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# A STUDY ON MULTICULTURAL PERSONALITY

Case  
Study

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## Keywords

Multicultural personality  
MPQ Questionnaire  
Groups

## JEL Classification

D20, M12, M14

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## Abstract

*The paper aims to characterize the multicultural personality (behavior dimensions) in the case of two groups of students in order to identify ways for their multicultural skills development. The research sample allowed the results comparison between a witness group consists of Romanian students from the second year of study in engineering (educational program developed in Romanian language, 70 students) and an experimental group of students of different cultures, from the second year of study in the same engineering specialization (educational program developed in English language, 68 students). The research tool used was the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). The behaviors dimensions considered and analyzed were: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. The findings have underlined that members of the experimental group have high level of multicultural skills and also, their educational performances (shown by their partial transcript of records for the first and second year of study) are higher than for the witness group.*

## 1. Introduction

The importance of student force mobility in the modern world and the question how personality features may influence motivations and decisions to facilitate or inhibit their adaptation in multicultural work and academic environment have recently been analyzed by many researchers (Deller, 1997; Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997). For the international students, a successful integration to a multicultural environment needs more than professional and intellectual skills and self-efficacies (Kealey & Protheroe, 1996). Talented and high-performing students may show sometimes low multicultural orientation if they lack the personal competencies to adapt in an international environment.

The paper aims to characterize the multicultural personality (behavior dimensions) in the case of two groups of students in order to identify ways for their multicultural skills development. The research sample allowed the results comparison between a witness group consists of Romanian students from the second year of study in engineering (educational program developed in Romanian language, 70 students) and an experimental group of students of different cultures, from the second year of study in the same engineering specialization (educational program developed in English language, 68 students).

The research tool used was the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) and the scales related to behavior attributes study were: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000).

## 2. Theoretical Aspects of the Multicultural Personality Research Approach

### 2.1. The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) Approach

Recently, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Van derZee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000, 2001) has been considered as an important tool to measure the characteristics relevant to motivational, professional and occupational problems occurred in a multicultural and/or international environment. The development of this tool started from the idea that cultural adaptation depends on five dimensions of human personality: cultural empathy (CE), open-mindedness to new (O), social initiative (SI), emotional stability (ES) and flexibility (F). The questionnaire consists of 91 items, which are valued using the five multicultural dimensions rated on a five points Likert scale (1 - totally not applicable to 5 - completely applicable). For each dimension of the MPQ questionnaire, authors (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) include items that are able to describe specific behaviors or trends, suggestive for each behavior dimension. MPQ is a personality assessment questionnaire which was built specifically to describe individual's behavior when interacting with people from different cultures (individuals acting in a multicultural environment). The five personality factors assessed by the MPQ questionnaire are briefly described in the following.

1. *Cultural empathy (CE, 18 items)* is the most frequently mentioned dimension of cultural effectiveness (Arthur & Bennett, 1995). These authors define cultural empathy as being the *capacity to clearly project an interest in others, as well as to obtain and to consider a reasonable complete and accurate sense of another's thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences*. This dimension's scale assesses the ability of a person to identify herself/himself with the feelings, thoughts and behavior of other people with different cultural backgrounds. The cultural empathy dimension scale includes items such as:

*understanding other people's feelings (+), trying to understand other people's behavior (+)* Working effectively with people from other cultures is important in order to understand different cultures, but also, cultural empathy seems to be an important aspect to read other cultures. People with high scores for cultural empathy are able to identify themselves easy with the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of individuals and groups belonging to different cultures.

2. Arthur & Bennett (1995) include *open-mindedness (O, 18 items)* dimension among the relational skills and those use elements related to racial, ethnic tolerance. This dimension scale assesses people's ability to be open and non-judgmental when faced other people outside their cultural group which may have different values and norms. This dimension is based on the rigid prejudices absence towards other cultural groups, the analysis of their behaviors and cultural habits (Arthur & Bennett, 1995) and to a more open attitude towards those groups. The open-mindedness dimension scale includes items such as: *interest in other cultures (+); fascination of other people's opinions (+)*. This ability, as well as cultural empathy, seems vital to understand the rules and values of other cultures and to meet them in an efficient manner. People who have a high score for open-mindedness dimension have an open and unprejudiced attitude towards other groups, regarding their values and cultural norms and also, they are open to new ideas.

3. Social initiative (SI, 17 items) denotes the tendency of people to actively address social situations and their ability to take initiative. These show how they interact with people from different cultures and the ability to get friends from other cultures (facilitate relationship). The social initiative dimension scale includes items such as: *ability to speak out (+), leadership (+)*. In addition, this dimension takes into consideration personality characteristics

as: extraversion, sociability and action tendency. Individuals who have high social initiative score are easily able to build up social networks and lead social action in a multicultural environment.

