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Intercultural Competences and Self-Identity as Key Factors to Adaptation

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Abstract

Students increasingly cross borders to study in a foreign country and live a full experience abroad. The aim of this study is to examine the relationship among intercultural personality, self-identity orientation, and outcomes of cultural adaptation among international students. According to the multicultural personality questionnaire, five key dimensions lead to intercultural adaptation success: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative, and flexibility. In addition, another relevant factor is that individuals frame situations differently depending on how they construe or represent themselves in a specific context. Thus, we consider three related identity orientations (*i.e.*, personal, relational, and collective identity) to understand how international students feel toward and interact with others in the host culture. The results show that for international students to successfully adapt to a “host” culture, open-mindedness, social initiative, and relational identity are key factors in life satisfaction and in having more contact with the host (*i.e.*, Dutch) and international students. However, international students with a more personal identity orientation have more contact with Dutch students, and those with a more collective identity orientation with co-nationals. In conclusion, specific intercultural competences and identity orientations may help students feel more satisfied and interact with different groups as ways to achieve international cultural adaptation.

Introduction

Moving to a foreign country to study brings both potential challenges and difficulties that international students, as well as immigrants, may experience during the acculturation process of adjusting to a new culture. Berry (2006, pp. 719-734) defines adaptation as “the relatively stable changes that take place in an individual or group in response to external demands.” Ward and Searle (1991) extend Berry’s model and distinguish between two types of adaptation: psychological and socio-cultural. The former refers to affective responses, including a sense of physical and psychological well-being (*e.g.*, life satisfaction), and the latter reflects behavioral responses related to how effectively an individual fits in to the new society and how competent the individual is in managing tasks

in daily intercultural living (Searle & Ward, 1990).

As previous research finds, factors such as language difficulties, social isolation, homesickness, and geographic separation may negatively affect international students' adaptation, while factors such as English language fluency, length of residence, and greater endorsement of values can positively affect their adaptation (Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). According to Berry (1997, 2006) and Ward and Kennedy (1993), extended comprehensive acculturation models also integrate three theoretical approaches (*i.e.*, the stress and coping, cultural learning, and social identification perspectives) to study acculturation (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver, 2006; Safdar, Lay, & Struthers, 2003), conceiving individual characteristics as predictor variables of adaptation.

Personality–cultural competences and adaptation

Personal and situational factors are related to cultural adaptation. According to Searle and Ward (1990), intercultural effectiveness can be measured on the basis of both behavioral and psychological adaptations to the host culture. Specifically, behavioral adjustment reflects the number of socio-cultural difficulties international students experience in performing daily routines such as “making contacts at the university,” “understanding the university organization,” and “following rules and regulations in the country.” In psychological adaptation, the emphasis is on the amount of well-being symptomatology experienced in the acculturation process. Thus, psychological adjustment is situated in a stress and coping model, and the key predictors could include the amount of social support (*e.g.*, from friends and classmates), the degree of ethnic-cultural affiliation (*e.g.*, cultural distance), and the strategies international students use to cope with difficulties.

Regarding cultural competence, although there are various and broad definitions, Deardorff (2006, pp. 247–248), in an attempt to find consensus among international experts' definitions, concluded that intercultural competence is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes”. Nevertheless, Deardorff also mentioned the relevance of the personality component in the definition of intercultural competence, emphasizing openness to and respect for other cultures.

Empirical evidence suggests that personality variables such as attachment styles, trait anxiety, and extroversion may affect international students' socio-cultural and psychological adaptation (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Ying & Han, 2006). A recent meta-analytic study from a cultural competence perspective confirms this idea, noting the correlates of contextual factors among different samples, countries and cultures, and person-culture-centered variables (*e.g.*, cultural competence) related to adaptation (Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013). Moreover, empirical evidence reveals that a multicultural personality (*i.e.*, cultural empathy, open-mind-

