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Personality Assessment of Global Talent: Conceptual and Methodological Issues

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The recruitment of managers who will operate in a culturally heterogeneous context (as expatriate managers, managers in a global company, or managers of a multicultural workforce) is increasingly important in an age of globalization. This article describes conceptual and methodological issues in the assessment of such managers, notably in the domain of personality. It is argued that this assessment can build on the well-supported cross-cultural equivalence of various personality measures. Methodological issues, such as the applicability of test norms, are particularly important in culturally heterogeneous applicant groups. Ways to deal with this heterogeneity are suggested. The predictive validity of personality measures can often be increased by measuring constructs that come from the intercultural communication and acculturation literature, such as cultural empathy, cultural distance, and intercultural competency.

Keywords: bias, intercultural skills, personality assessment

The globalization of business creates new opportunities and challenges for psychology. The recruitment of managers who are able to operate in an intercultural context is one of these interesting challenges. If the economic stakes are high and the market is rapidly expanding, there may be a discrepancy between what is economically possible and what is scientifically adequate in assessment. A viable and sustainable development of the field requires a balance between economic and scientific perspectives. High-quality measures that predict managerial performance and that show cross-cultural equivalence provide a scientifically sound and economically viable basis for cross-cultural personality assessment.

This article focuses on cultural aspects of global talent assessment. Culture is a buzzword; the interest in culture has increased in the past decades in various

domains of society such as business and science (Van de Vijver, 2006). On the one hand, the interest means that there is a good awareness of the impact of cultural factors on assessment. On the other hand, the interest in cultural factors lacks balance in my view. The focus on static aspects of national culture (such as individualism–collectivism; Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995) in which cultural characteristics are indiscriminately applied to individuals (“Americans are individualistic whereas Japanese are collectivistic”) is counterproductive in the assessment of global managers. I agree with Bartram (this issue) when he argues, “Culture only matters for assessment purposes when it is related to some effect or impact on scores that is a group level effect and which is large enough to result in misinterpretation of individual level scores.” An emphasis on national cultures has at least three problems. First, it underrates individual differences within cultures. Second, it views culture as static; managers with much experience abroad often have multiple or diffuse ethnic identities which makes the use of national characteristics to such individuals problematic even more problematic than in a mainstream group (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). Third, the focus on national cultures has led to an underrating of the influence of acculturation and diversity management issues in the assessment of global managers.

The first part of the article defines the key elements of assessment of managers who will work in intercultural contexts; namely features of the instrument, such as internal and external bias, and features of the target population, such as homogeneity of the group and adequacy of norms developed for other populations to applicants. The second part of the article describes models and findings from the literature on acculturation, intercultural competency, and diversity management. Conclusions are drawn in the final part.

KEY ISSUES IN THE ASSESSMENT OF GLOBAL MANAGERS

The Population of Interest

The need to deal with cross-cultural differences is relevant for at least three groups of managers. The first group comprises managers who will work with multicultural teams. They are often employed in their country of origin; they need skills to manage the cultural diversity of the employees they supervise. The second group of managers is formed by expatriates who will work in another cultural context than they were born and raised. These managers may supervise a culturally heterogeneous workforce, but in most cases their own cultural backgrounds create the cultural heterogeneity in the workforce. The third group is formed by global managers who work in an international context and deal with diversity among clients and colleagues from other countries. Assessment of these groups must be culturally sensitive and appropriate.

Another source of cultural heterogeneity in assessment can be because of the composition of the applicant pool. Assessment procedures may need to be adapted when applicants come from different countries. This kind of application is fairly recent, but with the increased globalization of the workforce and open labor market, labor migration will become more common. A final application of heterogeneity can be found in application procedures in which a (typically Western) assessment agency is asked to recruit managers in a non-Western country for which no standard tests are available. For example, a British company is asked to recruit a head of the financial department of a large company in Jakarta. Although the specific cross-cultural assessment issues are not identical across these applications, there is a core set to take into account, as described in the next section.

Instrument Issues

Bias and equivalence are the main issues to deal with in cross-cultural assessment. Bias refers to the presence of nuisance factors, which threaten the comparability of scores and the validity of cross-cultural comparisons (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). In the context of selection, there is a common distinction between internal bias and external bias (e.g., Saad & Sackett, 2002). Internal bias focuses on the psychological meaning of test scores and potential threats to the identity of meaning across cultural groups. This kind of bias is relevant in all cross-cultural research. External bias, however, is a concept that is specifically relevant in a selection context. An instrument shows external bias if the relationship between predictor and criterion, often operationalized by means of a regression equation, is not identical across cultural groups. In the context of global talent selection, an instrument shows external bias if at least one group of persons from different groups with the same scores on a set of predictors, such as personality traits, do not show the same expected output as the other groups; examples of output are ratings by supervisors and other indicators of job success overseas for expatriates. External bias can be operationalized as the dissimilarity of intercepts and/or regression coefficients in the cultural groups studied (e.g., Hunter & Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt & Hunter, 2003).

