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The political skill and will of expatriates in acculturating to the politics of an organization in a new culture



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and conceptualizes the process through which expatriates acculturate to the politics of an organization in a new and dominant culture that differs from their origin culture. In addition to an overview of acculturation, we review research on the emergence and perception of political context in organizations, and on political skill and political will. We posit that politically-relevant situational characteristics in organizations and work interact with national culture to affect the intensity with which expatriates perceive politics in their organization. Based on their political skill (operationalized as high versus low) and their political will (operationalized in terms of concern for self versus concern for others), we describe the different political behavior expatriates will use as a means of acculturating to their political context and the effects those strategies have on their acculturative stress and individual effectiveness in the organization.

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Acculturation research to date has greatly expanded our knowledge of the acculturation process and acculturation strategies, much of which can be extrapolated to the workplace. To further build upon these advances, [Doucerain, Dere, and Ryder \(2013\)](#) contend that greater understanding is needed specifically of organizational contexts that impact the psychological, physical, and behavioral processes of acculturation in a foreign workplace. In addressing their concerns, and the call of this special issue, we elaborate on organizational politics as an important aspect of organizational socialization ([Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994](#)) that is intertwined with cultural effects, and explicate its role in expatriate acculturation.

Past research has explored the importance of political skill in an expatriate manager's success in global assignments (e.g., [Harvey & Novicevic, 2002](#); [Harvey & Novicevic, 2004](#)). The present paper moves forward by recognizing the complementary role of political will in determining an expatriate's strategy for acculturating to organizational politics, and describes the integration of workplace and cultural characteristics that give rise to such politics ([Fig. 1](#)). In doing so, we make several contributions to the literature: (1) providing a framework for the arising of politics across cultures, (2) conceptualizing the

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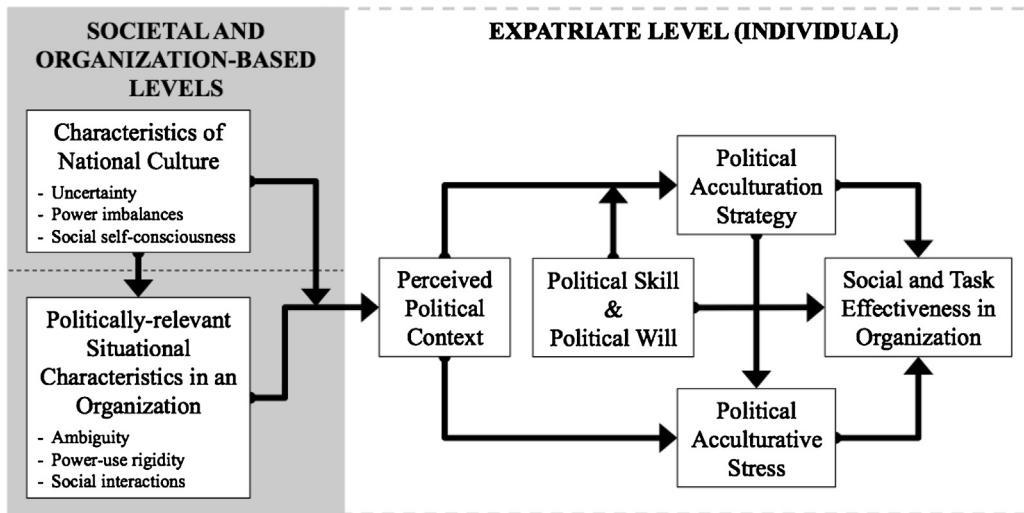


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the politics of acculturation.

intersection of political skill and will in the formation of political acculturative strategies, and (3) contrasting of the effects of such strategies on expatriate stress versus effectiveness. We begin by reviewing the basics of both acculturation and politics, move on to integrate them with culture, then explore the formation of political acculturative strategies in conjunction with political skill and will, and end by discussing outcomes.

1. Acculturation

Acculturation is the process by which newcomers learn and adapt to the ways existing members of a group have themselves learned to survive in their environment. Where culture itself is “a learned and shared pattern of behavior which is characteristic of a group living within fairly definite boundaries and which is interacting socially among themselves” (Berry, 1976, p. 9), acculturation is the integration of individuals with different cultures (Berry, 2005). Once introduced, newcomers experience *psychological acculturation*, or a change in their personal cultural identity, which is heavily dependent upon “continuous first-hand contact” (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149) and reciprocal cultural influence (Sam, 2006) via social interaction between the newcomer and members of the new and dominant culture. Berry (1976, 2005) suggests that two types of behavior arise during acculturation: (1) behaviors that are easily adopted because they are similar to the newcomers’ original culture, (2) behaviors uniquely adopted in response to acculturative stress from psychological differences between the cultures.

