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# Assessing High-Performance Cultural Intelligence: A Study of International Rugby Teams in the Rugby World Cup 2019

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## Abstract

This study explored and analysed the level of consciousness and use of cultural intelligence in a high-performance environment in a host culture—the Rugby World Cup 2019 held in Japan from September to November 2019. Through the use of a qualitative, open-ended questionnaire coupled with non-participant observation fieldnotes, a total of seventy-two participants (players, coaches, management and support staff) from four international teams competing in the world cup took part. The data was thematically analysed from which three main themes were extracted: (a) intercultural sensitivity, (b) intercultural adaptability and (c) intercultural efficacy. Results are discussed in terms of the effect high-performance environments have on team member attitudes and approaches toward cultural diversity and how it is managed. In conclusion, implications for future research and testing in other contexts are provided.

**Keywords:** cultural intelligence, high-performance sports, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural adaptability, intercultural efficacy, RWC2019, cultural diversity

## Introduction

The impetus for this paper sprung from the first stage of the author's research

sabbatical project conducted from September until November in 2019. Entitled "*The Impact of International Sporting Events on Intercultural Engagement in Japan*," this project focused on the observation and analysis of interaction between international rugby teams (players, coaches and management staff) and the local Japanese authorities, staff, volunteers and fans during the Rugby World Cup 2019 (hereafter referred to as RWC2019) hosted by Japan.

The author was fortunate to be able to conduct non-participant observation throughout the entire RWC2019 campaign whilst acting as a team liaison officer for the Scottish Rugby Team. The project sought to elucidate the following three points: 1) the level of intercultural adaptability by the professional players, coaches and management of international teams due to their experience of travelling to and playing in many foreign countries, 2) the impact of the RWC2019 in terms of increased popularity of rugby as a sport in Japan and 3) the influence on constructive and productive intercultural engagement between foreigners and Japanese in Japan through the context of international sport.

The advancement of globalisation and multiculturalism in international rugby and other sports has seen an increased call for international team members to be equipped with intercultural skills to help enhance their level of performance and strategic management (Deissler, 2012). The type of intercultural skills required by international teams include a high level of cultural sensitivity that allows members to engineer a map for enhanced performance in global arenas.

As Cox (1994) explains, for any organisation to effectively manage cultural diversity and become more culturally sensitive, people must be aware of the five main elements of an effective cultural diversity management cycle, which are: 1) diversity, 2) creativity, 3) strategic innovation, 4) success and 5) prosperity. Using this framework as a guideline, this paper will explore how members of four of the major international teams that participated in the RWC2019 viewed the use and growth cultural intelligence skills in a high-performance context during the tournament.

Firstly, the paper will provide a canvas of the current literature pertaining to cultural intelligence and its place in international rugby. Following that, it will explain the current research project with an introduction of the participants

involved. Using an open-ended questionnaire and follow-up interviews, the participants were asked to give their objective views of their own cultural intelligence and its efficacy.

Accordingly, a thematic analysis of their responses will be provided in the findings section before concluding the paper by elucidating the significant findings and their implications for further in-depth research.

## **1. Current Literature: Cultural Intelligence in Professional Sports**

In recent years, an increased amount of discussion regarding sport as a tool of social integration has surfaced. Gasparini & Cometti (2010), for example, point to the potential of international sports, including rugby, to act as a catalyst for furthering intercultural understanding through the blending of cultures both within international teams as well as interactions with host country teams, staff and the public. Although their research predominantly looks at the context of European countries, which due to their geographical and economic ties already enjoy a deep interaction of cultures, they elucidate that more dialogue and exploration of interculturalism in sport is necessary. The main reason for this necessity is to avoid the integration into a single melting pot, and therefore make it possible to gain a better understanding of how cultural diversity can complement the dynamic of international sports globally.