4. Emotional stability (ES, 20 items) dimension's scale assesses the degree to which people tend to remain calm in stressful situations when facing stressing environments. Leaving the home country on a regular basis and trying to adapt to a new cultural environment has been identified as a stress situation by many individuals. The capacity to cope with acculturative stress is a core characteristic of the successful international assignee. This dimension takes into consideration behavior attributes as: *put setbacks in perspective (+), keep calm at ill-luck (+) or consider problems solvable (+)*. A person working in a multicultural environment has to cope with physical and emotional discomfort. People with high score on this dimension scale are considered calm in stressful situations. This dimension is negatively linked to neuroticism (Hendriks, Hofstee & De Raad, 1999; Hofstee, 1991).

5. Flexibility (F, 18 items) behavior dimension scale is associated with people's ability to adapt their behavior to new and unknown situations that promote adaptation to the new cultural environment. Items that characterized this dimension are: *working mostly according to a strict scheme (-), working according to a plan (-), working according to strict rules (-)*. This dimension focuses on characterizing the flexibility in the way new professional procedures and tasks are tackled.

The validity of the MPQ questionnaire is based on many researches described in the literature and that have reported inter-correlations obtained from scores used (Leone et al., 2005; Van der Zee et al., 2003; Van der Zee et al., 2004; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2003).

A number of studies revealed the MPQ questionnaire validity by reporting significant relationships between the multicultural behavior characteristics and dimensions described and international career aspirations, developing multicultural activities, international orientation, self-assessments and personal suitability for an international career (Leone et al., 2005; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001); number of languages spoken (ability for foreign languages learning) and self-assessment skills, experience life abroad (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001).

Other relevant studies have highlighted the MPQ questionnaire validity by estimating more traditional measures, direct adaptation and adjustment, including life satisfaction, physical and mental health, social interaction and academic achievement (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2003; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002); satisfaction at work (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2003); team commitment and performance in work groups (Van der Zee, Atsma & Brodbeck, 2004; Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven & Grijs, 2004; Ashton, 1998); anxiety, positive and negative feelings and evaluations in work groups (Van der Zee et al., 2004); reactions to hypothetical scenarios on acculturation strategies, individual membership in various groups (Van der Zee & Van der Gang, 2007; Van Oudenhoven, Mol & Van der Zee, 2003); responses to critical incidents and self-assessments of intercultural experiences (Herfst, Van Oudenhoven & Timmerman, 2008; Van der Zee, Zaal & Piekstra, 2003); socio-cultural adaptation and depression (Leong, 2007); academic performance, experience difficulties, social support, psychological health and life satisfaction (Long, Yan & Van Oudenhoven, 2009; Kosloski et al., 2005); stress and homesickness (Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009); life satisfaction, intercultural interaction and socio-cultural

adaptation (Ali, Van der Zee & Sanders, 2003); subjective well-being (Ponterotto et al., 2007; Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven & Bakker, 2002).

In the same context, the validity of the MPQ questionnaire was also revealed by measuring the behavioral features (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002; Van der Zee et al., 2003); self-efficacy analysis (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002; Van der Zee, Zaal & Piekstra, 2003); analysis of students in an exchange program and students at undergraduate level (Leong, 2007); employees in the field of an internal and international business analysis.

The English version of the MPQ questionnaire has been supported in studies among international students (Mol, Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2001; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002), international employees (Van der Zee & Brinkmann, 2004); immigrants (Van der Zee et al., 2002), expatriates in Taiwan (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2003) and expatriate spouses (Ali, Van der Zee & Sanders, 2003). All these studies have underlined that higher scores of the MPQ behavior dimensions are linked to psychological and social well being in a multicultural environment (Ali, Van der Zee & Sanders, 2003; Mol, Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2001; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002).

## 2.2. Remarks on MPQ dimensions

The MPQ questionnaire might have some common behavior dimensions analysis with the Big Five measures (Deller, 1997). The Big Five personality traits are formed by the following factors: *Openness to experience* (inventive/curious vs. consistent/cautious); *Conscientiousness* (efficient and organized vs. easy-going and careless); *Extraversion* (outgoing, energetic vs. solitary, reserved); *Agreeableness* (friendly, compassionate vs. analytical, detached); *Neuroticism* (sensitive, nervous vs. secure, confident).

The researches made in this field identified that the Big Five is not the ideal set of traits to rely on in research on issues such as multicultural success (Ashton, 1998).