If left unmanaged, acculturative stress can cause strain reactions, feelings of marginality or high uncertainty as to one’s position in either culture, and/or attitudes toward the new culture that are characterized by rejection. Berry’s (1997) work suggests that individuals appraise the resources they have to manage their acculturating experience and then choose an acculturation strategy as a coping mechanism (cf. Lazarus, 1991). To the extent that a particular strategy alleviates stress, a newcomer will have an easier time adapting and succeeding in their new culture. Berry asserts that individuals will engage in either problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping when faced with stress (Lazarus, 1991), and that these coping strategies will take different forms based on an individual’s views toward their old and new cultures.

The typology of acculturative coping strategies has four factors (e.g., Berry, 1997) with two motivational axes: (1) importance of one’s origin culture and desire to maintain it, and (2) desire to participate and interact with the new culture. Combined, these yield four behavioral acculturation strategies: (1) *assimilation*, members take on the cultural identity of the new culture and maintain frequent contact; (2) *integration*, members maintain their own culture yet co-exist and interact with the new culture; (3) *separation*, members maintain their own culture by isolating themselves; and (4) *marginalization*, members have little interest in maintaining their culture or contact with the new culture (often from failure of forced assimilation and separation). The appraisal and engagement of resources for coping, depends on the unique nature and process for social interaction and reciprocity within the social context individuals find themselves.

In organizations, informal social influence norms, known as organizational politics, are among the dominant forces shaping social interactions and both the use and acquisition of resources that could help one cope with acculturative stress. Since psychological acculturation relies so heavily on social exchange and interactions, success in acculturating depends in large part upon how well newcomers adapt to the politics of their new organization and new culture. Politics have already been recognized as one of the critical domains to which newcomers must socialize themselves (Chao et al., 1994), and below we expand on this topic by conceptualizing a model through which political acculturation takes place in organizations. For consistency, we will from here onward refer to acculturating employees in a new culture as *expatriates*.

2. Organizational politics

Organizational politics is “a social influence process in which behavior is strategically designed to maximize short-term or long-term self-interest, which is either consistent with or at the expense of others’ interests” (Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989, p. 145). Formally accepted types of behavior that occur in the workplace are expected to benefit the organization rather than the individual (or benefit the organization by benefitting the individual, e.g., vacation days, wellness programs, etc.), however, politics is an informal process not prescribed by any employee’s policy-defined role or task structure, and its beneficiary is mainly determined by the individual, not the organization. As individuals jockey with one another to gain power and fulfill their personal objectives (even if those objectives benefit the whole), their political behavior comes to shape the informal and psycho-social context of the work environment that revolves around social influence and necessarily arises in the gaps among policies, procedures, and formally proscribed behaviors. This process ultimately gives shape to unique political contexts.

2.1. Individual political behavior

Political behavior is a form of social influence used to secure power (Pfeffer, 1981) to complete one’s personal goals or objectives (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1979), and is defined as political because it runs counter formally accepted and normative behavior in the organization. Whether consciously or not, people can engage in political behavior that influences others both *directly*, such as by rational persuasion or bargaining (Yukl & Tracey, 1992), and *indirectly* by altering their own impression, such as appearing likeable via ingratiation or threatening via intimidation (Wayne & Ferris, 1990). Political behavior yields many benefits, including higher performance ratings and pay (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Judge & Ferris, 1993), greater promotability (Thacker & Wayne, 1995), and heightened career success (Judge & Bretz, 1994), as well as improved leader-follower relations (Wayne & Green, 1993).

2.2. Perceptions of politics and the political context

Political behavior enacted by an employee’s co-workers shapes the political context, expectations, and assumptions experienced by that employee. In general, heightened perceptions of politics arise when employees perceive their co-workers to be motivated primarily by self-interest, and their formal organizational processes to be biased by informal social influence (Kacmar & Baron, 1999). Within these broad perceptions, employees often come to characterize their political context by one or more of the particular types of the political behavior that have become normatively prevalent (Treadway, Adams, & Goodman, 2005a). For instance, an employee may perceive high levels of politics in their work unit if co-workers in that unit normatively use ingratiation to obtain personal resources at the expense of others.

The intensity of the arising and perception of normative political behavior is caused in large part by the situational characteristics within an organization that affect an employees’ experience of work (e.g., role or job design, department processes, policies & procedures, etc.; Ferris et al., 1989; Porter, 1976). Gandz and Murray (1980), for instance, found employees in lower hierarchical levels perceived their organization to be more political than did employees in higher levels. They suggested this difference arose because those in higher positions had the job-based autonomy to handle ambiguity and thus felt more accountable for outcomes, while those in lower positions did not and attributed issues to the self-serving politics of others. Considering the interaction of politics with culture, three situational characteristics are important: degree of ambiguity in work processes, norms for power usage, and frequency of social interaction.