edness, emotional stability, flexibility, and social initiative) has explanatory value in predicting cultural adaptation (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2013) in different samples and cultures: employees in diverse work forces (e.g., Van der Zee, Atsma, & Brodbeck, 2004), migrants (Bakker, Van der Zee, & Van Oudenhoven, 2006), expatriates (Van Oudenhoven, Mol, & Van der Zee, 2003), and international students (Carmona, Van der Zee, & Van Oudenhoven, 2013; Leong, 2007). Specifically, foreign students display lower subjective well-being at the start of their academic program than local students (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001), and emotional stability is important in maintaining mental health. In a similar vein, Leong (2007) finds that social initiative is linked to indicators of social integration and psychological well-being of sojourners, and cultural empathy, open-mindedness, and flexibility are related to both psychological and behavioral adjustment (Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009). In addition, recent research shows that a multicultural personality is positively associated with socio-cultural adaptation and social support among Asian international students (Lee & Ciftci, 2014). These findings indicate that personal cultural characteristics predict better international adaptation. However, there is also a need to understand how international students perceive themselves in relation to others in their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation.

Self-construal, identity orientation, and adaptation outcomes

Culture is understood as a dynamic process in which the socio-cultural ideas, practices, and economic factors that compose it are constantly changing over time. In a similar vein, the self is also dynamic because it changes from the various cultural contexts individuals engage in—for example, as a result of an international study program abroad or migration process. In intercultural situations, people need to be able to alter the way they perceive themselves and adopt different strategies to rapidly deal with the new situation. Therefore, students' self-perceptions may also adapt as the context changes and include elements of independence and interdependence to varying degrees (Greenfield, 2009). Although self-construal is related to specific culture dimensions such as individualism and collectivism (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Triandis, 1989), the findings are context-dependent. Oguri and Gudykunst (2002) show that psychological adjustment among Asian international students is related to high independent self-construal. In addition, studies find support for the proposition that independent and interdependent self-construal may coexist within individuals and that individuals may shift their self-construal in response to contextual cues (Gardner, Gabriel, & Dean, 2004; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). Specifically, studies on social personality show that there are differences within cultures in the way the self is construed (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Moreover, Vos and Van der Zee (2011) indicate that individuals may also have a preference for a certain identity orientation as a dominant identity that guides behavior: *a personal identity orientation*, in which an individual conceives the self in terms of his or her individual traits and characteristics; *a relational identity orientation*, which refers to an individual's conception of his or her relatedness to other individuals; and *a collec-*

tive identity orientation, in which the self-conception evolves in terms of being a group member and describing oneself in relation to the characteristics connected with the group.

The Present Study

As intercultural adaptation involves affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects, changes and adjustments to the host culture may occur among international students. This study, carried out with international and Dutch students attending the first year of a business school in the same classrooms, aims to examine the relationships among the multicultural personality, self-construal in terms of identity orientation (*i.e.*, personal, relational, and collective), the predictors of psychological adaptation in terms of the subjective well-being component (*i.e.*, life satisfaction), and socio-cultural adaptation conceived of as contacts with host, international, and co-national students during the international experience.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 169 first-year students in a Dutch international business school (three-year program); 53.8% of the sample were women, and the mean age was 20 ($SD = 1.98$). Regarding students' nationality, 29.6% were Dutch, 43.8% German, 7.1% Chinese, 3.6% Spanish, 3% Ukrainians, 2.4% French, 1.8% Latvian, 1.8% Bulgarian, and 1.2% Russian. The other 5.7% of nationalities corresponded to less than 1% of the sample (Romanian, Portuguese, Polish, Belgian, Canadian, British, Costa Rican, Malaysian, Macedonian, and Peruvian students). The relatively small number of students from each country made it necessary to cluster students by countries (Gupta, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002). Therefore, we used the following groups in the analyses: Germanic (43.8%), Nordic European (29.6%), Eastern European (9.5%), Asian (7.7%), Southern European (7.1%), Latin American (1.2%), and Anglo culture (1.2%).

The language used for instruction and survey administration was English, and classes were made up of international and Dutch students. Before school admission, all the students had to prove that they had sufficient proficiency in English.

Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of different scales measuring socio-demographic variables (*e.g.*, age, gender, English-language perception proficiency, parents' cultural background, other countries they lived in before the Netherlands), personality culture dimensions, self-identity orientation, and outcomes of cultural adaptation (life satisfaction and contact with host, international, and co-national students).

Multicultural personality. We measured personality related to intercultural effectiveness using the MPQ-91 items (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001). This question-

naire has five scales rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all applicable*) to 5 (*completely applicable*): cultural empathy ($\alpha = .78$), open-mindedness ($\alpha = .76$), social initiative ($\alpha = .80$), emotional stability ($\alpha = .74$), and flexibility ($\alpha = .70$).

