Identifying International Assignees At Risk for Premature Departure: The Interactive Effect of Outcome Favorability and Procedural Fairness

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The consequences of managers' international assignments are of great significance, both to the organization and to the managers themselves. From the organization's perspective, whether international assignees successfully complete their tour of duty is a matter of considerable importance (Bird & Dunbar, 1991; Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992; Naumann, 1992). Moreover, international assignments may have significant effects on managers' professional and personal lives. For example, international assignments may affect managers' longer-term career prospects, either inside their employing organization (Adler, 1996; Grant, 1997) or outside of it.

Given the many significant consequences of expatriation, it is both practically and theoretically important to understand the factors that make expatriation more or less successful (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991). Although the success or failure of expatriation has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, one frequent operational definition is the extent to which managers prematurely depart from their international assignments. Studies have shown that the costs of premature departure may be considerable to the organization, the expatriates, or both. For example, it has been reported that the average annual cost to send an employee overseas for a year or two is in the range of $250,000–300,000 (Milkovich & Newman, 1996). Thus, for organizations that have a sizable number of expatriates, the total cost of premature repatriation may be enormous. Costs to the expatriates may include threatened career advancement, reduced managerial self-confidence, and lowered prestige in the eyes of their peers.

The purpose of the present research is to identify factors that lead expatriate managers to think seriously about departing prematurely from their international assignments. Theory and research have suggested that turnover typically is preceded by several related withdrawal cognitions, such as serious thoughts of leaving and the intention to turnover (Mobley, 1982; Naumann, 1992; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). Moreover, previous research has found moderate-to-strong relationships between behavioral intentions and actual behavior, both generally in social psychology (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and specifically in the context of organizational turnover (Mobley, 1982; Naumann, 1992). For example, Steel and Ovalle (1984) reported a weighted average correlation of .50 between intention to turnover and actual turnover in their meta-analytic review. Thus, expatriates who are thinking seriously about departing prematurely may be described as being at risk to leave. Given the magnitude of the potential costs associated with premature expatriate departure, it is important to identify those who are at risk.

The potential conceptual advances offered by the present research are threefold. First, we seek to extend the literature on premature expatriate departure by providing a theory-driven analysis of some of its antecedents. More specifically, the present studies are grounded in a considerable body of theory and research...
in organizational justice (e.g., Greenberg, 1990). Second, the theoretical underpinning of the present studies offers an extension to existing models of expatriate adjustment and turnover (e.g., Black et al., 1991; Naumann, 1992), which suggests that expatriates' thoughts of premature departure may be influenced by a variety of factors. The existing models, however, have not considered how the various factors combine with each other to influence expatriates' thoughts of premature departure. The organizational-justice framework guiding the present studies suggests that several antecedents of expatriates' withdrawal cognitions interact to predict the extent to which they are seriously thinking of departing prematurely.

A third goal of the present studies is to extend the generality of organizational-justice theory. Although justice factors have been shown to influence a variety of important work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Folger, 1993; Greenberg, 1996), few studies have examined the role of fairness perceptions as predictors of expatriates' reactions.

Theoretical Grounding

Organizational psychologists have shown that employees' work attitudes and behaviors are jointly determined by outcomes (i.e., what happens) and procedures (i.e., how things happen). Outcome factors have been considered by social exchange theorists (e.g., Blau, 1964). According to this viewpoint, employees give back to the organization (e.g., show signs of commitment) in proportion to the perceived favorability of the outcomes received from the organization. Relevant outcomes may be economic (e.g., favorable levels of compensation) or psychological (e.g., individuals' perceptions that they are valued and respected by their employers).

The role of procedural fairness has been discussed extensively by organizational justice theorists (e.g., Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Greenberg, 1987; Lind & Tyler, 1988). According to these viewpoints, employees will be more organizationally committed (e.g., they will be less likely to think of leaving) to the extent that organizational authorities use fair procedures in planning and implementing decisions. Individuals' perceptions of procedural fairness, moreover, are based on two categories of factors: (a) the structural aspects of decision processes, such as whether people are allowed to provide input into decisions (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), and (b) the interpersonal behavior of those responsible for implementing decisions (also known as interactional justice; Bies, 1987), such as whether they treated the affected parties with dignity and respect.