Examples of the most common internal bias threats in the assessment of personality are:

1. Construct bias: Can I use a specific instrument to assess personality in all cultural groups in the applicant pool? Failure to identify identical factor structures across cultural groups is often viewed as evidence against the cross-cultural adequacy of the instrument. Although there is impressive evidence for the universal applicability of some personality instruments such as the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), which is a measure of the five-factor model of personality, universality of structure is not a foregone

conclusion in the domain of personality (or any other psychological domain for that matter). Construct bias (or lack thereof) is a characteristic of an application of an instrument in a specific setting; as a consequence, conclusions about the presence or absence can only be based on data analyses in which constructs are compared across cultures (e.g., Hedricks, Robie, & Harnisher, this issue; Kabacoff, this issue; Meyer & Foster, this issue; Ramesh, Hazucha, & Bank, this issue).

2. Method bias: Are there confounding individual differences in the applicant pool, such as education, mastery of the testing language, or acquaintance with the culture of the assessment instrument, that may challenge the validity of the assessment procedure? In addition, can differences in response styles induce unwanted cross-cultural score differences? Acquiescence, extremity scoring, and social desirability responding show consistent cross-cultural differences (Johnson, Kulesa, Cho, & Shavitt, 2005; Lalwani, Shavitt, & Johnson, 2006; Van Hemert, Van de Vijver, Poortinga, & Georgas, 2002). In general, individuals with less education and individuals from less-affluent countries are more likely to display response styles.
3. Item bias/differential item functioning: Are there specific items that cannot be translated, were poorly translated, or are not applicable in the specific cultural context? An example about the impossibility to translate the German concept of *Schadenfreude* (taking pleasure in another's troubles) is given by Meyer and Foster in this issue.

Different views on the relationship between internal and external bias have been expressed in the literature. On the one hand, it could be argued that adequate assessment in multicultural groups requires the absence of both internal and external bias. The presence of either form of bias compromises the adequacy of an assessment instrument in a selection context. On the other hand, there is the more pragmatic viewpoint that internal bias is irrelevant in the context of selection. The idea behind this viewpoint, which is adopted in the validity generalization tradition (Hunter & Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt & Hunter, 2003), is that cross-cultural identity of predictor—criterion relations—is a necessary and sufficient condition for unbiased prediction and, hence, for fair assessment. It may seem counterintuitive to refrain from studying internal bias in a cross-cultural selection. The most important rationale for this choice is eclectic and utilitarian: the employer is interested in hiring the best person, which can be translated as the person with the highest expected score on the criterion. Identity of regression lines across cultural groups means that we do not need to factor cultural membership into the regression equation. There may be a smaller or larger internal bias in the assessment procedures to recruit the applicants, but this bias is immaterial as long as it does not affect the parameters of the regression equation. It may not seem obvious why a potentially biased instrument, such as an English vocabulary test in a group of native and

non-native speakers, could show the same predictor–criterion relationships in a cross-cultural setting. However, we should take into account that the bias that influences the predictor may also influence the criterion. For example, support that English-language mastery is included in an assessment procedure because it is an important part of job success. The regression equation determines whether persons from different groups with the same level of language proficiency will show the same output levels. Now, it could well be that native and non-native speakers with the same language proficiency show similar levels of performance, which would then be interpreted as the absence of prediction bias.

Another important source of concern in cross-cultural selection is the applicability of norms. Test norms are typically obtained in Western groups, while the assessment of global talent often involves the assessment of other groups. The question that arises is to what extent Western norms can be validly applied in multicultural groups. Strictly speaking, the norms can only be applied to persons who can be considered to belong to the population in which normative data were collected. Such a strict viewpoint may be counterproductive; a more pragmatic viewpoint could be to examine whether the use of norms can be expected to lead to bias for or against members of any of the groups. Bias is more likely when there is a larger discrepancy between the characteristics of the applicant and the norm group in terms of relevant background variables such as mastery of the testing language and knowledge of the culture of the testing. Recruiting new normative data on a population of applicants from different countries may be a viable alternative way of avoiding bias problems as long as the applicant pool is fairly homogeneous in terms of relevant background characteristics. An alternative way of testing the applicability of norms may be the application of person-fit statistics. There is an extensive set of statistical techniques available that provide information on to what extent individual score profiles such as the vectors of item scores can be seen as belonging to a specific target population that has a known set of scores on the same items (Emons, Sijtsma, & Meijer, 2005). The use of norms to the heterogeneous applicant pool would then be restricted to those applicants who have a profile that does not differ significantly from the profile of the normative population.