Psychologists', besides intercultural competence, are interested on emotional intelligence (EI). According to (Matsumoto, 2004) and (Yoo, Matsumoto & LeRoux, 2006; Petrides, Furnham & Mavroveli, 2007) emotion regulation and emotional intelligence are important components of intercultural competence. Furthermore, (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2008) defined the emotional intelligence as *the ability to engage in sophisticated information processing about one's own and others' emotions and the ability to use this information as a guide to thinking and behavior*. There are moments when EI is synonymous with emotional self-efficacy (Petrides, Perez-Gonzalez & Furnham, 2007).

At the moment, there is an ongoing debate between authors that consider EI as ability (Mayer et al., 2008) and as a trait (Perez, Petrides & Furnham, 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Salovey's & Mayer's (1990) brought a theoretical contribution for the EI investigation. In the research field, there are three meta-analytic investigations that examined the relationship of both EI ability and trait in order to measure assessments of general mental ability, personality and performance in employment field, academic and life settings (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004; Van Rooy, Viswesvaran & Furnham, 2005; Van Rooy, Viswesvaran & Pluta, 2005; Ponterotto et al., 2011) and mental and physical health (Schutte et al., 2007).

Based on the researches made on this field, the EI trait had been identified as an element to predict variance in quality of life variables (like life satisfaction, above and beyond the variance for abroad personality dimensions (Law, Wong & Song, 2004; Petrides, Perez-Gonzalez & Furnham, 2007; Petrides, Pita & Kokkinaki, 2007). It might be an overlap

between the multicultural personality (managing cultural diversity interactions, groups, networks) and EI (expressing and utilizing the emotions to promote positive interaction in many contexts).

### **3. Research Design Methodology and Context**

The research objective was to investigate and characterized two learning groups behavior from the perspective of their individuals' multicultural personality. The sociological survey method based on the MPQ questionnaire was used. The research sample allowed the results comparison between a witness group consists of Romanian students from the second year of engineering studies (educational program developed in Romanian language, 70 students) and an experimental group of students of different cultures, from the second year of study in the same engineering specialization (educational program developed in English language, 68 students).

Statistical data processing was performed using the Microsoft Excel 2003 and the SPSS program.

### **4. Research Results, Findings and Debates**

The experimental sample group consists of the 68 students with the average age of 21 years old (mean  $M = 20.5$ ; standard deviation  $SD = 2.82$ ). 78% of students were male and 22% were female (Figure 1). In the experimental group, the students' nationalities are shown in Figure 2. The witness sample group consists of Romanian engineering students (educational program developed in Romanian language) consists of 70 students with the average age of 21 years old (mean  $M = 20.5$ ; standard deviation  $SD = 2.82$ ). 34% of students were male and 66% were female (Figure 1). All the students from the witness group had a Romanian nationality.

The research variables were: age, gender, nationality, residence (urban/rural), and college school profile.

In both samples, the students profile varied. Reliabilities of the scales were satisfactory (Cronbach's value is around 0.70), and the MPQ questionnaire dimensions presented a substantial associations with measures of multicultural orientation (intentions and motivations to work abroad and in multicultural teams/projects) and multicultural activities (interaction with different culture people, foreign languages skills development).

Scale means, reliabilities and scale inter-correlations were computed for the MPQ scores for the total group of 68 students (experimental group) and for the total group of 70 students (witness group). Scale means were all slightly above the midpoint of the scale. For cultural empathy and open-mindedness, in both groups, high means were obtained, pointing at a possible susceptibility of these two scales to social desirability bias. In both analyzed groups the scale reliabilities were all sufficiently high.

In the witness sample the dimensions showed satisfactory internal consistencies ( $\alpha = 0.79$  for CE;  $\alpha = 0.84$  for O;  $\alpha = 0.83$  for SI;  $\alpha = 0.72$  for ES;  $\alpha = 0.71$  for F). In the experimental sample, scale reliabilities were 0.89 for CE, 0.79 for O, 0.85 for SI, 0.72 for ES, and 0.71 for F.

As Table 1 and Table 2 show, the scales were not independent. Between open-mindedness and cultural empathy was obtained the highest correlation. In both groups was also analyzed the students educational performances (shown by their partial transcript of records for the first and second year of study). The results obtained in the research revealed that witness group (participants in an international exchange program) had higher scores on Cultural Empathy, Open-mindedness, Social Initiative and Flexibility than the other students.

## 5. Conclusions

For the twenty-first century organization, the multiculturalism presence is a success factor that provides a favorable environment for the cultural diversity development and management (Aoun, 2004). From a more practical perspective, this research offers a new way to indirectly understand the intercultural skills. The MPQ scales were slightly predictive of academic performance (Van Oudenhoven, & Van der Zee, 2001). Based on the results obtained, was identified a higher educational performance for the students with high scores for emotional stability (44.44 % for the experimental group and 35% for the witness group).