The present research examines whether expatriates' thoughts of premature departure are affected by both the outcomes associated with their overseas assignment as well as the procedural fairness exhibited by organizational authorities. Interestingly, many recent studies (conducted outside of the expatriation context) have shown that outcome favorability and procedural fairness combine interactively to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors. It is therefore plausible that expatriates' thoughts of premature departure also will be an interactive function of outcome favorability and procedural fairness. Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) reviewed 45 independent samples that showed that individuals' perceptions of outcome favorability had much less of an impact on a variety of dependent variables (including withdrawal cognitions) when they perceived the procedures enacted by organizational authorities to be relatively fair.

A number of explanations have been advanced to account for the interactive relationship between outcome favorability and procedural fairness. It is beyond the scope of the present research to describe and compare the various explanations (but see Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996, for a review). Moreover, the present studies were not designed to be a critical test of competing explanations. Rather, our primary purpose was to evaluate whether expatriates' thoughts of premature departure varied as a function of the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness. Specifically, whereas expatriates were expected to be more seriously thinking of departing prematurely when the outcomes associated with their overseas assignment were relatively unfavorable, this tendency was expected to be less pronounced when procedural fairness was relatively high.

Outcome Favorability in the Present Research

Although many outcomes of significance to expatriates reside in the workplace (e.g., compensation, feeling valued), the outcomes selected for investigation in the present studies referred to the nonwork aspects of expatriates' assignments. Nonwork factors, such as living conditions, health care, and the perceived adjustment of participants' spouse or significant other, were chosen for several reasons. First, previous research has shown that the perceived favorability of these nonwork outcomes is meaningful to expatriates; for example, it predicts the extent to which expatriates consider departing prematurely from their overseas assignments (Black et al., 1992; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). Second, previous research examining the interactive relationship between outcome favorability and procedural fairness outside of the expatriate context invariably has examined work-related outcomes (e.g., Greenberg, 1994). By focusing on nonwork factors in the present studies, we evaluated whether the outcomes associated with a broader array of factors (than those residing in the workplace) interact with procedural fairness to influence employees' work attitudes and behaviors.

Procedural Fairness in the Present Research

Procedural fairness in the present research referred to expatriates' perceptions of the methods generally used by the parent organization to plan and implement decisions. Participants rated the fairness of the organization's usual procedures in making decisions, which may include, but need not be limited to, their expatriate experience (e.g., compensation, work assignments, etc.). Previous research has shown that perceptions of procedural fairness are related to various indexes of organizational commitment, including the desire to remain with (rather than depart from) the organization (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). Moreover, the procedural fairness of an organization relates to several components of Naumann's (1992) model of expatriate turnover, such as corporate culture (i.e., the perceived fairness of how things are done around here).

In sum, we conducted two studies that examined the extent to which expatriates were thinking seriously about departing prematurely from their international assignments as a function of their perceptions of (a) the favorability of the nonwork outcomes of
their assignments and (b) the procedural fairness of the organization’s decision-making processes. Whereas expatriates were expected to be more seriously thinking of departing prematurely when outcomes were perceived to be less favorable, this tendency should have been less pronounced when procedures were seen as relatively fair.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Participants were 58 international assignees employed by a United States-based service company with significant international markets. The survey was mailed to all expatriates in the company; the response rate was 75%. Participants were located in 20 countries drawn from five continents. The average age of participants in the sample was 37 years, and 95% of them were men. In addition, all of the participants in the main analyses were accompanied by a spouse or significant other on their assignment. The group was evenly divided between technical specialists and first-level managers versus second-level or higher managers (senior managers, managing directors, and vice presidents). Their average tenure with the company was 8.7 years. Participants had been in their assignments for an average length of 1.6 years at the time that the study was conducted. The typical length of an expatriate assignment in the organization was approximately 3 years.