In the last two decades, intercultural understanding, communication and performance has been framed under the paradigm of 'cultural intelligence' (hereafter referred to as CQ). As a number of researchers explicate, CQ can be defined as the ability of individuals to act appropriately and effectively in a host culture. It is seen as a multi-dimensional competence that works on a continuous cycle of motivation, knowledge, strategy and action (Earley & Ang, 2003; Peterson, 2004; Thomas & Inkson, 2003).

When faced with the challenges of being placed in a different cultural context to one that a person considers normal, he/she can first be motivated to learn about the differences experienced. This then leads a person to learn the specific cultural traits of the host culture from where he/she is able to create strategies to help effectively function or act whilst in it. As a result, the more enhanced one's CQ becomes, the more a person is able to make sense of the

intercultural interactions and make judgements on how to communicate and behave appropriately.

Needless to say, in the context of professional sports in the global arena, CQ becomes an extremely useful form of intelligence to possess. This is especially the case when the length of time spent in a host culture is long, such as the RWC2019 which saw twenty international rugby teams spend between six to nine weeks in Japan depending on how far they progressed through the tournament. Naturally, the longer that a team remained in the competition, the more each of the team members was required to interact with the host culture in some way, thus making CQ an ideal framework to use.

## **2. The Current Study: Rugby World Cup 2019 International Teams**

As briefly explained in the above section, this study focuses on examining the level of intercultural adaptability and the influence on constructive and productive intercultural engagement from the viewpoint of professional rugby. More specifically, the main aim is to clarify the level of consciousness of cultural intelligence of players, coaches and support crews (hereafter referred to as 'RWC2019 team members') of the international teams that participated in RWC2019.

The RWC2019 was hosted by Japan from September 20 until November 2, 2019 across twelve venues. It was the first time that the tournament had been hosted in Asia and by a country that was not yet in the tier 1 rugby nations at the time of host selection. In total, twenty national teams qualified for the tournament, including the traditionally strong tier 1 nations such as New Zealand, Australia, England, Wales, Ireland, South Africa, Scotland, Japan and Argentina as well as less dominant playing nations such as Fiji, Italy, Russia, Samoa and Tonga.

In this study, all communication between RWC2019 team members and Japanese staff, volunteers and public will be defined as 'intercultural communication' due to the fact that the RWC2019 team members come from foreign countries and were interacting with the local Japanese populace. Additionally, knowledge regarding Japanese customs, ways of thinking, behaviours and other cultural elements that differ from the survey participants' own cultural backgrounds is defined as 'intercultural understanding'.

### **3. Methodology**

This study used on two qualitative data-collection instruments—(1) an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix) and (2) fieldnotes from non-participant observation conducted by the author. After confirming a willingness to participate in this study, the questionnaire was sent to four (two from the Northern Hemisphere and two from Southern Hemisphere) of the twenty international teams participating in the RWC2019.

Each of the participating teams was made up of approximately fifty members which included players, coaches, management and support staff. The questionnaire pack also included an information sheet stating the research goals as well as a consent form which provided an explanation of how the participant identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and secured storage of data.

The questionnaire was split into three main sections—(1) Personal Background Information, (2) Cultural Intelligence in High Performance Sport, and (3) Experiences in Japan. The main objective was to gain insight into the level of conscious cultural intelligence among team members and how it related to their experiences during the RWC2019 in Japan.

The rationale for the use of a qualitative approach and open-ended questionnaire research instrument is simple. The main aim of the questionnaire was to obtain detailed responses by allowing the participants freedom in their answers. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) emphasise, this approach allows the researcher to yield comprehensive answers from an audience that he/she is not well-acquainted with and makes it possible to gain in-depth information due to the participants' knowledge and/or experiences. That information can then be used by the researcher to make meaningful interpretations. In other words, the participants can express themselves freely and the risk of researcher bias can be avoided.

As for the non-participant observation, the author's role as a liaison officer during the RWC2019 allowed him to constantly witness and analyse the setting in which these teams were situated. This, in turn, made it possible to pay attention to a focused observation of examples of cultural intelligence displayed by the participants in the study continuously for a period of two months from

September to November 2019. As Liu & Maitlis (2010) stress, this approach is ideal when the observation period is long enough so that theoretical saturation can be reached.