To Which Cultural Group Does an Applicant Belong?

Traditionally, the cultural background of an applicant is used as a static variable that does not change over time. Moreover, there is often a tendency to emphasize the commonalities in background of all members of a cultural group, such as the example about individualism–collectivism described above. The attribution of characteristics of national culture to managers in assessment procedures is problematic for two reasons. The first is the so-called ecological fallacy (Robinson, 1950). Aggregate-level characteristics may not apply at individual level; this is clear for dichotomous characteristics such as gender. If a country has a fifty-fifty

male–female distribution, no single individual is half male, half female. The ecological fallacy amounts to the negligence of individual differences within a culture. Most psychological traits show more variation within each country than across countries (Poortinga & Van Hemert, 2001). The second problem is related to the first. Managers who work in multicultural environments or who have lived abroad often do not have a single ethnic identity (Ashmore et al., 2004). Norms obtained in their country of origin may have a limited applicability for them. From a cultural perspective, these managers may have a multiple-cultural identity, which makes them particularly skilled to work in a multi-ethnic context.

Intercultural Competency, Diversity Management, and Acculturation

A defining feature of managers described in the present article is their contact with individuals from other cultures. These managers need to have a combination of styles and skills that make them functioning in an appropriate manner in a multicultural context. As for the skills, managers who work in a multicultural environment should know basic principles of intercultural communication and diversity management. Diversity management involves a number of skills that can be trained (for reviews, see, e.g., Gudykunst, 1998; Landis & Bhagat, 1996); unfortunately, the number of validated programs for which the adequacy has been demonstrated is limited (Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley, & Riedel, 2006; Van de Vijver & Breugelmans, 2008). I focus here on two other aspects of functioning in a multicultural context that are relevant for global talent recruitment: intercultural competency and acculturation.

As for the styles, we know from the literature that persons with some personality characteristics fare better in a multicultural environment than others. It is remarkable that this aspect of personality is not mentioned more often in global talent management. Various studies have attempted to identify the components of intercultural competency. The discussion is restricted here to models with a firm psychometric basis. Using confirmatory factor analysis, Cui and Van den Berg (1991) found support for the view that intercultural effectiveness consists of three interrelated components—namely, communication competence, cultural empathy, and communication behavior. Matsumoto and colleagues (2001) have developed the Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale (ICAPS), a measure that is specifically geared toward predicting intercultural adjustment. Intercultural competency has four components in this scale: Emotion Regulation, Openness, Flexibility, and Critical Thinking. Recently, Matsumoto et al. (2007) reported that the ICAPS predicted intercultural adjustment over and above traditional personality scales in a sample of international students in the United States. The ICAPS has shown to be applicable in a variety of intercultural contexts and could well represent a fruitful way to more concretely operationalize the influence of general personality traits on intercultural adjustment. Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000;

2001; 2002) have developed the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire, which measures cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility. These traits are related to the "Big Five" but they are more focused on predicting intercultural effectiveness. There is some evidence that the traits measured by the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) are related to psychological and social well being in a foreign environment (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). Moreover, Leone, Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Perugini, and Ercolani (2005) demonstrated factorial invariance of the factor structures in Italian and Dutch samples. The three measures that are discussed here show major areas of overlap. More generally, the literature suggests that a combination of cultural sensitivity (empathy and openness), care not to impose one's own norms when these are inappropriate in another context, extroversion, and stress-resistance (to buffer the problems met in the new cultural context) provides a good set of attributes to deal with the challenges in the new cultural context.

Psychological acculturation refers to the consequences of prolonged intercultural contact (Graves, 1967). There is extensive literature on how immigrants deal with the cultural differences between their country of origin and country of settlement and which immigrants are more successful in coping with the new cultural context (Sam & Berry, 2006). Although most of this literature describes groups that have moved permanently, the central notions of the acculturation literature are also relevant for managers who work in a multicultural context. Much current work in acculturation is based on mediation models in which antecedents have a direct influence on acculturation outcomes and an indirect influence through mediation (i.e., intervening) variables, being acculturation orientations, and coping skills.