First, the degree of *ambiguity* in work processes and procedures is highly predictive of politics (Ferris, Harrell-Cook, & Dulebohn, 2000). Various studies have demonstrated that low formalization and centralization, minimal feedback that clarifies aspects of work, and other related characteristics, are linked with heightened political activity (Ferris et al., 2002). This is mainly because high ambiguity leaves space for employees to engage in social influence and self-serving behavior as a means of resolving such ambiguity in their favor (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Ferris et al., 1989). Individuals who resolve ambiguity tend to gain power (Ferris et al., 2002), which then only perpetuates political behavior and expectations (cf. politics perceptions cause political behavior: Ferris et al., 2000).

Second, *norms for power usage* affect the arising of politics. Organizations rooted in formal organization-based power (French & Raven, 1959) or authoritarian leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008) can create inherent power differentials that allow powerful individuals to, ironically, obviate formal procedures (e.g., Van Vugt, Jepson, Hart, & De Cremer, 2004). This can heighten their informal power in teams (Krackhardt, 1990) or the success of their social influence (Bass & Bass, 2008). Freedom from scrutiny and unquestioned normative support for their actions enhances the likelihood of self-serving and social influence behavior (Johns, 1999), or at least the perception of it (Ferris et al., 2002). Moreover, employees with less organization-based power may come to value such power (Hofstede, 1980) and act politically to climb the rigid hierarchy (Ferris et al., 2002). In contrast, organizations with power norms rooted in social or person-based power, such as expert or referent power (French & Raven, 1959), or social-based leadership, allow greater formal equality in power access (Pawar & Eastman, 1997), and thus, less informal uses of power and lower likelihood of the arising of politics (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007).

Last, *frequency of social interaction* in the work environment can also enhance politics. Social influence is enacted within social interactions, and heightened interaction can heighten salience of one’s social expectations and the utility of co-workers in meeting one’s personal goals (Ferris et al., 2002). A common form of heightened salience of social interactions

in the workplace is accountability, which is linked to political behavior (Fandt & Ferris, 1990; Ferris et al., 1997). High accountability, alongside low involvement in one's work, as opposed to low involvement in social structures, have been linked to heightened levels of politics and can characterize context-level perceptions if they occur consistently (Ferris et al., 2002). Because of the critical importance of social interaction in enacting informal social influence, and thus politics, low levels of social interaction will buffer the arising of politics.

In sum, while the *nature* of an employee's perceived political context depends on specific political behaviors and expectations, the *intensity* of that political context increases as their personal experience is affected by those three situational organization-based characteristics. This process, however, is relative to the culture in which organizations and expatriates are embedded.

3. National culture and the emergent perceived political context

National culture can modulate how politically-relevant situational characteristics in an organization are perceived, which then affects the arising and perception of politics. A characteristic of one organization (e.g., high ambiguity) may not be perceived as political in a different organization because the culture of the former already operates under that assumption. For instance, highlighting work by Drory and Romm (1988), Leslie and Gelfand (2012) noted that acts viewed as political in Canada are seen as less so in Israel because of the normative prevalence of informal social influence in the Israeli culture. Politics are defined by their informality and deviance from norms, and culture is a primary means of establishing such norms.

3.1. Interaction of cultural and organizational/work characteristics

We propose that three characteristics of culture parallel and interact with the politically-relevant characteristics of work, which then dictates political intensity. When both characteristics are equally strong, the organizational characteristics will not enhance an expatriate's perceptions of politics because the behavior induced by them is formally accepted by the culture. They are seen as simply a "way of life" in those organizations. When the strength of the characteristics are mismatched, however, political perceptions will increase because the organizational characteristics elicit behavior that is culturally incongruent and violates formal norms. Building off of Leslie and Gelfand (2012), we suggest that incongruence of the following three culture characteristics with their parallel work/organizational characteristics will enhance perceptions of political context: tolerance for uncertainty, balance of power, and social self-consciousness.

First, the *tolerance for uncertainty* exhibited by a culture determines the extent to which ambiguity is present in an expatriate's experience of work, which heightens their perception of a political context. This is likely to be greater in cultures with low levels of uncertainty avoidance since members are typically more tolerant of both risk and divergent ideas or behavior counter to the original culture (Hofstede, 1980). Cultures with high levels of fatalism (similar to the free-will versus determinism cultural difference dimension; Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991) may also experience heightened overall acceptability of uncertainty because members tend to exert less control on the outcomes of their life, which breeds uncertainty, dependency on others for direction, and lack of proactive coping and social relationship building (Leslie & Gelfand, 2012). Finally, cultures with more normative-looseness rather than normative-tightness also will be more accepting of heightened uncertainty because their behavioral norms are more easily violated and deviant behavior is more readily tolerated (Gelfand et al., 2011; Triandis, 1989).

