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Adaptability and Social Support: Examining Links with Engagement, Burnout, and Wellbeing among Expat Teachers

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Abstract: (1) Background: Expatriate (expat) teachers, i.e., those living and working outside of their own country, face several unique challenges. Without sufficient protective resources, these challenges threaten to negatively impact upon their workplace engagement and psychological wellbeing, and lead to burnout. In the present study, we utilise the ‘conservation of resources’ (COR) theory to examine the influence of expat teachers’ adaptability (a personal resource) and social support (a conditional/situational resource) on their workplace engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing. (2) Methods: A sample of expat teachers ($N = 88$), mostly working and residing in Middle Eastern countries, completed a series of validated self-report scales to measure each substantive construct. (3) Results: Results revealed that adaptability, but not social support, was a significant positive predictor of both work engagement and psychological wellbeing. There were no significant interaction effects observed. Moreover, neither adaptability nor social support were associated with burnout in this study. Personal resources, such as adaptability, may be more significant determinants of workplace engagement and psychological wellbeing among expat teachers relative to conditional/situational resources, such as social support, according to this research. (4) Conclusions: These findings have important implications for researchers, practitioners, and businesses/organisations, underlining the need to concentrate on strengthening personal resources such as adaptability to improve workplace engagement and psychological wellbeing outcomes among expat teachers.

Keywords: adaptability; social support; engagement; burnout; wellbeing; expat teachers



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1. Introduction

Teaching can be a rewarding profession: it has the potential to inspire dreams, optimise human potential, and change lives. However, teaching can also be challenging given that it is often highly (and increasingly) stressful and demanding [1], with above-average burnout rates relative to other professions [2]. Although the sources of teacher stress can vary [3], some contend that the constantly evolving landscape within the profession, e.g., class sizes and composition, changing roles, evolving curriculum standards, and new educational technologies (not exhaustive), has led to a progressive increase in workload and accountability resulting in heightened stress levels and professional burnout [4]. For expatriate (expat) teachers (i.e., those living and working outside of their own country), this myriad of evolving challenges may be exacerbated by the need to adjust to a new locale, culture, language, curriculum, and to new social conventions and networks. A developing literature (e.g., [5,6]) has shown that teacher ‘adaptability’ (that is, the capacity to adjust thoughts, emotions, and behaviours under situations of change, novelty, and uncertainty, [7]) may enable teachers to successfully navigate these novel, changing environments and promote

positive psychological functioning in the workplace. However, no study to date has explored these associations among expat teachers, where the magnitude of change in their educational environment is conceivably greater than for non-expat teachers, and where the importance of adaptability may be even more salient. To fill the gap, the present study examines the contribution of expat teachers' adaptability (personal resource) as well as social support (a conditional/situational resource) to their workplace engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing.

2. Expat Teachers: A Novel and Challenging Environment

For expat teachers, there exists a myriad of unique challenges [8] beyond those commonly associated with the teaching profession in general. While these challenges can vary [9], expat teachers often encounter logistical issues relating to a changing locale, possible culture shock, less familiar (and less supportive) structural and organisational arrangements, differing notions of assessment, language and communication issues, and problems with teacher–student relations [10]. Other documented challenges for expat teachers include, but are not limited to, role ambiguity [11], more frequent and evolving curricula changes [12], differences in assessment standards as well as cultural adjustment to teaching pedagogy [13], and sometimes, a perception of having to do 'extra work' relative to their local colleagues [14] under a more precarious and shorter-term employment contract, which can enhance stress associated with job security [14]. It would follow that expat teachers who are more able to successfully navigate such novel and changing environments may be less likely to suffer from stress and professional burnout [4] and are more likely to experience positive psychological functioning, such as wellbeing, organisational commitment, and engagement, in the workplace (e.g., [5,6]). One pertinent theory of relevance here, is the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (see [15–17]).

3. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

The COR theory [15–17] provides a reliable basis to understand stress, burnout, and psychological wellbeing in the workplace. According to this theory, individuals are driven to protect, procure, and preserve psychological resources [15] to enhance their psychological functioning in the environment. These 'resources' can be considered as 'personal' (i.e., those internal to the individual, such as their capacity to adjust) and 'conditional/situational' (i.e., those external to the individual within their environment and context, such as social support). The COR theory explains that in a challenging environment (such as that encountered by expat teachers), those with more and/or a surplus of 'resources' are more likely to function well [18] whereas those lacking or with insufficient resources are more likely to experience increased vulnerability and stress, which may lead to burnout [15]. It is further considered that individuals who are more able to 'conserve' these resources (rather than exhaust them) are more protected against future stress and strain and are also more likely to gain additional resources [16], thus further promoting their psychological functioning within their current and future environment. Taken together, the COR theory implies that 'availability of resources' may be a significant factor in determining the extent to which expat teachers are able to successfully navigate the novel and changing educational environment. In adherence with other recent studies in this area (e.g., [19]), we regard 'adaptability' as a personal resource and 'social support' as a conditional/situational resource.

3.1. Adaptability

Adaptability refers to one's capacity to effectively regulate (manage and adjust) their cognitions, behaviours, and emotions in situations of change, novelty, and uncertainty [7]. Recent studies have shown that adaptability is associated with psychological wellbeing (positively) and psychological distress (negatively) among different student and non-student groups (e.g., [20]). A developing literature has also shown that adaptability has a negative influence on teachers' engagement [6] and a positive influence on psychological wellbeing [5]—a finding also replicated among university lecturers [21]. Ref. [22] also found

that school-average teacher adaptability was positively associated with teacher self-efficacy and, in turn, student self-efficacy. It has also been theorised [23], albeit in the context of students rather than teachers, that the effects of adaptability may become more salient when the magnitude of change in one's environment is greater. For example, ref. [23] found that adaptability was a significant predictor of several wellbeing outcomes among Chinese international students, who needed to cross borders and adjust to new cultures to pursue their studies. Indeed, among expat teachers, it has been argued that to succeed amid the turbulence of all these challenges, teachers need to embrace the changes and uncertainties of their new lives [10], which would seem akin to adaptability. Taken together, given the reported importance of adaptability, one would expect strong associations between this self-regulatory capacity and psychological wellbeing outcomes among expat teachers, who are living and working outside of their own country.

3.2. Social Support

Social support refers to one's perceived level of support from individuals, groups, and the larger community [24]. Research has demonstrated that increased social support can reduce the effects of workplace burnout and improve psychological wellbeing [25]. Other studies [26] found that social support protected individuals from psychological distress and operated as a buffer against stressful conditions within their environment. Among educators, [5] argued that improved social support networks (e.g., work colleagues) can reduce emotional exhaustion and improve workplace engagement. Similarly, [27] observed that a reduced social support network at school led to teacher's reporting higher levels of burnout and reduced levels of work engagement, especially when compared to other teachers who reported having close relationships with colleagues. Among expat teachers (see [28]), it has also been argued that a perceived lack of support can leave teachers feeling isolated, alienated from their families, and overwhelmed while simultaneously dealing with the challenges of living abroad and working in a school system different from their own. Thus, social support likely influences psychological wellbeing and other associated factors, such as work engagement and burnout among expat teachers (and in other workplace contexts).

4. Summary, Rationale, and Research Questions

There is growing empirical evidence linking personal and conditional/situational resources (i.e., in the COR theory) to engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing among different sample groups. However, few studies capture these substantive variables (adaptability, social support, engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing) in a single study, and no study to date has examined these relations among expat teachers, where such protective resources may be of particular importance. To fill the gap, in the present study, we examine the contribution of adaptability (a personal resource) and social support (a conditional/situational resource) to workplace engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing among expat teachers, and also investigate whether there is an interaction effect between these protective resources.

