

# Global Assessment: The Impact of Culture on Personality Measurement

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In today's world of business, "globalization" has become both a reality and a necessity. Geographical boundaries are diminishing as goods and services created in one part of the world are increasingly consumed in another, very different part of the world (Freidman, 2006). Technology, for example, has reduced the barriers that distance and language once created. For some, this is a threat; for others, an opportunity; for all, a reality.

For organizations competing globally, many unique human resource challenges must be confronted. For example, organizations must determine how to recruit, select, onboard and develop managers capable of functioning effectively across different cultures (e.g., Project GLOBE, a large-scale study of the managerial implications of culture; Koopman, Hartog, Konrad, et al., 1999). At all levels, organizations are increasingly confronted with the question of whether or not human resource programs created in one culture will be appropriate in other, different cultures. This is especially true of assessment programs. Can organizations use the same assessments, assuming accurate translations, across cultural boundaries? Do the same psychological constructs or traits exist across cultures? Can they be measured with the same tests? Do they relate to the same outcomes, such as performance, customer satisfaction, retention and organizational productivity in a similar fashion?

These are important questions because there are obvious benefits to using common human resource programs across cultures, such as saving time/money, facilitating cross-cultural comparisons and enhancing intra-organizational communications. Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature on cross-cultural psychological assessment. Research on general mental ability (GMA) and personality, for example, has long considered the issue of culture and its effects on the comparability of test scores across cultures and their interpretative meaning. Other assessment methods

commonly used in the U.S. have not received comparable levels of cross-cultural scrutiny. Biodata and situational judgment tests (SJT), to name two, have been studied and used far more extensively in the U.S. than in other parts of the world. As a result, there is little empirical research to guide discussion about the generalization of these types of measures across cultures. Consequently, the following review focuses on measures of personality (the cross-cultural comparability of mental ability will be discussed in a subsequent article).

When considering the effects of culture on psychological assessments, there are several criteria to consider. First, are the same constructs or traits represented across cultural lines or does culture affect the very essence of what is being measured? Second, assuming that the constructs (traits) are the same, do the measures provide scores that are comparable or are the scores culture-specific? Finally, do the measures relate to other variables in a similar fashion (e.g., do they predict performance in a like manner or does the relationship change from one culture to another)? We take up these issues in order.

## Same Traits?

The advent of the "Five Factor Model" (FFM) of personality (consists of conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, extroversion and openness to experience) has stimulated greater use of personality measures in both practice and research (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991). Fortunately, the same five personality traits found in the U.S. are generally apparent in other cultures as well. Numerous studies have replicated the FFM across a wide range of cultures (e.g., McCrae & Allik, 2002; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Paunonen & Ashton, 1998). This is true regardless of whether one employs self-reports of personality or an observer gives account of another's personality (McCrae, Costa, Martin, et al., 2004; McCrae, Terracciano, et al., 2005). In addition to

factorial similarity, these studies have shown that well-developed and carefully translated personality inventories consistently demonstrate reasonable levels of reliability across cultures. Despite differences in language, religion, customs, history and values, these consistencies suggest that personality traits are a shared human feature. In short, there is substantial evidence that the same personality traits are common across almost all cultures.

### **Same Meaning?**

Existence of the same FFM across cultures does not mean that personality scores have scale measurement equivalence—that a raw score has the same absolute interpretation across cultures. Much of the research by Costa, McCrae, colleagues and others (e.g., Salgado, Moscoso, & Lado, 2003) has demonstrated that the same personality traits can be reliably captured across cultures. Still, evidence that the same traits are being measured does not mean that scores can simply be compared across cultures.

It is known, for example, that personality scores are affected by response styles, which, in turn, vary across cultures. There are two response styles, which if ignored, could lead to erroneous conclusions when making cross-cultural comparisons. The first of these, extreme response styles, refers to the tendency of respondents in some cultures to favor the end points of a scale when responding. In other cultures, there is a marked tendency to avoid using, for example, the 1 or 5 scale points and limit ratings to the less extreme 2-4 points. The second response style, acquiescence, refers to the tendency to agree with items, regardless of content. Johnson, Kulesa, Cho and Shavitt (2005), when examining data from 19 countries, found that extreme responding was more likely in cultures high in power distance (authoritarian cultures emphasizing conformity) and masculinity (cultures emphasizing assertiveness and decisive, daring behavior). Conversely, cultures low in these same two traits, and low in individualism (cultures less concerned with group harmony) were less likely to engage in acquiescence.