When a culture has a high level of tolerance for uncertainty, work behaviors that arise from ambiguity will not be perceived as political because such behaviors are expected and normative in the culture. If there is incongruence, however, it is more likely that politics will be perceived. For instance, in organizations with low ambiguity (e.g., highly formalized manufacturing factories) that are embedded in cultures with high tolerance for uncertainty, employees who engage in culturally normative exchange and ingratiation will be seen as political when they engage in such behaviors in their highly stable and formal workplace. In contrast, employees who are culturally averse to uncertainty may view the social influence behavior that arises in their highly ambiguous organization (e.g., creative or artistic design firm) as political.

Proposition 1a. The interaction of ambiguity in an organization and tolerance for uncertainty in a culture will affect perceived political context such that it will be greater when ambiguity and tolerance are not congruent, and less when they are congruent.

Second, the *balance of power* within a culture will affect the extent to which employees view behavior as acceptable and implicit in the formal procedures of an organization, or as political and not condoned by formal processes. Power imbalances are likely to be greater in cultures with higher levels of power distance wherein the members of such cultures more easily accept unequal distributions of power and fixed status hierarchies with little chance for advancement unless supported by the powerful (Hofstede, 1980; Leslie & Gelfand, 2012). Further, cultures with ascription-oriented values are likely to experience greater power imbalances because members rely more heavily on inflexible standards for assigning or acquiring status and less on personal effort or competition (Trompenaars, 1993). In cultures with high power imbalance, organization-based power norms will be perceived as acceptable and essential, and thus not generate politics. If power norms are social-based, however, such behavior will seem counternormative culturally, and the opposite is true if cultural norms reflect balanced power yet an organization relies heavily on organization-based power rather than social-based power.

Proposition 1b. The interaction of power norms in an organization and power balance in a culture will affect perceived political context such that it will be greater when norms and balance are not congruent, and less when they are congruent.

Third, the level of *social self-consciousness* within a culture will affect the meaning and necessity of social interactions, obligations, and expectations for personal success. Social self-consciousness is likely to be greater among individuals in collectivistic cultures, where such members depend more closely on meeting the expectations of tight-knit social groups and advancing by demonstrating worth to smaller in-groups (Hofstede, 1980). Members of particularistic cultures are also likely to experience enhanced social self-consciousness because they value relationships to particular people more than generalized universal standards of social interaction (Trompenaars, 1993). Lastly, cultures with high levels of context used for communication will also likely experience heightened social self-consciousness. As such, members rely heavily on nonverbal, situational, and symbolic information to understand communication, all of which requires heightened acuity to social expectations and norms and the integration of work and cultural values (Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991).

When a culture has a high level of social self-consciousness, behaviors that arise from high levels of social interaction will not be perceived as political but rather as expected and normative in the general social context. However, if there is incongruence, it is more likely that politics will be perceived. For instance, in organizations with infrequent social interactions (e.g., independent contributors, specialized knowledge workers) that are embedded in cultures with high social self-consciousness, employees who engage in culturally-condoned informal network control or favor-giving will be seen as political when they engage in such behaviors in that workplace. In contrast, employees who are culturally focused on personal goals and obligations may view the social influence behavior that arises in a socially interactive and interdependent environment (such as a group-based sales organization, or athletic team) as political.

Proposition 1c. The interaction of social interaction frequency in an organization and social self-consciousness in a culture will affect perceived political context such that it will be greater when interaction frequency and social self-consciousness are not congruent, and less when they are congruent.

Beyond the unique combinations of organizational and cultural characteristics, culture may also have a long-term effect on the type of organizational characteristics that arise (Leslie & Gelfand, 2012). For instance, cultures with a high tolerance for uncertainty may give rise to organizations with greater levels of ambiguity. Although possible, there are other constraints placed upon organizations when they form, such as the nature of the work, international industry standards, and any idiosyncratic personality traits of the founding members, which make it likely that the organization will differ from its cultural environment.

Proposition 2. Cultural characteristics will have a direct effect on the organizational characteristics that arise.

The interaction of culture and organizational characteristics in determining the intensity of an organizational political context, presents a unique challenge for newcomer expatriates. As will be discussed in the following section, when perceptions of politics are high, employees are likely to experience stress. In the case of expatriates, that stress will occur while acculturating to the politics of their new organization; we term this *political acculturative stress*. Much like with the general acculturation process (cf. Berry, 1976, 2005), we suggest that political acculturative stress can be reduced depending on the type of *political acculturative strategy* adopted.