Identity orientation. To measure personal, relational, and collective identity orientation, we administered the Identity Orientation Scale (Vos, et al., 2009). This scale consists of 21 items grouped into three dimensions and rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extreme*). Internal consistency was good: personal identity orientation ($\alpha = .83$), relational identity orientation ($\alpha = .70$), and collective identity orientation ($\alpha = .77$).

Psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. As an indicator of subjective well-being, we included the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). This scale consists of five items rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistency was reliable ($\alpha = .79$).

As an indicator of socio-cultural adaptation, three questions asked how much contact students had with host, international, and co-national students. The response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*).

Procedure

Before administering the questionnaire, we contacted the head of the business school and, in collaboration with a teacher, arranged sessions in different lecture classrooms to fill out the questionnaire the third month after the students' arrival. Participation was voluntary, and no financial reward was given.

Data analysis

We used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine whether the samples showed different scale means. In addition, we used multiple regression analysis to evaluate the association between the predictors (multicultural personality and identity orientation) and adaptation outcomes (life satisfaction and contacts).

Results

The results are divided into two sections: (1) examination of cultural group differences in all the variables and (2) test of the relationships between personality dimensions and adaptation outcomes.

Group differences in mean scores

We examined cross-cultural differences in means on the scales in a MANOVA with the country clusters (seven levels: Germanic, Northern European, Eastern European, Asian, Southern European, Latin American, and Anglo culture) as independent variables and all the scales as dependent variables. Gender served as a control variable because of differences in gender composition. Country cluster showed a significant multivariate effect (Wilks's $\lambda = .26$, $F(72, 789) = 3.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$, which represents the proportion of variance accounted for by groups).

Table 1*Standardized mean scores for each country cluster*

Scale	East European	Asian	South European	Anglo culture	Nordic European	Latin American	Germanic culture
Personality							
Cultural empathy	-.03	-5.43	-.27	1.03	-.08	.37	.04
Open-minded	-.26	-.32	-.29	.95	.28	.52	-.06
Social initiative	.00	-.93 _{e,g}	-.62	-.15	.17 _b	-.63	.07 _b
Emotional stability	-.31	-.23	-.64 _e	-1.00	.38 _c	-.72	.02
Flexibility	-.27	-.34	.28	1.06	-.00	.68	.02
Identity orientation							
Personal	.64 _c	.06	-.99 _{a,e}	-.88	.18 _c	.63	-.11
Relational	-.19	.52	-.55	.60	-.15	-.81	.11
Collective	-.08	.47	-.27	-3.83	-.08	-.70	.03
Adaptation							
Life satisfaction	-.02	-.62	.03	.62	-.06	-.27	.13
CH	-.05 _e	-.65 _e	-.16 _e	.06	.74 _{a,b,c}	.53	-.39
CN	-.51 _{d,f,g}	.10 _{d,f}	.06 _{d,f}	-2.63 _{a,b,c,e,g}	-.15 _{f,g}	-3.10 _{a,b,c,e}	.33 _{a,e}
CI	.34	-.63 _e	.36	-.15	.33 _{b,g}	-.15	-.24 _e

Note: CH: contact with host-nationals students; CN: contact with co-national students; CI: contact with international students. Subscripts a, b, c, d, e, f, and g indicate that in the post hoc test (Tukey), the cell average differs from average of the East European, Asian, South European, Anglo, Nordic European, Latin American, and Germanic cultures, respectively.

Table 1 presents the mean score differences per cultural group. We standardize the means across the seven groups, so that cell values in the table can be interpreted as deviations (z scores) from the global mean of zero. We used a Tukey post hoc procedure to examine group differences. The findings did not show any cultural group differences in cultural empathy, open-mindedness, flexibility, relational identity, collective identity, and life satisfaction. However, Asian and Southern European students showed significantly less social initiative and emotional stability than Germanic and Northern European students. In addition, Southern Europeans showed less personal identity orientation than Northern and Eastern European students.

