinned by SDT. Ryan and Deci (2019) have developed an SDT approach to coaching and hope that the model might progress further in the coaching field. This research presents evidence that cross-cultural coaching might be informed by SDT principles as it already occurs with several coaching approaches and practices.

Participants have received coaching in different domains, such as, for example, Executive, Career, Business and Life coaching underpinned by approaches such as, in some cases, Cognitive Behavioural coaching and Co-Active coaching. These results corroborate the idea advocated by some scholars that culture should be integrated as a variable in well-known coaching approaches and practices (Abbott et al., 2013; Rosinski & Abbott, 2010). Furthermore, they support the idea that cross-cultural situations are encountered on a regular basis and that intercultural coaching is becoming an integral part of coaching practice (Abbott & Salomaa, 2017).

The data supports the importance of undertaking a holistic approach to the expatriation cycle by considering both the individuals' emotional, cognitive and behavioural domains and their working and nonworking environments during the expatriation (Abbott & Stening, 2011). The results corroborate the importance for executives to evaluate, in the contemplation phase of the expatriation cycle, the consequences for their family of pursuing an overseas assignment (Abbott & Stening, 2011; Miser & Miser, 2011). The data supports Miser and Miser's (2011) coaching framework, which stresses the importance of both the adjustment of the expatriate spouse and the development of greater levels of assertiveness, better communication, and negotiation of roles and responsibilities between partners. Furthermore, the findings support the literature suggesting that coaches may facilitate the coachees' 'unlearning' process of some cultural values that individuals have been exposed to in their lifetimes (Plaister-Ten, 2013). This consequently fostered expatriates' global dexterity as individuals were able to adapt their behaviours successfully to the needs of a different culture without losing their sense of self (Abbott & Salomaa, 2017).

Regarding the coaches' capabilities, some coaches' attributes were perceived as contributing positively to compatibility and matching within the coaching relationship, enhancing the rapport with coachees. Practitioners' "intercultural sensitivity" was perceived as an essential ability as with this, they were able to support individuals in becoming aware of their cultural values and how to use them to better navigate in a different and complex environment (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). Additionally, some participants expressed the importance of the coaches' personal experience as expatriates (Abbott, 2014; Salomaa, 2015), whereas for others this was not a decisive criterion for selecting a specific practitioner, rather basing the choice on their coaching approach.

Conclusions

This study provides a contribution to various aspects of coaching research. Firstly, the proposition that coaching in cross-cultural environments might be informed by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (1985). The findings have shown that expatriates have, in different ways, expressed the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness as they relocate to a different country. Most importantly, SDT emphasizes the importance of the socio-cultural environment in order to promote or hinder individuals' innate tendency to growth and development, which represents a main topic regarding the expatriation cycle and one which was also reinforced by participants' accounts. Furthermore, the results emphasize that it is crucial to continue the promotion of a holistic approach to cross-cultural coaching research that considers expatriates' experience in terms of cognition, feelings and behaviours, in both their working and nonworking contexts, alongside their family members.

Regarding the limitations of this study, as all the participants were married during the period they received coaching, the findings reflect the dynamics of marital relationships in the expatriation cycle. Future research could explore further the expatriate couple's experience of cross-cultural coaching where, as a couple, individuals have received coaching during one or more phases of the expatriation cycle. Similarly, future studies could explore the experience of coaching of expatriate individuals who are not in a marital relationship.

Regarding coaching practice, there are implications for various stakeholders. Coaches working in intercultural contexts might benefit from incorporating SDT principles to support expatriates and their partners so as to better understand their motivations to move abroad and the implications for their families. Additionally, practitioners need to develop their “intercultural sensitivity” so as to help coachees to become aware of their cultural values and how to use them to better navigate a different and complex environment. For professional bodies, implications exist to foster diversity and inclusion among their members as results could support those working in intercultural contexts in terms of both their practices and capabilities. For organizations dealing with relocations, this study advocates the inclusion of cross-cultural coaching for assignees and their partners as part of organizations’ expatriation packages, considering the importance to their performance overseas of executives’ adjustment alongside that of their families.

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Appendix: Pictures sent by a participant