In terms of data-analysis, a thematic analysis approach was chosen as the main qualitative tool to extract themes from the data. Developed by Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis within qualitative research. As this study is not heavily bound by theoretical frameworks, thematic analysis is seen as the most appropriate as it allows the researchers to identify, analyse and interpret the themes extracted from the qualitative data.

Accordingly, in the following section, the responses collected from the questionnaire are used to explore the participants' lived experiences, their perceptions and how they constructed meaning to their experience during the RWC2019.

#### **4. Findings: Cultural Intelligence in High-Performance Rugby Contexts**

During the data collection and non-participant observation, a high level of cultural diversity among the players, coaches, management and support staff was clearly evident. This can be linked to the increasing trend of mobility in the global recruitment market for professionals in the sport of rugby, be it players, coaches or other members of the national teams in an effort to maintain and/or improve the team performance.

From the four participating teams, a total of seventy-two responses were received—forty-eight from players, ten from coaches, and fourteen from management and support staff. In this section, extracts from the responses will be provided with the use of the following pseudonym codes: (1) Players=P, (2) Coach=C and (3) Management & Support Member=M&S.

In terms of the data analysis itself, a blend of inductive and deductive approaches was used. The first stage of coding began by identifying keywords and themes that were common among the responses and from the fieldnotes. This began with the process of induction so as to avoid trying to fit the data into pre-existing theories or frameworks. It is important to note here that the inductive analysis was not 'pure' as the author's coding also reflects research

values from a CQ standpoint. Following the initial coding, a second, more deductive analysis was used based on the frameworks of intercultural communication and understanding to gain further insights into the themes appearing from the data.

The analysis revealed three main themes: 1) Intercultural Sensitivity, 2) Intercultural Adaptability, and 3) Intercultural Efficacy. Accordingly, the remainder of this section will discuss what was discovered within each of the themes in order.

### **Theme 1: Intercultural Sensitivity**

The first noticeable theme to emerge from the data analysis was a high level of consciousness regarding intercultural sensitivity and its importance in high-performance arenas such as professional rugby.

The following extracts are representative of the shared sense of intercultural sensitivity and the role the participants see it plays in a professional rugby context:

*“In the type of arena we play in, it’s really important for us as players to expect the unexpected culturally. That way we can keep a focus on the job at hand—performing to our best in a foreign environment. We are lucky that we already have a diverse mix of players, including some that were born and bred overseas. Having those players within our team actually helps us embrace cultural differences on a day-to-day basis.” (P#14)*

*“Although we get looked after really well when touring in another country, it’s really important for us to remember that things will be different to home. Things such as customs, procedure, lifestyle and communication differences are really important to learn when it comes to getting ready for international tours.” (P#41)*

*“As a team, we already have a diverse range of backgrounds. Some of our players originate from other countries and have played there first before joining our national squad. So, that brings a new dynamic into the team. We have to be thoughtful*

*toward those differences even before travelling to other countries to play. So, this gives us plenty of chances to work on our cultural sensitivity as a team.” (C#1)*

*“Being sensitive to cultural differences is all part and parcel of preparing well for international tours, including world cup tournaments. As a coach, I need to lead by example in this so that my support crew and the players follow suit.” (C#4)*

*“Coming from another country, I always have to be mindful of the national team’s cultural dynamic. This helps tremendously when preparing for an international tour because I can relate the differences I experience there to what I have to be aware of already in my current role within our team.” (M&S#12)*

*“Just knowing that things are going to be different can help you think about what kind of assistance you will need in foreign environments. This kind of attitude is paramount when planning ahead for international events such as the world cup. We all have a lot of international travel experience, but it’s always vital that we write out a clear list of things that we might need local support in the planning stage. This helps to get us ready mentally for what may unfold in terms of cultural differences and challenges once we arrive.” (M&S#5)*