Table 2*Correlations between all variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Cultural empathy	—											
2. Open-mindedness	.63***	—										
3. Social initiative	.34***	.46***	—									
4. Emotional stability	.11	.28***	.28***	—								
5. Flexibility	.26***	.34***	.30***	.33***	—							
6. Personal identity orientation	.32***	.37***	.31***	.11	.12	—						
7. Relational identity orientation	.37***	.22**	.20*	-.12	.07	.34***	—					
8. Collective identity orientation	-.04	-.03	-.11	-.04	.03	-.06	.32***	—				
9. Life satisfaction	.22**	.31***	.30***	.19*	.07	.13	.18*	.03	—			
10. Contact with Dutch students	.07	.33***	.32***	.18*	.11	.27***	.00	-.12	.23**	—		
11. Contact with co-national students	-.03	-.02	.07	.07	.10	-.09	.05	.08	.06	-.02	—	
12. Contact with international students	.19*	.32***	.30***	.19*	.09	.23**	-.02	-.14	.17*	.40***	.05	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Predicting adaptation outcomes

Before regression analysis, we calculated correlations among all the variables (see Table 2). The results displayed positive and significant correlations among cultural empathy, social initiative, open-mindedness, emotional stability, and relational identity orientation. Regarding contacts, the findings showed that four of the five intercultural competences, except for flexibility, and a personal identity orientation were positively and significantly correlated with more contact with Dutch and international students.

We carried out regression analyses on life satisfaction and contact frequency (see Table 3), with multicultural personality and identity orientations as predictors. The results showed significant effects for all adaptation outcomes depending on specific predictors. In particular, the results indicated that international students with more open-mindedness and more social initiative were the most satisfied and had more contact with Dutch and other international students. In addition, students who displayed a more personal identity orientation indicated having more contact with Dutch students, and students with a more collective identity orientation had more contact with co-national students.

Table 3

Multiple regression analyses predicting life satisfaction and contact with students

	Life satisfaction	Students contact		
		Dutch	Co-nationals	International
Predictor	β	β	β	β
Personality				
Cultural empathy	-.02	-.23*	-.09	-.02
Open-mindedness	.24*	.33***	-.04	.24*
Social initiative	.20*	.18*	.13	.19*
Emotional stability	.13		.08	.13
Flexibility	-.10		.10	-.10
Identity orientation				
Personal	-.05	.18*	-.09	-.06
Relational	.08		-.02	.09
Collective	.03		.17*	.01
R^2	.20***	.23***	.11	.18***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the relationships among the multicultural personality, the identity orientation, and cultural adaptation. The results show that there are not many significant differences among cultural groups of international students on the study variables. These findings might be due to the low number of participants in each cultural cluster, which is one of the study limitations. However, from a more global perspective, the findings might also be interpreted according to the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2000). Their approach shows that subjective well-being is based on inherent and universal human needs underlying three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and that fulfillment of these needs is essential for well-being (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that there are both universal and culture-specific causes of subjective well-being. On the basis of this idea, for international students to succeed in the new context and culture and manage their daily routines, they need to somehow acquire autonomy, competence, and good relations with others. As previous research has shown (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002), the results of the present study confirm that international students feel more satisfied with their lives if, on the one hand, they are more open-minded, are culturally empathetic and emotionally stable, and take social ini-

tiatives and if, on the other hand, they perceive themselves as more oriented toward others. Regarding contact with other students, international students also felt more satisfied when they had more contact with host-nationals (*i.e.*, Dutch students) and with other international students.

The results of this study highlight the role of the related intercultural competences in the adaptation process of international students. However, these findings are extracted from a correlational study in which the participating cultural groups were not completely homogeneous. Future studies should obtain information about participants belonging to more cultural groups and in different cultural contexts. Nonetheless, according to the results obtained, there is a need to reflect on the fundamental role of intercultural competences in the adaptation process of international students involved in university mobility programs.

Therefore, the results have some implications for the higher education context and the effective development of its internationalization, specifically the inclusion of modules or programs in which both national and international students can participate collaboratively. These programs would allow international students to achieve better cultural adaptation (Jackson, 2008), as they would create opportunities for greater intercultural contact and for learning about cultural diversity in the classroom. Thus, the development of intercultural competences could have a positive effect on the cultural adaptation of international students, on their interpersonal relationships, and on their psychological well-being, which would help them have a more successful personal and academic experience in an intercultural context of learning and continual change in higher education.

Author note

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