3.2. Political acculturative stress and acculturation strategies

Evidence suggests that perceiving politics is linked to increased stress (Ferris, Frink, Gilmore, & Kacmar, 1994; Miller, Rutherford, & Kolodinsky, 2008), as well as decreased satisfaction and commitment, increased intentions to turnover, and even decreased job performance (Ferris et al., 2002). Moreover, perception of politics is linked with increased political behavior by the perceiver (Ferris et al., 2002), which suggests that politics causes further politics, stress, and declines in organization-related attitudes and performance. In light of that research, increasingly intense perceptions of a political context, even in a different culture, likely presents a major challenge to their functioning and effectiveness in their new organization.

Proposition 3. Strength of the perceived political context will positively predict political acculturative stress.

Further research into political perceptions reveals that both understanding the cause of politics and feeling a sense of control over those politics can reduce the negative effects of a perceived political context (for review see Ferris et al., 2002). Much like how expatriates engage in an acculturative strategy to manage the stressful transition into a new culture, we suggest that expatriates will adopt unique political acculturation strategies to manage their transition into the politics of an organization in a new culture. We propose that political acculturation strategies parallel those proposed by Berry (1997) for general acculturation, and will alleviate the stress associated with perceiving and adapting to organizational politics in a new culture (i.e., political acculturative stress) by more or less granting expatriates a heightened sense of understanding and control in the new political environment in which they've found themselves.

As discussed previously, people will adopt acculturative strategies based, in part, on the nature of the stressors presented by the acculturation process (Berry, 1997). For instance, Rao and Hashimoto (1996) found that Japanese managers

in Canada used more influence tactics toward their Canadian subordinates, especially rationalization, sanctions, upward appeal, and exchange, than toward their Japanese subordinates. On the whole, we expect that expatriates will adopt a political acculturative strategy that matches their political perceptions.

Proposition 4. Strength of the perceived political context will increase the likelihood of an expatriate adopting a political acculturation strategy and both the frequency and intensity of political behavior associated with that strategy.

As with organizational politics in general, the effectiveness of an individual's political acculturative strategy (and the political behavior associated with that strategy) in both alleviating stress and enhancing effectiveness will depend on both their political skill and their political will.

3.3. Political skill and political will in the political acculturation process

The importance of social-based individual differences in expatriate acculturation is not a new idea. [Mendenhall and Oddou \(1985\)](#) reviewed evidence that expatriates who were able to confidently adopt the social nuance of a new culture were more likely to adjust well. They suggested that an expatriate's ability to communicate ([Brein & David, 1971](#)), evaluate unfamiliar situations with openly ([Detweiler, 1975](#)), and manage social interaction frequency will enhance expatriation success. More recently, [Harvey and Novicevic \(2002, 2004\)](#) argued that political competence and prowess in leveraging social influence is essential for expatriates' strategic decision-making, especially when assigned to developing markets, and that skill in politics can help expatriates greatly excel when coordinating competing interests between origin and assigned cultures. Developing further upon their insights, we assert that political skill and political will are essential for successful expatriate acculturation and effectiveness.