Procedure. Participants were asked to complete a survey in the context of the organization’s routine efforts at assessing and improving the quality of its human resource practices. Prior to receiving the survey, all participants received an in-house notice from the Vice President of International Personnel that informed them of the study’s significance and implied that they would be asked to complete the study. Ron Garonzik then mailed the survey to all participants. In the cover letter accompanying the survey, Garonzik introduced himself and described the basic purpose of the survey (“to gauge the experiences and reactions of international personnel to their assignments”). The cover letter also assured respondents that (a) their participation was voluntary, (b) their responses would be confidential, and (c) only aggregate data would be presented to the sponsoring organization.

Survey instrument. All of the measures were included in the survey, which consisted of more than 100 items and which entailed a comprehensive assessment of expatriates’ perceptions of the assignment and the parent organization. The independent and dependent variables of the present study were embedded in the survey (Hay/McBer Co., 1996).

Dependent variable. Six items were developed to measure the extent to which participants were thinking seriously about departing prematurely from their expatriate assignment. A 6-point rating scale was used for each item, with endpoints labeled strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (6). Items were coded such that higher scores reflected fewer thoughts of premature departure (or more of an expressed likelihood of remaining with the assignment). Sample items were, “I wouldn’t seriously consider leaving my current job assignment prematurely,” and “I often discuss with my spouse (or significant other) the possibility of returning to the U.S. prematurely” (reverse scored). Coefficient alpha was .76. Participants’ responses to the six items were averaged into an index.

Independent variables: Outcome favorability. Seven items measured participants’ perceptions of the favorability of the outcomes associated with their expatriate assignments. Six-point rating scales were used. Six of the seven items required participants to indicate how much they had adjusted to various aspects of their nonwork lives. Endpoints ranged from very unadjusted (1) to very adjusted (7). Aspects covered included (a) living conditions in general, (b) housing conditions, and (c) health care management. An additional item measuring an important nonwork outcome was, “How well has your spouse (or significant other) adjusted to living overseas?” Presumably, participants viewed their outcomes more favorably to the extent that they perceived adjustment to be higher. Responses to the measures of outcome favorability were internally consistent (coefficient alpha = .85) and averaged into an index.

Procedural fairness. Whereas questions pertaining to outcome favorability referred specifically to the expatriate assignment, the measures of procedural fairness were intended to be more general, reflecting participants’ judgments of the organizational climate of their work units based on typical day to day experiences (Hay/McBer Co., 1997; McClelland & Burnham, 1995). Thus, evaluations of procedural fairness could be based on events associated with their expatriate assignment or organizational experiences encountered outside of the expatriate setting. Five items tapping various aspects of procedural fairness were included in the climate survey. Some of the items referred to the structural aspects of the organization’s procedures (Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), such as whether people were allowed to have input into the organization’s decision-making policies (“Problems are solved and decisions are made at the lowest appropriate level in the business”). Other items focused on the interpersonal behavior of the parties responsible for planning and implementing decisions (“Employees are treated with respect and dignity in this company”). Six-point rating scales were used with endpoints consisting of diagnostically opposed statements. All items were coded such that higher scores reflected stronger perceptions of procedural fairness. Coefficient alpha was .61. Participants’ responses to the five measures of procedural justice were averaged into an index.

Control variables. Four factors that have been theoretically or empirically linked to expatriates’ thoughts of premature departure were included in the survey (e.g., Black et al., 1992; Gregersen & Black, 1992). The control variables consisted of (a) whether participants have had any prior international work experience (measured by either a “yes” or a “no” answer); (b) perceptions of predeparture training, which were assessed with four items (e.g., “I am satisfied with the quality of the predeparture preparation I underwent”; coefficient alpha = .77), (c) perceived support from the home office during their overseas assignment, which was based on six items (e.g., “Overall, I am satisfied with the level of support I have received from the home organization to help me solve work-related problems”; coefficient alpha = .77), and (d) beliefs about being successfully repatriated on completion of their overseas assignment, which were based on five items (e.g., “I am confident that I will be repatriated in a manner that will take advantage of my international experience”; coefficient alpha = .85). Responses to the measures of predeparture training, perceived support from the home office, and beliefs concerning repatriation could range from thoroughly disagree (1) to thoroughly agree (6).

