Sence of place on expatriate mental health in Malaysia

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**Abstract.** We propose that sense of place effects on mental health or psychological adjustment among expatriates. The dominant trend in previous studies of expatriates’ adjustment was influenced by management and organizational psychology which is not wide-eyed sight to the problem. Filling the gap needs to create a new systematic approach supported by different disciplines. This research is an interdisciplinary study which reconciles environmental psychology, cross-cultural psychology, organizational psychology, management and clinical psychology to observe the expatriation from different angles. The results conclude significant relationship between sense of place and mental disorders among expatriates and local workers in Malaysia. The results notify Government of Malaysia to make positive sense of place for expatriates working in Malaysia by selecting the certain strategies.

**Keywords:** Sense of place, mental health, expatriate, psychological adjustment.

1. **Introduction**

Malaysia is one of the most ‘globalised’ countries in the Asian region and top 20 in the world among globalised 62 countries\(^1\). It is also a target country mainly to the Asian skilled labour migrants since the statistics show 12.7 per cent of the workforce are migrant labours. The reason being, Malaysian government launches different programs like Capturing 5000 knowledge workers every year until 2020 responding the increasing need of expatriates. As a result, the number of expatriates in Malaysia rose up from 21,859 in 2001 to 35,583 in 2007\(^2\),\(^3\). It was argued that it can led to social problems for the reason that the unacceptability and socio-cultural dissimilarities of foreign labours in Malaysia\(^4\). Consequently, expatriates are not quite happy with reduced job opportunities, earnings and perks; increased workloads and exploitation points to stress, depression, and reducing in the quality of life. In the other word, in presence of difficulties to access resources by expatriates compare to Malaysian community that felt uncomfortable with foreign labours in the certain areas, such as socio-cultural problems, health issues, and problem in language and communication, local resentment, overstaying of expatriates, security threat and economic deprivation, it is expected to see much more interpersonal relationship problems and psychological issues among expatriates. Besides, inequitable treatment in Malaysia by the companies with local and expatriate-which sends massage to local labours that they are less respected than expatriates- generates tension between them and in turn decreases desire to cooperate and support expatriate by local co-workers which makes the process of expatriate adjustment to new environment more complicated and heighten failure rate\(^5\). Nowadays, work places in Malaysia create more stress so that workers increasingly prone to anxiety, psychosis, multiple personality disorders, schizophrenia, risk-oriented personal problems and job-related stress\(^6\). Therefore, conducting research to detect determinant of psychological adjustment or mental disorders in expatriates is necessary.

2. **Previous researches on expatriate adjustment**

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Adjustment is a form of harmonious relation to the place enable person to be satisfied for most of one’s needs in physical settings. [7, 8]. Therefore, psychological adjustment is regarded conceptually as the level of fit between the expatriate and new environment in a way of increased effectiveness, satisfaction with new place and reduced stress and conflict [9] or lack of mental health issues such as depression [10-12] or psychological comfort experienced by expatriate toward the overseas environment [13, 14]. Previous studies maintain indicators of adjustment including willing of expatriate to work overseas or expatriates’ intentions [15, 16], organizational commitment [16, 17], job satisfaction [15, 17], expatriate’s ability to overcome the cultural shock and living overseas and interact successfully with host country nationals [18], psychological well-being and positive job attitudes [15]. For more understanding, Bolino [19] classified the studies on expatriate adjustment in five issues including: first, cross-cultural training (CCT) [20], cultural distance [21]. Second, career development programs or free choice in taking overseas assignments and realistic attitude of the assignment [15, 22]. Third, the organizational selection criteria. Fourth, the individual factors, like personal style attributes and personality traits [23], emotional stability [24] flexible/ adaptable manner, motivation, openness to other culture, and self-efficacy [25] [18]. Fifth, studies about family factors [9, 26], marital status, spouse employment status, and having minor children in the household [27]. However, there is paucity of studies on expatriate adjustment considering environmental factors like sense of place. Therefore, the lack of study on expatriate adjustment influenced by misfit people and place motivated us to launch this new area of research combination of different disciplines of psychology: environmental psychology and cross-cultural psychology.