A similar model could be used for understanding outcomes of global managers (see Figure 1). An important antecedent variable that has received little attention in the literature is the cultural distance that the global manager faces. The diversity can come from different sources, as argued above; it may refer to the differences between the society of origin and of assignment of the global manager, it may also refer to the heterogeneity of the manager's work force. The literature on acculturation shows a consistent set of findings regarding cultural distance: A larger cultural distance is associated with more acculturative stress (e.g., Galchenko & Van de Vijver, 2007). Ethnic vitality is another relevant antecedent variable; the concept was originally developed in linguistics and refers to the resources that are available to immigrants to maintain their original language, such as schools in which this language is the medium of instruction. In the acculturation literature, the concept refers to the presence of resources to maintain the original culture, such as associations for immigrants or places of worship. Mediating conditions are constituted by coping skills, diversity management skills, and, in the case of an overseas assignment, the preferred ways in which the global manager prefers to deal with the culture of the country of origin and the overseas culture. Finally, different types of outcomes are relevant for the global manager. The first refers to

FIGURE 1
Framework for Success Global Managers (after Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2006).

the psychological well being of the manager (and, if applicable, his or her family in the overseas culture), the second is the actual multicultural effectiveness of the manager, whereas the third involves job success as measured by supervisory ratings and achievement of targets.

A final aspect that can be used in assessment of global managers (and also in training modules) is focused on the skill to deal with other cultures. A so-called cultural assimilator (Fiedler, Mitchell, & Triandis, 1971) describes a vignette in which usually some cross-cultural misunderstanding or an awkward social situation is described, followed by four possible actions from which the applicant (or trainee) has to choose one. The correct answer is always culturally more appropriate than the other three. Bhawuk (1998; 2001) studied cultural assimilators among 102 exchange students at a U.S. university whom he prepared for living in Japan and communicating with Japanese persons. He found some evidence for an increase in scores after intercultural training.

The performance of a global manager is determined by a variety of sources, ranging from personal characteristics, such as intercultural competency and intellectual skills, to cultural differences that make up the working environment of

the manager. The literature on intercultural competency suggests that predicting outcomes of expatriates is more effectively done by measures of intercultural competency than by general measures of personality; the acculturation literature suggests that coping and diversity management skills are adequate predictors of acculturation outcomes. It can be concluded that the recruitment of global managers could benefit from including cultural factors in their assessment.

CONCLUSION

The further globalization of economic markets and the increasing internationalization of labor create new markets for assessment agencies. There is an expanding market of global managers, expatriates, managers of diverse work teams, and other managers who have to deal with cultural differences on an everyday basis. The current article applied a cross-cultural psychological perspective on the recruitment of these managers. Four conclusions can be drawn from this (necessarily brief and selective) review.

1. An important issue to deal with is the potential bias in psychological tests. Applicants may have an entirely different cultural and linguistic background than is tacitly assumed in the assessment battery. As is described in the other articles of this special issue, psychometric techniques should be applied to ensure the adequacy of the instrument for all applicants.
2. The issue of the applicability of an instrument is particularly salient in decisions about using norms. Applicability of norms should be demonstrated instead of assumed. There is no problem if norms have been derived from the population from which applicants can be taken to be recruited. However, this assumption is almost never realistic if the applicant comes from a different cultural group than the normative sample. Statistical techniques such as person-fit statistics can then be used to empirically examine the applicability of norms.
3. A distinction was made between internal and external bias. Whereas the former refers to the presence of any factor that could challenge the comparability of test scores, the latter focuses on identity of predictor—criterion relationships across different cultural groups. An exclusive focus on external bias downplays the relevance of the applicability of norms. Such a position is usually defended by referring to economic utility: Internal bias is immaterial if the test is equally predictive for all the applicants.
4. The literature on diversity management, intercultural competency, and acculturation suggests various psychological constructs that can substantially increase the predictive power of tests for global managers.

The economic viability of assessment procedures of global managers who will be sent abroad is highly dependent on the successful avoidance of the failures—notably, the failure of selecting candidates who eventually do not make it in the new cultural environment. Such errors tend to have a high financial and personal price. However, the limits of assessment should also be acknowledged. Even if candidates with a lot of potential are selected, the assessment procedure may not be sufficient. Selection may have to be followed by training. Dealing with different cultures comes natural for some individuals, whereas for other individuals diversity management skills need to be trained. So, assessment may be a first step in a successful overseas assignment; however, this first and may need to be complemented by other steps, such as a thorough preparation on the new job and training in diversity management.

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