In addition to response styles, there seem to be true differences between cultures in terms of personality. In other words, some personality characteristics are more or less prevalent, depending on the culture. Allik and McCrae (2004) found that respondents from European and North American cultures were more extroverted, open to new experience and less agreeable than were people from Asian or African cultures. As expected, geographically proximate cultures showed high degrees of profile similarity (Allik & McCrae, 2004). Using observer reports of others' personality, McCrae, Terracciano, et al. (2005) partially replicated these findings by showing higher levels of extroversion and openness to experience among European and Americans (North and South) as compared to Asians and Africans. Further, scale variances differed by culture,

with Western cultures showing greater variability. The results were not attributable to acquiescence and possibly not to extreme responding (by using observer ratings, it was hoped that the tendency in some cultures toward modesty in self-presentation would be minimized).

In summary, there are differences between countries in the distribution of various personality traits, with countries becoming less similar as geographic separation increases. Although McCrae (2002) has noted the differences between cultures is smaller than the differences within cultures, there does appear to be both average as well as distribution differences (degree of variability) in personality scores as a function of culture. One clear implication is that norms (e.g., average scores) developed in one culture may not be representative of the population in another culture. Where norms are used in scoring and interpreting personality scores, those norms should clearly be local and reflect the culture of the respondent.

### **Same Validity?**

The final issue concerns culture and validity. Several meta-analytic studies have established that measures of personality can be valid predictors of performance in the U.S. (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991). Consistently, these studies have shown that conscientiousness is a valid predictor across occupations and criteria, and that emotional stability is nearly so. Extroversion appears to be a valid predictor of performance for managers and salespeople, and agreeableness can predict performance in jobs requiring interpersonal skills (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). Research in Europe has produced similar conclusions. Salgado (1997; 1998), in a meta-analysis of the European Community personality literature, found conscientiousness and emotional stability to be valid predictors across occupations and performance measures.

However, there is less research on criterion-related validity in other parts of the world, such as Asia and Africa. To be sure, studies have been conducted on personality-performance relationships in these cultures (e.g., Ployhart, Lim, & Chan, 2001; Smithikrai, 2007), with similar results. The absence of a comparable meta-analysis, however, makes conclusions a little more difficult to reach. This is unfortunate because there is at least theoretical reason to suspect that personality may not be as good of a predictor in some cultures as it is in others.

Church (2000) presented a model that suggests personality may account for more behavior in individualistic cultures than in collectivist cultures. In collectivist cultures, members emphasize relationships, group cohesion, cooperation and group success, and view situations as fixed and behavior as fluid (Triandis & Suh, 2002). In individualistic cultures, members are more competitive

and independent, viewing themselves as stable and the situation as fluid. In Church's (2002) model, personality characteristics exert a greater influence on behavior in the latter types of cultures. The relative absence of validity studies in the collectivist cultures has rendered this model plausible, yet largely untested.

### Conclusions

In summary, the work on personality measurement suggests that the same basic personality factors exist across cultures, at least when well-developed, carefully translated instruments are used. Further, there are apparent differences between cultures in average scores, some of which may be true average differences in the presence of traits among people and some of which may be attributable to differences in cultural response styles. Finally, the validity of these measures appears comparable as a whole, although the validity of some personality traits may vary by culture.

One caveat to keep in mind is that much of this research has been conducted with "convenience" samples (samples not designed to be representative of a culture). In particular, many of the participants have been relatively highly educated members of their respective populations and probably not characteristic of the country they represent. For organizations seeking to use assessments globally, this may not be a crippling concern. In fact, these may well be a closer approximation of the types of people global organizations will be assessing across various cultures (e.g., more so than the uneducated, members of some remote tribe, nomadic clans people, etc.). Where the target population for an assessment differs dramatically in culture from that of the assessing organization, great care should be exercised in the use and interpretation of all test scores. ■

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