Sense of place is a topic from environmental psychology that is defined as an emotional connection between place and person. Place is a particular position with its relatives such as physical attributes or characteristics of a location, meaning or perceptual and psychological facets and activities by which play role to make sense of place. Therefore, sense of place is a consequence of the mutual relationship between human and her living space [28]. A person values a place as being purposely used to completing assignments and achieving goals [29]. In this study expatriation was tested as a cross-cultural psychological phenomenon and expatriates and local workers valued three types of places including settlement or town, region or province and country to show us their sense of belong to Malaysia [30].

3. Person-environment fit theory

One of the theories match with the nature of the current study is person-environment fit theory. According to this theory, environment places demand to evoke different individual behaviour [31]. Misfit between environment and individual rises up stress by which maximal discrepancies go to worse mental health [32].

4. Methodology

The sample size of this study selected from 300 (MSC) organizations in Malaysia which is the sample to fulfil the requirement of using SEM and generalize the finding to the population in quantitative paradigm. In terms of originality 53.7% of respondents were expatriates and 46.3% of them were local workers in Multimedia Super-Corridor MSC organizations. The measures of this study were SCL-90-R to gauge mental health issues found by Derogatis [33] with reliability ranging from 0.73 to 0.90 in subscales and sense of place questionnaire found by Shamai and Ilatov [30] with reliability ranging from 0.88 to 0.90 [34].

5. Results

The current study contains two hypothesizes which tested by using structural equation modelling (SEM) as below;

H1: There is a significant negative relationship between sense of place and mental health issues among the MSC workers in Malaysia.

The result of structural model showed that there is significant negative relationship between sense of place and mental health ($\beta = -0.276$, C.R. = -3.470, p-value= 0.000). Thus, the H1 was supported by the research data. In other word, generally sense of place contributes toward the prediction of mental health issue
among MSC workers in Malaysia. It is critical to mention that this outcome is similar with other researches such as investigation by Butterworth’s investigation in Australia [35] found the sense of place as important determinants of mental well being.

**H2: Originality (local and expatriate) moderate the relationship between the sense of place and mental health issue.**

The result showed non-significant negative relation between senses of place and mental health issues among the local workers ($\beta = -0.076$, p-value = 0.429), while this relationship was significant for expatriates ($\beta = -0.314$, p = 0.004). Therefore, if the relations between two variables significant in one group and not for other group then the moderation effect supported. Consistently the moderation effect of originality (local and expatriate) supported for the relationship between sense of place and mental health issues.

### 6. Conclusion

It is clear from the findings discussed above that the sense of place has contributed significantly to mental health. This finding matches with the study that mentioned having poor sense of place play a significant role in mental health problems[28]. For example, impaired sense of place causes in anxiety, mood and behavioural disorders [36]. In between, as Jackson [37] stated that home as with other places that normally obtain a strong sense of place, is more associated with mental health positively. Thus, new arrivals like expatriates who lose their home and their memories are more at risk of mental disorders and in turn are needed to be more taken into account by the countries where accommodate international workers. Moreover, Foley[38] discussed that mental health problems interfere with the productivity of people at work and home which is one of main concerns of Malaysian government and MSC companies. Malaysia is as a target for expatriates around the world and its progressed economy has been indebted to foreign workers in the past decades. Hence, Malaysians ought to be concerned with new arrivals experiences because psychological problems of newcomers like expatriates arising from grief due to removal from homes, land, and culture. Losing positive sense of home and negative sense of new place increase expatriate mental disorders which in turn reduce expatriate productivity and heighten failure rate. Therefore, The current study propose to prepare the more stable environment and to some extent similar to the expatriate homeland as such architecture and physical elements, so that they become familiar with the new location sooner and fostering sense of place, by enriching the present cross-cultural training for expatriate scholarly in accordance with the theories of environmental psychology. The study also can be used by organizations’ human resource of MSC to increase organizations’ productivity throughout promoting expatriate mental health which would be obtained by fostering sense of place, by becoming venue for social activities and community conversation, peer association settings, and ideal place to be comparable with home or the expatriate preferred environment.

### 6.1. Submitting

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### 6.2. Filename

Full Paper of SOP

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