Results and Discussion

Summary statistics for and correlations between all of the continuous variables are reported in Table 1. Four factors were significantly related to expatriates’ thoughts of premature departure (perceived support from the home office, beliefs about being successfully repatriated, outcome favorability, and procedural fairness), all in the expected direction.

The primary hypothesis was tested with a hierarchical multiple regression. In the first step, we simultaneously entered the four control variables. As reported in Table 2, Step 1, the only one to attain significance was the measure of perceived support from the home office ($p < .01$). In the second step, we simultaneously added the main effects of outcome favorability and procedural fairness to the terms entered in Step 1. As can be seen in Table 2, Step 2, only the main effect of outcome favorability was significant ($p < .001$), such that expatriates were more apt to think seriously about departing prematurely when their nonwork outcomes were more unfavorable.

Finally, and of greatest importance, the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness was added in the
procedural fairness was relatively low). To illustrate further the

**f**.01.  

Step 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Results (Study I)

of favorability per se. An alternative measure of outcome favor-

able factors of known significance to expatriates (e.g., living

conditions), the rating scales asked participants to indicate bow

gible factors that might influence their tendency to remain in a

level of procedural fairness, r(22) = .66, p < .025, such that perceptions of predeparture training were more favorable among participants who did not have (rather than did have) previous overseas experience (Ms = 2.64 and 1.94, respectively).

* p < .05.  ** p < .01.

third step; it was found to be significant (p < .01). The fact that

the sign of the beta weight was negative suggests that the interac-

tion took the predicted form (i.e., that outcome favorability and

thoughts of premature departure were more strongly related when

procedural fairness was relatively low). To illustrate further the

nature of the interaction effect, we classified participants as rela-

tively high or low in their perceptions of procedural fairness on the

basis of a median split. We then computed the correlation between

outcome favorability and thoughts of premature departure for each

of these two groups. As expected, expatriates' perceptions of

outcome favorability were more closely related to their thoughts of

premature departure among those who perceived relatively low

levels of procedural fairness, r(22) = .66, p < .01, rather than high

levels of procedural fairness, r(32) = .32, p > .05.

Although the measure of outcome favorability referred to tan-

gible factors of known significance to expatriates (e.g., living

conditions), the rating scales asked participants to indicate how

adjusted they felt toward these factors rather than their perceptions

of favorability per se. An alternative measure of outcome favor-

ability consisted of an item which assessed the construct more
directly (and more generally) than the measure reported above.

Specifically, participants indicated on a 6-point rating scale their

level of agreement with the following statement: “All in all, the

benefits of my current assignment outweigh its costs.” As might be

expected, participants' evaluations on this alternative measure of

outcome favorability item were significantly related to their eval-

uations on the previously reported measure of outcome favorabil-

ity, r(56) = .52, p < .001.

We also conducted a hierarchical multiple regression in which

the alternative measure of outcome favorability was substituted for

the one used previously. Of greatest concern was whether the

interaction between procedural fairness and the alternative mea-

sure of outcome favorability would be significant. In fact, it was,

F(1, 50) = 5.88, p < .025, and took the same form as the one

reported above. That is, outcome favorability was more strongly

related to expatriates’ thoughts of premature departure when pro-

cedural-fairness was relatively low rather than high. These findings

provide converging evidence in support of the primary hypothesis.

Furthermore, in conjunction with the significant correlation be-

tween the two measures of outcome favorability, the regression

results provide evidence supporting the construct validity of the

original measure of outcome favorability.

Study 2

Although the results of Study 1 supported the primary hypoth-

esis, several methodological weaknesses should be noted. First, the

sample size was fairly small (N = 58). Second, the internal

consistency of the measure of procedural fairness was modest

(.61). Given these shortcomings, it seemed worthwhile to attempt

to replicate the findings; hence, a second study was conducted.