The current study addressed three major questions:

1. What are the bivariate relationships among expat teachers' adaptability, social support, engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing?
2. Are expat teachers' adaptability and social support uniquely associated with their engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing?
3. Is there an interaction effect between adaptability and social support and engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing? (see [19])

5. Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants comprised 88 expat teachers (87.5% female) aged between 24–60 years ($M = 39.52$; $SD = 9.31$). All were teaching in a country that is not their home country,

with 44.32% of participants coming from African countries, 36.37% coming from European countries, and the remaining 19.31% coming from Asia, the Middle East, North America, and Oceania. Most participants were working and residing in Middle Eastern countries (71.60%), such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, while others were working in other Asian countries (14.77%) or North America, Oceania, Africa, and Europe (13.63%). Most of the expat teachers in this sample were working full time (94.3%) and were teaching across different levels ranging from early years to Key Stage 4 (KS4). Years of teaching experience fell primarily within the 0–20 range, with only 18.2% of respondents having been in teaching longer than 20 years.

Participants were recruited via a link sent to expat teacher groups on Facebook. Permission to use expat teacher Facebook groups was requested and approved from group admins prior to making contact. Teachers were first required to provide informed consent and confirm that they met the research requirements, i.e., that they were teachers currently living and working outside of their home country. Participants who met these requirements and were willing to take part were then asked to complete an online questionnaire which included demographic (background) questions (i.e., age, sex, locale, years teaching, teaching level) (there were no significant effects observed of demographic variables on any substantive variables in this study), and then a series of validated self-report scales measuring the substantive constructs in this study: adaptability, social support, work engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing. These measures were administered using Gorilla software, and, therefore, anonymity and confidentiality standards were met for all participants. Upon completion, participants were debriefed.

6. Measures

Adaptability. The 9-item Adaptability Scale [29] was used to assess participants' cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adaptability. Participants responded to items (e.g., "I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations to assist me in a new situation") using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = 0.91$ in the present study).

Social Support. The 12-item Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support [30] was used to assess participants' perceived levels of social support relating to family, significant others, and friends. Participants responded to items (e.g., "my family really tries to help me") using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = 0.91$ in the present study).

Work Engagement. The 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement scale, UWES-9 [31] was used to assess participants' level of work engagement. Participants responded to items (e.g., "At work, I feel bursting with energy") using a 7-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 6 (always, every day) ($\alpha = 0.93$ in the present study).

Burnout. The 9-item Emotional Exhaustion scale [32] was used to assess participants' level of burnout. Participants responded to items (e.g., "In the last 7 days how much have you felt emotionally depleted") using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) ($\alpha = 0.96$ in the present study).

Psychological Wellbeing. The 8-item Psychological Wellbeing scale [33] was used to assess participants' general level of psychological wellbeing. Participants responded to items (e.g., "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life") using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = 0.88$ in the present study).

7. Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the key variables are presented in Table 1. As indicated, adaptability was significantly positively associated with both work engagement and psychological wellbeing. Perceived social support was also significantly positively associated with psychological wellbeing. Neither adaptability nor perceived social support were associated with burnout; as such, we did not include burnout

as an outcome in further analyses (Note: Mann–Whitney U tests revealed no significant differences in adaptability ($U = 471, p = 0.55$), perceived social support ($U = 491.5, p = 0.39$), work engagement ($U = 431.5, p = 0.92$), burnout ($U = 399, p = 0.76$), or psychological wellbeing scores by sex ($U = 426.5, p = 0.97$)).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between key variables ($N = 88$).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Adaptability					
2. Social Support (PSS)	0.35 **				
3. Work Engagement	0.43 **	0.14			
4. Burnout	−0.12	−0.16	−0.42 **		
5. Psychological Wellbeing	0.54 **	0.37 **	0.58 **	−0.36 **	
Mean	49.02	64.62	33.92	28.96	44.92
SD	8.49	14.44	11.29	10.04	6.86

Note: ** $p < 0.001$.

8. Moderated Regression Analyses

All regression assumptions for this dataset were met for each model. Moderated regression analyses were conducted to examine perceived social support as a moderator of the relationship between adaptability and psychological wellbeing outcomes (work engagement and psychological wellbeing), respectively. The total scores of the key predictor variables (i.e., Adaptability) and the moderator (i.e., Social Support) were first mean centred and an interaction term was computed by multiplying the centred predictors [34].