3.4. Political Skill

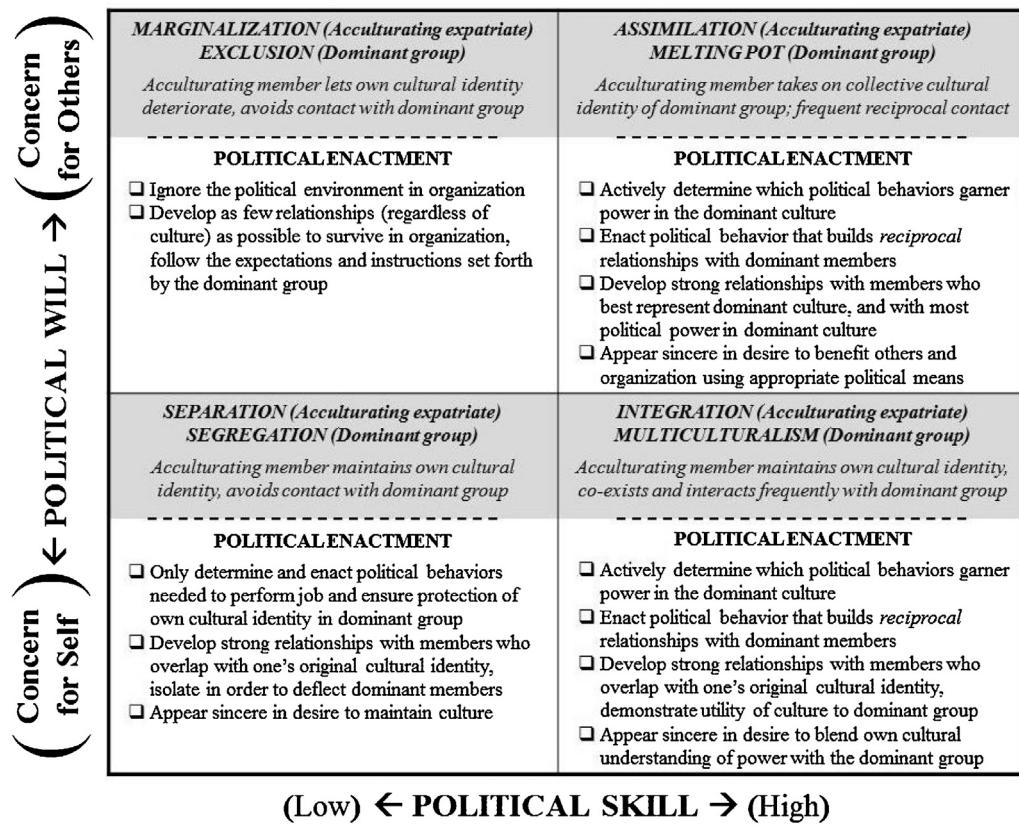
Unlike the nature and intensity of an expatriates' perceived political context, their skill in navigating and managing those politics (i.e., their degree of political skill) does not vary across cultures ([Lvina et al., 2012](#)). Political skill is "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" ([Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas, & Ammeter, 2004, p. 311](#)). [Ferris et al. \(2005a\)](#) and [Ferris, Davidson, and Perrewé \(2005b\)](#) demonstrated that the politically skilled are socially astute, interact well with others, appear sincere in those interactions, and thus proficiently construct and leverage social networks. The social sensitivity of the politically skilled enables them to select the most effective political behavior in a situation, and their confidence and networks facilitate effective execution of that behavior. Moreover, using more than 1500 employees from five countries, [Lvina et al. \(2012\)](#) determined that "political skill can be treated as a stable construct among diverse cultural groups" (p. 172), suggesting that the same benefits may accrue to politically skilled, regardless of specific culture.

Political skill has been associated with many positive outcomes. Leaders who are politically skilled have enjoyed higher performing teams ([Ahearn et al., 2004](#)) and improved relations with subordinates ([Treadway et al., 2004](#)). Subordinate political skill has been linked with enhanced performance ratings ([Treadway, Ferris, Duke, Adams, & Thatcher, 2007](#)) and reduced career fallout from a poor leader–subordinate relationship ([Breland, Treadway, Duke, & Adams, 2007](#)). More generally, political skill has been negatively associated with emotional labor ([Treadway, Hochwarter, Kacmar, & Ferris, 2005b](#)) and strain ([Perrewé et al., 2004](#)). However, despite the positive effect of political skill for engaging in social influence, its peak activation depends on more than just the presence of politics, it also depends on the will to engage in politics.

3.5. Political will

The concept of political will was originally referred to by [Mintzberg \(1985\)](#), yet has only recently received a multi-dimensional construction in the organizational literature. Extending Mintzberg's conceptualization, [Treadway \(2012\)](#) defined political will as "the motivation to engage in strategic, goal-directed behavior that advances the personal agenda and objectives of the actor that inherently involves the risk of relational or reputational capital" (p. 533). Treadway specified five dimensions of political will: instrumental, relational, concern for self, concern for others, and risk. While all dimensions are important for full understanding of political will in organizations, we focus on two particular dimensions, concern for self and concern for others, as these two are particularly salient for the political and general acculturation (i.e., [Berry, 1997](#)).

Employees engaging in politics out of concern for self use political behavior to enhance their self-image and manage the construction of their self-concept at work ([Treadway, 2012](#)). This concept is present in other areas of organizational research, such as work by [Turnley and Bolino \(2001\)](#) that found high self-monitors were more capable than low self-monitors of using impression management tactics to improve others' views of them. In contrast, engaging in politics out of concern for others is typically done to improve the conditions of co-workers, and is often meaningful for the actor ([Treadway, 2012](#)). An example is the use of political behavior to enact voice in organizations ([Fuller, Barnett, Hester, Relyea, & Frey, 2007](#)) to benefit common goals.



(Low) ← POLITICAL SKILL → (High)

Fig. 2. Political acculturative strategies as a function of political skill and political will.

3.6. The interaction of political skill and political will

We propose that the combination of an expatriate's political skill and political will elicits the specific political behavior they enact as a political acculturation strategy in response to their perceived political context (Fig. 2). We draw on Berry's (1976, 2005) conceptualization, and view political acculturation as a subset of an expatriate's broader acculturative strategy.