Method

Participants. Participants were 70 international assignees employed by a

European-based consumer products company with significant interna-

tional markets. The survey was mailed to all expatriates in the company;

the response rate was 35%. Participants were located in more than 40

countries spanning five continents.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>M</th>
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<td>.28*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>(.76)</td>
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Note. Higher scores reflect greater levels of all variables except thoughts of premature departure, in which case higher scores reflect fewer thoughts of premature departure. All scores could range from 1–6. Coefficient alphas are in parentheses. One of the control variables (whether participants had overseas experience) was a categorical variable. We conducted a series of t tests to evaluate whether this factor was related to any of the variables included in Table 1. The only significant effect emerged on the measure of predeparture training, t(56) = 2.49, p < .025, such that perceptions of predeparture training were more favorable among participants who did not have (rather than did have) previous overseas experience (Ms = 2.64 and 1.94, respectively).

* p < .05.  ** p < .01.

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<th>Variable</th>
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** p < .01.  *** p < .001.
The average age of the participants in the sample was 40 years, and 95% of them were men. All of the participants in the main analyses were accompanied by a spouse or significant other. The group was largely composed of middle- to senior-level managers (e.g., directors, vice presidents, and regional general managers). Their average tenure with the company was 12 years. At the time the survey was administered, participants had been on assignment for an average of 1.6 years. The usual length of an international assignment in the organization was approximately 5 years.

Procedure. The procedure was highly similar to the one used in Study 1. Participants completed the survey in the context of the organization’s efforts to assess its human resource practices. The survey was highly similar to the one used in Study 1. Because two of the control variables in Study 1—previous overseas experience and predeparture training—were unrelated to the dependent variable in both correlational analyses (see Table 1) and multiple regression (see Table 2, Step 1), they were deleted from Study 2.

Results

Summary statistics for and correlations between all of the variables are reported in Table 3. As can be seen, all of the measures had acceptable internal reliabilities (including procedural fairness). Moreover, each of the independent variables and control variables was significantly related to participants’ thoughts of premature departure and in the expected direction.

As in Study 1, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. In the first step, we entered the two control variables. As can be seen in Table 4, Step 1, only perceived support from the home office was significant ($p < .01$). In the second step, we added the independent variables of outcome favorability and procedural fairness. Although neither effect was significant, outcome favorability was marginally related to thoughts of premature departure ($p < .08$).

Finally, we added the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness on the third step. As can be seen in Table 4, Step 3, the interaction was significant ($p < .025$), and the sign of the beta was negative, as predicted. Subgroup analyses (analogous to those conducted in Study 1) further illustrated the nature of the interaction effect. Among those who perceived relatively low levels of procedural fairness, higher outcome favorability was associated with fewer thoughts of premature departure, $r(36) = .50, p < .01$. In contrast, among those who perceived relatively high levels of procedural fairness, the relationship between outcome favorability and thoughts of premature departure was not significant, $r(24) = .23, p > .15$.

General Discussion

Taken together, the results of both studies show that (nonwork) outcome favorability and procedural fairness combine interactively to predict expatriates’ thoughts of premature departure. Although it may come as little surprise that participants thought more seriously about departing prematurely when their nonwork outcomes were relatively unfavorable, it is intriguing that the relationship between outcome favorability and thoughts of premature departure was significantly less pronounced when the organization’s procedures were judged to be more fair. Both studies included control variables that have been linked to expatriates’ thoughts of premature departure (e.g., perceived home office support). Thus, the interaction between procedural fairness and outcome favorability accounted for a significant portion of the variance beyond that attributable to the control variables. Furthermore, the fact that similar results emerged across two samples drawn from different countries and industries bodes well for the generalizability of the findings.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<td>2. Successful repatriation</td>
<td>2.62</td>
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<td>.51**</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
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<td>3. Outcome favorability</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Procedural fairness</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>(.70)</td>
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<td>5. Thoughts of premature departure</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
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</table>

Note. Higher scores reflect greater levels of all variables except thoughts of premature departure, in which case higher scores reflect fewer thoughts of premature departure. All scores could range from 1–6. Coefficient alphas are in parentheses. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 

Theoretical Implications

Expatriation. The extent to which expatriates successfully complete their overseas assignments is a matter of considerable significance to organizations and individuals alike. Extant models designed to predict premature expatriate departure, however, have not considered possible complexities in how the antecedent factors combine with each other, such as interaction effects between the antecedents. Drawing on recent research and theory in the organizational-justice literature (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996), the present studies hypothesized and found that important nonwork outcomes combine interactively with procedural fairness to predict the extent to which expatriates were seriously considering departing prematurely from their overseas assignments.