9. Work Engagement

It was found that there was a significant positive relationship between adaptability ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.23, 0.86]$) on work engagement. However, there were no unique effects of social support ($\beta = -0.01, p = 0.88, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.18, 0.15]$) and no interaction effect observed ($\beta = -0.07, p = 0.52, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.01, 0.00]$). The variance explained by the predictors was 19.5%.

10. Psychological Wellbeing

It was found that there was a significant positive relationship between adaptability ($\beta = 0.55, p < 0.001, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.27, 0.62]$) and psychological wellbeing. However, there were no unique effects of social support ($\beta = 0.14, p = 0.15, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.02, 0.16]$) and no interaction effect observed ($\beta = 0.13, p = 0.21, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.00, 0.01]$). The variance explained by the predictors was 32.2%.

11. Discussion

This current study examined the role of adaptability as a personal resource and social support as a conditional/situational resource [20] to determine the extent to which these resources are related to workplace engagement, psychological wellbeing, and burnout in expat teachers. The results showed that adaptability had a significant association with engagement and psychological wellbeing. This finding is consistent with the existing literature and the COR theory, where personal resources are linked to greater work engagement [27] and psychological wellbeing (e.g., [20,35]). However, social support was not significantly related to engagement, psychological wellbeing, or burnout in this study; despite prior studies showing that social support reduces emotional exhaustion and is seen to improve workplace engagement of educators [5]. This could be because the sample group in this study comprised expats, who live away from friends and family, and needed to learn to be more self-reliant, independent, and gain a greater sense of autonomy. Indeed, these attributes (i.e., independence and autonomy) have been found to support expats with the challenges of working abroad [36] and promote a greater sense of identity and belonging among the expat community (and others) within their host countries [37].

This study has practical implications at the school-level that are relevant to expat teachers' psychological functioning in the workplace. For example, the findings indicate the potential benefits of addressing adaptability among expat teachers. To do this, schools might create 'professional learning communities' (see [22]) which provide opportunities for and promote self-reflection, discussion, and self-awareness among expat teachers. These communities might: (1) promote opportunities for self-reflection of one's thoughts, behaviours, and emotions (e.g., via self-assessment tools; [4], and/or peer mentoring and coaching; [38]), and how these might be adjusted to manage situations of change, novelty, and uncertainty more effectively; (2) provide a forum of exchange among expat teachers, where communities can share and discuss strategies that could be used more effectively in future situations of this nature; (3) this, in turn, might further promote self-awareness among expat teachers, to help refine their adaptive practices (see also [22]).

12. Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations to acknowledge when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was somewhat small, although fairly consistent with that of other studies exploring such variables (e.g., [21]). Second, all measures adopted were self reported and as such, were susceptible to biased or inaccurate responses [39]; although this could again, conceivably, be levelled with most other studies in this area. It may also be important for future research to measure whether expat teachers had family and/or friends with them in their new country, as locality and immediacy of social support, may be of importance. Moreover, as this research adopted a quantitative methodology, there is scope for more in-depth qualitative research to help understand the complexities, trends, and nuances for expat teachers in how they adapt in their workplaces. Finally, our correlational design cannot account for cause-and-effect relationships, nor does it consider the wider context including the role of leadership within a school, socio-economic factors impacting wellbeing, job security, and school climate and environment. Future research may benefit from controlling and exploring other such factors which, in turn, may lead to greater understanding of the causal mechanisms.

13. Conclusions

In this paper, we explored the relationships between expat teachers' adaptability and social support, and examined the extent to which these variables are uniquely associated with their workplace engagement, burnout, and psychological wellbeing. Our findings illustrate that adaptability, and not social support, plays an important role in an individual's engagement and psychological wellbeing among expat teachers. These findings may have important implications for employers who might consider developing expat teachers' levels of adaptability (i.e., focusing on nurturing personal resources) to help positively influence workplace outcomes (e.g., high levels of engagement and psychological wellbeing).

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