From the above-mentioned examples, it is evident that RWC2019 team members consider the attitude of expecting the unexpected to be an important trait to have. In a high-performance sporting context, this type of mental preparedness starts at the pre-departure stage, as M&S#5 alluded to in his response. Interestingly, the mention of drawing on personal experiences of cultural difference within the team as stated by P#14 and C#1 shows that intercultural sensitivity is a conscious characteristic. Another important point to acknowledge, as described by C#4, is that the importance of intercultural sensitivity as part of high-performance culture starts at the top using a lead-by-example approach. As will be shown in the analysis of the remaining two themes, this attitude was a fundamental mindset in all four participating teams.



## **Theme 2: Intercultural Adaptability**

The second theme to transpire was a recognised cognizance of adapting to different cultural situations. Considering that CQ in this study has been framed in the context of high-performance sport, the responses to the question of how team members consciously adapted interculturally revealed that they operate within a clear framework.

As is shown from respondent comments below, players, coaches, management and support staff from the four participant teams strongly link the extent to which they adapt to how it can help achieve their high-performance goals:

*“Our job here is to win the world cup. To do that, we need to perform at our best. That means we need to be in a comfortable and familiar environment. For this world cup, we do that by having others in our support crew acting as the bridge to the Japanese culture. They can give us explanation and advice on how to act in formal situations such as local community engagements, but besides that, things need to feel as normal as possible for us to succeed.” (P#9)*

*“As players, we always have to adapt on the field to what’s in front of us. But, at the same time, we have a plan of attack and defined roles as individual players and as a team. The same goes for playing at the world cup—we have key members in our support team that help us adapt to a foreign country’s culture and customs when we need to and to shield us from unnecessary things so that we can concentrate on the job at hand. So, the extent we adapt to the host culture changes from when we are preparing for a game and performing as a team on game day to when we are relaxing and going out to experience the local culture on our days off.” (P#37)*

*“Whether it be a world cup or an international tour, the degree we adapt to the local culture depends very much on the situation we are in and the role we play within the team. It’s important for us to have cultural ambassadors within the team that can help bridge that divide and act as our voice with the local culture, especially when we are focusing on getting the team ready for game day.” (C#2)*

*“The high-performance nature of our environment is one type of culture we are all constantly adapting to. It's very important that we have key team members in place that can guide us through the local culture fine points to save us from not having to think too much outside the job at hand—namely the game and how we want to perform in it. Naturally, in our down time such as days off, we also need to equip our players and staff with some easy-to-follow guidelines such as basic language and cultural tips so that they can enjoy the time away from the pressure of high-performance rugby as it helps them relax and experience some of the local culture.”* (C#3)

*“When managing an international rugby team like ours, creating an environment so that the players and coaches can operate to their maximum potential is very important. We have to find ways to bridge cultural gaps so that they don't become points that take the players' and coaches' minds too far away from the game, match preparation and objectives. That often means that our support staff are the ones at the front line do a lot of the detailed adapting to local culture, such as daily logistical and negotiation differences, behind the scenes so as not to cause unnecessary stress among the rest of the team.”* (M&S#6)

*“Good team management during an international event such as a world cup is all about knowing who needs to adapt to differences in culture so that it has a positive effect and outcome for the team. That involves the management and support members communicating with the local liaisons and tournament staff to get help and advice on how to do things right when we interact with the locals. This plays a huge role in reducing unnecessary stress so that the whole team can remain focused on the job at hand—playing and performing our best and learning how to enjoy the experience of a new culture at the same time.”* (M&S#10)

These responses noticeably expose the required level of consciousness to adapt to a foreign culture. As represented by players #9 and #37, the comments reveal that the skill of adaptability on the field equates to the same skill outside of the game also when touring overseas. This notion is strongly

supported by the insights that appeared form within the coach, management and support staff comments.