Organizational justice. Although the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness has been found on numerous occasions (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996), the present studies enhance the generalizability of previous findings in two important respects. First, none of the preceding studies examined the interaction effect in the context of expatriates’ reactions to their overseas assignments. Instead, many of the previous studies looked at the interaction between the outcomes and procedures associated with a significant organizational change, such as layoffs (Brockner et al., 1994), a pay freeze (Schaubroeck, May, &
reported by Shaffer and Harrison (1998). In contrast, the correlations were not significant among those who had been accompanied in both studies; \( r = .45 \) and \( .35 \) in Study 1 and Study 2, respectively, \( p < .01 \). Nevertheless, the interactive effect of outcome favorability and procedural fairness was stronger when procedural fairness was relatively low rather than high. One possible explanation of why the interaction effect became weaker is that the nonwork outcomes chosen for investigation (e.g., living conditions, health care management) were less important to expatriates who had not been accompanied by a spouse/significant other. To evaluate this possibility, we computed a measure of nonwork outcome favorability that applied to all expatriates, regardless of whether they had been accompanied by a spouse/significant other. This was achieved by deleting the item tapping the perceived adjustment of the spouse/significant other, all other items tapping outcome favorability applied to all expatriates. We then repeated the hierarchical regression analyses conducted in Studies 1 and 2. Of greatest importance, the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness took the same form (but was weaker) in both studies (\( p < .03 \) in Study 1, and \( p < .11 \) in Study 2).

One possible explanation of why the interaction effect became weaker is that the nonwork outcomes chosen for investigation (e.g., living conditions, health care management) were less important to expatriates who had not been accompanied by a spouse/significant other. To evaluate this possibility, we computed a measure of nonwork outcome favorability that applied to all expatriates, regardless of whether they had been accompanied by a spouse/significant other. This was achieved by deleting the item tapping the perceived adjustment of the spouse/significant other, all other items tapping outcome favorability applied to all expatriates. We then repeated the hierarchical regression analyses conducted in Studies 1 and 2. Of greatest importance, the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness took the same form (but was weaker) in both studies (\( p < .03 \) in Study 1, and \( p < .11 \) in Study 2).

Another possible explanation is that the interaction effect was an artifact of common methods. Although this alternative explanation cannot be eliminated entirely, the fact that the primary findings were interaction effects makes the common-methods explanation less compelling. Participants in both studies completed measures of procedural fairness, outcome favorability, and thoughts of premature departure in the same survey at the same point in time. Whereas the common-methods account may explain why the three measures generally were correlated with each other, it is less able to explain why the relationships between variables were more pronounced under some conditions than others. For example, the relationship between outcome favorability and thoughts of premature departure was stronger when procedural fairness was relatively low rather than high.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present studies have a number of methodological and conceptual limitations. In discussing these limitations, we simultaneously are suggesting avenues for future research.

**Correlational design.** Given the methods used in the present research, the causal impact of the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness on expatriates' thoughts of premature departure has not been definitively established. On the basis of previous studies examining the interactive effect of outcome favorability and procedural fairness, however, there is reason to believe that the interaction between these two independent variables was causally related to the dependent variable in the present studies. Many of the previous demonstrations of the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness were obtained when one or both of the independent variables were experimentally manipulated (e.g., Folger & Martin, 1986; Folger, Rosenfield, & Robinson, 1983; Greenberg, 1987, 1994). The fact that the interaction has been found repeatedly in well-controlled studies suggests that the present findings have internal validity. However, the interactive effect of outcome favorability and procedural fairness on expatriates still needs to be explored in future research with methods that allow for stronger forms of causal inference.