In each of the following strategies, political skill determines an expatriate's perception of the cultural influences that determine politics in the present organization, as well as enables them to successfully select and enact political behavior that will be effective for their goals. These goals, in terms of political acculturation, are broadly determined by their levels of political will. Those who exhibit greater concern for self will be more likely to attempt to engage in political behavior that retains aspects of their original cultural identity, thus constructing a multi-cultural sense of self. In contrast, those who exhibit greater concern for others will be more likely to abandon their own cultural identity in favor of adapting to their new cultural context.

Expatriates with high concern for self and political skill will be the most effective in their political acculturation to whatever degree they are engaging acculturative behavior (based on the strength of their political perceptions: Proposition 4). In line with Berry's (1997) integration strategy, these expatriates can successfully merge their identity with their new cultural context. They will likely focus on understanding the appropriate political behavior that garners power in the new culture, and building relationships that encourage social reciprocity. Reciprocity is an essential means by which they incur favors-owed, because it serves the double purpose of furthering their own goals while also encouraging new colleagues to fulfill their own goals. As long as they appear genuine in their desire to integrate while still retaining some uniqueness, their skill enables them to successfully influence members of both their new and original culture.

Expatriates with high concern for self yet low political skill will be less likely to fully comprehend the behaviors needed to successfully manage two cultural identities, nor develop the reciprocity with the new culture needed to garner social power. They will probably appear most sincere when interacting with those from their own culture, which requires little social skill, and as such will succeed in separating themselves from the members and political activities of the new culture by insulating themselves with those from their original culture (if available). Worse yet, expatriates with low political skill and political will high in concern for others, lack both the ability to politically acculturate and the will to maintain their original cultural identity. They risk becoming marginalized by their isolation, and are unlikely to gain any much political power.

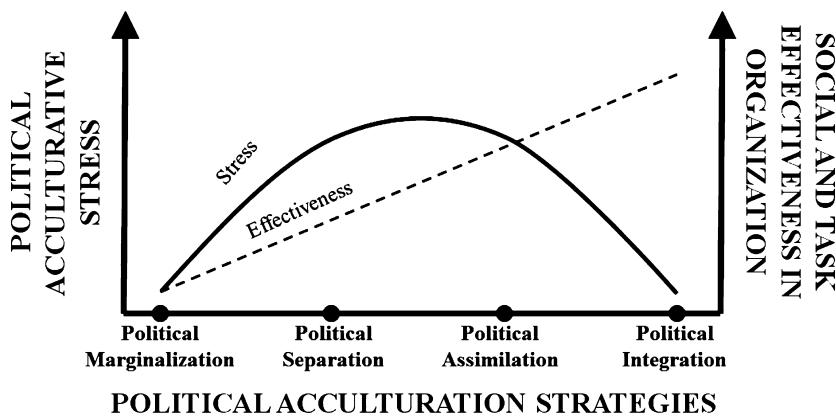


Fig. 3. Political acculturative stress and individual effectiveness in the workplace as functions of political acculturation strategy.

Lastly, expatriates with political will high in concern for others and high political skill will be likely to successfully assimilate into the politics of the new culture at the expense of their original cultural identity. While deftly perceiving the political behaviors that garner power, and developing the reciprocity necessary to build such power, they will focus predominantly on the needs of the new culture. Once again, as long as they appear sincere, they should be successful in cultivating networks with the new culture. In total then, we propose the following:

Proposition 5. Political will and political skill will interact to predict an expatriate's political acculturation strategy such that those with: concern for self and high skill will integrate, concern for self and low skill will separate, concern for others and high skill will marginalize, and concern for self and high skill will assimilate.

As with general acculturation, different political acculturative strategies will have unique effects on acculturative stress to politics. Yet because politics can be inherently harmful, not all expatriates will experience stress from loss of involvement in the politics of their organization.

3.7. The balance between acculturative stress and effectiveness in the workplace

When faced with political acculturative stress, some expatriates may simply choose to remove themselves from politics as a means of avoiding the stress of acculturation. Yet because political behavior is often linked with increased effectiveness, withdrawal from politics (to the extent it is even present) may have negative ramifications for one's overall effectiveness. We describe the effect of political acculturative strategies on outcomes below (Fig. 3).

Based in political skill and will, we suggest that expatriates with high political skill and high concern for self will appraise themselves as able to both understand and control the political process (political integration strategy), which will reduce political acculturative stress. In contrast, while those with high political skill yet high concern for others may believe themselves capable of political success, they will still experience identity change-based stress (for review on identity processes, see Burke, 1991) from heightened self-consciousness and integration mistakes as they alter their self-constructions to match their new cultural identity (political assimilation strategy). In complement, expatriates with low political skill yet high concern for others will also experience elevated political acculturative stress, however, this is due to their poor political effectiveness (political separation strategy), which not only limits their socio-political power, but could inhibit coping with any social isolation that may occur (Wu, Yin, Kwan, & Zhang, 2012).

