Breaking the Ice: Developing a Model of Expeditioner and Partner

Adaptation to Antarctic Employment

by

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Kimberley Anne Norris

21st May, 2010
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ABSTRACT

Existing research on the psychological issues that affect returning Antarctic expeditioners testifies to the coexistence of both positive and negative outcomes derived from their experience ‘on the ice’. However the predominant focus of such research has been limited to adjustment outcomes rather than the processes that underlie adaptation - processes which are likely to include individual coping mechanisms, organisational demands, and family functioning patterns. Identification of the salient predictors of resilience and adaptation enables intervention strategies to focus on enhancing this capacity throughout the employment experience.

Adopting a salutogenic perspective, the present study investigated the experience of Antarctic employment for single expeditioners, partnered expeditioners, and partners from pre-departure through to reintegration in an effort to identify factors which facilitate positive and negative adaptation. This was achieved through: 1) Identifying factors that promote psychological resilience and adaptation in Antarctic expeditioners and describing their relationship to positive and negative change arising from the expedition experience; 2) Identifying factors that promote psychological resilience and adaptation in Antarctic expeditioners partners and describing their relationship to positive and negative change arising from the separation experience; and 3) Describing the quality and nature of the reintegration experience by comparing the processes and outcomes of each of the above, and their implications for the process of reintegration over a 12 month period. An additional aim of the present research was to investigate the impact of a shift from ship to air-based personnel movement in Australian Antarctic populations.

Eligible participants were those undertaking a minimum employment period of three consecutive months. The sample incorporated within the present study comprised 141 single expeditioners and 282 partnered expeditioners recruited from the Australian Antarctic program during the 2005/2006, 2006/2007, and 2007/2008 seasons. In order to obtain a more
comprehensive understanding of experience of the pre-departure period upon existing intimate relationships, 149 partners of the recruited expeditioners also participated in this study. To enable comprehensive assessment and understanding of the independent and interdependent nature of experiences across Antarctic employment and how these contribute to resilience and adaptation, data was collected across four stages of the Antarctic employment experience according to the following schedule: *Stage One*: Prior to departure; *Stage Two*: During the Antarctic absence; *Stage Three*: Two months post-return to Australia; *Stage Four*: Twelve months post-return to Australia.

Results identified that compared to partners, both single and partnered expeditioners reported significantly higher quantitative and qualitative levels of well-being and indices of adaptation at all time points except reunion. Furthermore, there was little differentiation between single and partnered expeditioners on both quantitative and qualitative measures, nor between those who experienced ship versus air-based return to Australia. A consistent result demonstrated throughout the research studies was the multidimensional nature of factors influencing adaptation for all participant categories throughout all phases of the employment experience. These factors spanned individual, organisational, and relationship level factors as well as demonstrated interrelationships between experiences at each phase of employment enabling a model to be developed integrating these factors as they relate to resilience and adaptation.

Results of the current research are unique in that they provide a comprehensive understanding of both the outcomes associated with positive adaptation within single expeditioners, partnered expeditioners, and partners, as well as the mechanisms which underpin these. In this way, results of the present research identify areas for proactive intervention programs and training to maximise positive adaptation outcomes that in turn enhance employee well-being, performance, and retention.
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