**Common methods.** Another possible limitation of the present studies is that the results may have been an artifact of common methods. Although this alternative explanation cannot be eliminated entirely, the fact that the primary findings were interaction effects makes the common-methods explanation less compelling. Participants in both studies completed measures of procedural fairness, outcome favorability, and thoughts of premature departure in the same survey at the same point in time. Whereas the common-methods account may explain why the three measures generally were correlated with each other, it is less able to explain why the relationships between variables were more pronounced under some conditions than others. For example, the relationship between outcome favorability and thoughts of premature departure was stronger when procedural fairness was relatively low rather than high.

**Dependent variable.** A basic premise of the present studies is that premature departure is one operational definition of the success or failure of an expatriate assignment. Participants' actual level of premature departure was not measured in the present studies. Rather, we assessed the extent to which they thought seriously about leaving. Several turnover models (Mobley, 1982; Naumann, 1992) suggest that individuals who quit usually think seriously about doing so prior to their departure. Thus, it is useful to identify the factors that affect expatriates' thoughts of premature departure (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998; Steel & Ovalle, 1984). However, it is important for future researchers to evaluate whether the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness similarly predicts actual premature departure.

**Accounting for the interaction effect.** Numerous theories have been offered that can account for the interaction between outcome favorability and procedural fairness; see Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) for a review. One theory that is quite compatible with the present findings is the updated version of referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1993). According to this viewpoint, people are particularly resentful toward a party whom they associate with...
unfavorable outcomes when they view the party as responsible for, or intentionally causing, the unfavorable outcomes. When the party is seen as less responsible for, or less intentionally causing, unfavorable outcomes, resentment toward the party will be muted. The present findings suggest that expatriates who viewed procedures to be more fair may have perceived the organization as less responsible for unfavorable nonwork outcomes relative to those who perceived procedures to be less fair. For example, those who perceived procedures to be more unfair may have blamed the organization more for not arranging better living conditions for them, thereby eliciting more serious thoughts of premature departure.

Although the present findings are consistent with referent cognitions theory, they also are at least somewhat compatible with other explanations of the interaction effect (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). The present studies did not evaluate the relative merits of the various explanations of the interactive relationship between outcome favorability and procedural fairness, nor were they intended to do so. Thus, future research is needed to ascertain more definitively why expatriates’ thoughts of premature departure were more strongly related to outcome favorability when procedural fairness was low rather than high.

**Practical Implications**

Many of the factors examined in previous research on premature expatriate departure are proximal to the expatriation process, for example, whether the right people are selected or whether the organization provides adequate levels of predeparture training and support for managers and accompanying family members (Black et al., 1991; Naumann, 1992). The present findings suggest that organizational authorities also need to attend to the fairness of their ongoing procedures, which are more distal to the expatriation process but nevertheless may influence expatriates’ reactions to their overseas assignments. In fact, proximal factors such as the favorability of living conditions interact with distal factors such as procedural fairness to predict expatriates’ thoughts of premature departure.

The present studies also have important implications for organizations seeking to minimize the extent to which expatriates are thinking seriously about departing prematurely. On the one hand, it could be argued that organizations can reduce the odds of premature departure by trying to ensure that the expatriates receive favorable nonwork outcomes. On the other hand, organizations may encounter at least two problems in their attempts to provide desirable outcomes outside of the workplace. First, many of the relevant outcomes (e.g., adjustment of family members) may not be under the organization’s direct control. Second, it may not be economically feasible to provide expatriates with favorable outcomes. In fact, many globally oriented organizations are under increasing cost pressures to minimize the perquisites often associated with international transfers (Brewster, 1997). The nature of the interaction effect suggests that nonwork outcome favorability may be less consequential as long as the organization’s procedures are seen as fair. Although it may be challenging for managers to ensure that the institution’s procedures are fair, the economic or material costs associated with ensuring procedural fairness are likely to be far less than those needed to produce favorable nonwork outcomes (Folger & Pugh, 1999). In short, the present findings may help organizations find cost effective ways to minimize the extent to which their international assignees seriously contemplate departing prematurely.

**References**


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