The findings have underlined that the members of the experimental group have a high level of multicultural skills and also, their educational performances (shown by their partial transcript of records for the first and second year of study) are higher than for the witness group.

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Appendice

Table 1  
Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD) Reliabilities and Scale Intercorrelations of the MPQ scales and dependent variables for the witness group

|                                    | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |      | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>6</b> |
|------------------------------------|----------|-----------|------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>1. Cultural Empathy (CE)</b>    | 3.56     | 0.63      | 0.79 | 0.65**   | 0.31**   | 0.17     | 0.14     | 0.29**   |
| <b>2. Open-mindedness(O)</b>       | 3.46     | 0.49      | 0.84 | -        | 0.48**   | 0.37**   | 0.36**   | 0.27**   |
| <b>3. Social Initiative (SI)</b>   | 3.34     | 0.77      | 0.83 |          | -        | 0.35**   | 0.34**   | 0.25**   |
| <b>4. Emotional Stability (ES)</b> | 3.2      | 0.75      | 0.72 |          |          | -        | 0.45**   | 0.37**   |
| <b>5. Flexibility (F)</b>          | 3.1      | 0.70      | 0.71 |          |          |          | -        | 0.37**   |
| <b>6. Educational performance</b>  | 3.2      | 0.76      | 0.72 |          |          |          |          | -        |

Note. Significance level +  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.1$

Table 2  
Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD) Reliabilities and Scale Intercorrelations of the MPQ scales and dependent variables for the experimental group

|                                    | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |      | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>6</b> |
|------------------------------------|----------|-----------|------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>1. Cultural Empathy (CE)</b>    | 3.65     | 0.74      | 0.89 | 0.75**   | 0.31**   | 0.19     | 0.16     | 0.31**   |
| <b>2. Open-mindedness (O)</b>      | 3.56     | 0.63      | 0.79 | -        | 0.65**   | 0.37**   | 0.36**   | 0.29**   |
| <b>3. Social Initiative (SI)</b>   | 3.43     | 0.47      | 0.85 |          | -        | 0.35**   | 0.34**   | 0.27**   |
| <b>4. Emotional Stability (ES)</b> | 3.2      | 0.75      | 0.72 |          |          | -        | 0.45**   | 0.37**   |
| <b>5. Flexibility (F)</b>          | 3.1      | 0.70      | 0.71 |          |          |          | -        | 0.37**   |
| <b>6. Educational performance</b>  | 3.2      | 0.76      | 0.72 |          |          |          |          | -        |

Note. Significance level +  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.1$

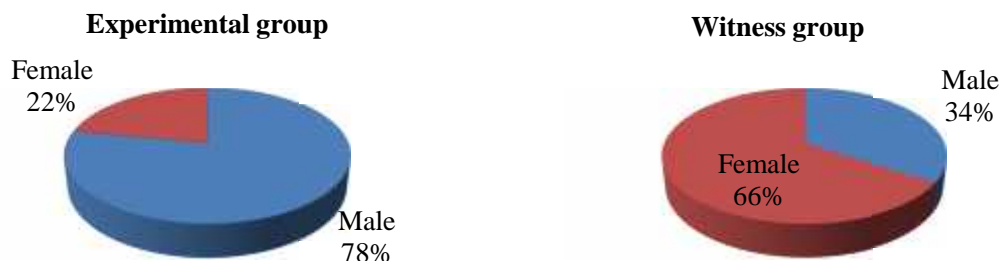
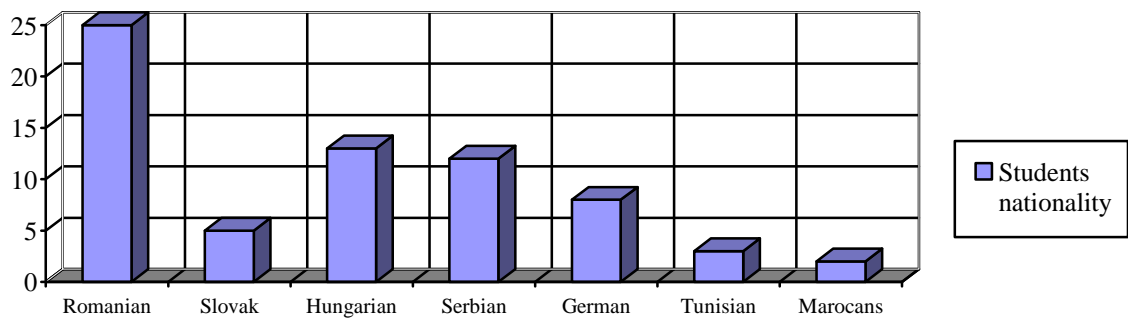


Figure 1 Subjects' gender for experimental and witness group



*Figure 2* Students' nationality in the experimental group