Lastly, expatriates low in political skill and high in concern for others may experience less political acculturative stress than expected. Because they have little political prowess and no identity motive within the new culture to guide political behavior, they are essentially removing themselves from participation in the politics of the organization (political marginalization strategy). This removal may inoculate them from political acculturative stress.

Proposition 6. Expatriates who adopt political integration or political marginalization strategies will experience less political acculturative stress than those who adopt political assimilation or political separation strategies.

Beyond stress, the political behavior inherent in a political acculturation strategy may also heighten an expatriate's work effectiveness (Fig. 3), due mainly to the interactive effects of political skill and will. Being the most effective, expatriates who enact political integration may successfully draw on social connections from *both* their original culture (where present) and the new culture, offering them an array of potential resources, and will also benefit from successfully using political behavior to achieve their goals at work. Those expatriates who enact political assimilation will likewise be effective in engaging political behavior to achieve goals for themselves and others, which can incur favors or reciprocity that lead to effectiveness (cf., Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996), yet will lack connections to their original cultural identity that

might let them bridge between social networks and leverage that position for the sake of enhanced effectiveness (i.e., connecting structural holes: [Burt, 1997](#)). Expatriates who engage in political assimilation will, however, likely achieve a level of performance that compensates for the political acculturative stress incurred from constructing a new cultural identity.

Near the lower end of effectiveness are expatriates using political separation strategies, who will only benefit from connections to members of their original culture, which will likely be the minority in the new culture, and may face heightened social and trust barriers to entry into networks in the new culture. Worse yet, those who have marginalized themselves, will experience little support, resources, or social benefits from any aspects of the political context in their organization. Thus while these expatriates will experience little political acculturative stress, they will also pass on any of the benefits that may come from successfully leveraging organizational politics to fulfill the goals of others in the organization, as well as any benefits that come from remaining embedded in their current cultural identity. As such, we propose:

Proposition 7a. Expatriates who adopt a political integration strategy will experience the highest task and social effectiveness in their organization compared to those who adopt other strategies, followed (in decreasing effectiveness) by political assimilation strategy, political separation strategy, and political marginalization strategy.

In proffering a comprehensive model of the political acculturation process, two further caveats are necessary. First, political skill has also been found to directly predict effectiveness in the workplace ([Ferris et al., 2005a, 2005b](#)), and as such will likely have some degree of independent effect on effectiveness in terms of social influence behavior that is not relevant to the political context. Second, like many forms of stress, political acculturative stress may also have independent negative effects on effectiveness through pathways such as emotional exhaustion and decreased perceptions of organizational fairness (e.g., [Chang, Johnson, & Yang, 2007](#)).

Proposition 7b. Political skill will directly predict task and social effectiveness in the organization.

Proposition 7c. Political acculturative stress will directly negatively predict task and social effectiveness in the organization.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we explore the role of organizational politics in expatriate acculturation, with the underlying contention that such understanding is essential for expatriate effectiveness. We detail the ways in which workplace and cultural characteristics integrate to affect an expatriate's perception of politics, and how their skill in selecting political behavior and their will to alter their cultural identity affects both their political acculturative stress and effectiveness in their new organization. Below we offer theoretical and practical implications of our work.

Theoretically, the integration of organizational politics with acculturation is a novel approach and suggests benefits for both literatures. First, by drawing parallels between cultural and organization characteristics in the process of politics perception, our framework reinforces the ultimate subjectivity of politics while offering a conceptual foundation for exploring it. By recognizing the curvilinear effects of both higher-level characteristics, we highlight the principle of balance (e.g., levels of particular characteristics can neutralize politics) in suppressing intra-organizational processes, rather than the sheer intensity of only one particular characteristic. Second, we highlight the intertwined dependence of both political skill *and* political will on the determination of an expatriate's political acculturative strategy, as well as the differential effects of those strategies on acculturative stress and effectiveness.

From a practical standpoint, political skill can be developed ([Ferris et al., 2005a, 2005b; Harvey & Novicevic, 2004](#)). If future empirical work supports our arguments, organizations will benefit from training and mentoring programs (both general and culturally-specific) that help managers involved with international assignments enhance their political skill. Past work by [Christiansen, Villanova, and Mikulay \(1997\)](#) found that individuals have a preference for a certain level of politics in organizations, and work better in their roles with such a level of politics. Extrapolating to the international assignments, it may be possible with the support of future research, to build profiles of characteristics that promote success of international assignments with a specific emphasis on this notion of political fit. Such efforts may work to extend not only the body of research accumulated to support international assignments, but may also be leveraged by organizations to see greater returns from their global managers.

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