As the extracts introduced clarify, ultimately, it is the responsibility of the team as a whole regarding the way to facilitate the willingness and ability to adapt interculturally. This can only be done through a conscious effort to provide help and support from top-down through the use of local support staff. Responses from the participant coaches, management and support staff strongly imply that the fundamental objective of providing team members with the knowledge and cognitive tools to adapt to a foreign culture equates to the creation of a high-performance environment that is free of unnecessary stress.

### **Theme 3: Intercultural Efficacy**

The issue of efficacy relating to how to adapt to foreign cultures during an international tournament such as a world cup is always an important area of consideration.

As explained in the background to the study section, cultural intelligence is a continuous cycle of learning, planning and acting with the underlying emotion of motivation to do so. In relation to this, interestingly, the final predominant theme to appear was connected to how to effectively function interculturally during the RWC2019 as shown in the following responses:

*“Outside of training and performing on the field, once I’m out and about enjoying the local culture, one way I try to act appropriately and effectively is by observing what the locals do, especially when I don’t understand the language. If I don’t know, what to do or don’t understand what’s going on, I simply ask someone for advice in our support crew that understands what’s going on. I find this better than making quick judgements or being biased as it makes it easier to blend in and enjoy the experience more.” (P#27)*

*“Learning to be effective when touring overseas is a lot like the feeling I had when joining the national squad for the first time. To me, first it’s about learning the structures, then making a plan around how to immerse myself in that structure. So, basically I learn about the boundaries, adapt to the rules and work out a plan*

*of action to survive and perform well within the environment with a firm plan of action. Basically, I like to think of it as getting my hands dirty to get a chance to immerse myself in different practices when the chance arises. This is what we are taught in the team environment and I find it equates well when I want to effectively experience the local culture, such as the one during this rugby world cup.” (P#40)*

*“One of our mantras for the team is to recognize and accept difference. This is done within the team environment and gives our players, coaches and management a mindset to get motivated to learn why things are different to what they're used to and how to minimise the stress it might create. When we can do that, we are better prepared to find new ways to behave that help smooth out communication and interaction with people from outside our environment. When we are talking about getting out and enjoying the local culture, all of our members are given a list of tips on protocol and etiquette differences before we arrive, but it is then up to them to use that mindset to experience it for themselves on their days off.” (C#2)*

*“Competing successfully and to a high-level in a world cup relies on planning and implementing effective behaviours. To me, this links directly to teamwork and being able to get the right information from those that understand the local cultural context. This is why we have liaison staff with us. They are able to give us pinpoint advice on the ins and outs of interacting properly when we need to. This helps so that we can focus on our jobs. During the RWC2019, we've been able to get that type of timely advice and it has given us the confidence to interact better with the Japanese people and enjoy it.” (C#3)*

*“Managing a high-performance oriented national squad in a world tournament is a 24/7 job. Add to that the challenges of a foreign culture and language and it is easy to get stressed. This is where key people in the team come into play. Namely, our liaison officers, interpreters and local security advisors. During our time at the RWC2019, this team of people were our links to understanding and communicating with all of the Japanese staff, volunteers and fans we came into contact with. Their*

*advice and assistance gave us many chances to interact successfully and also give us tools to use when we didn't have them close by." (M&S #3)*

*"We all have specific roles and responsibilities within the team. Doing those jobs well requires total focus. When it comes to acting effectively and appropriately in a foreign culture, we always turn to our cultural experts for initial advice. They have the knowledge of both sides and are always able to help us avoid causing any major cultural conflicts. Plus, for us to produce the best possible team on game-day, we need to stay focused on what we do in our individual roles. That means we just don't have the time to learn all the small details and rules of the culture we're in at that time." (M&S #7)*

As can be seen from the extracts, an underlying theme of using time and resources effectively in intercultural settings in order for each team member to be able to continue to carry out their role properly became apparent. From players through to management and support staff, the issue of efficacy in intercultural contexts relates to how to use the tools available to you within the big picture of an individual's role for the good of the team.

The participant responses strongly suggest that intercultural efficacy is centred around a clear line between team and private time. In short, during the times when high performance is called for such as training and game time, the outside world of foreign culture is blocked out. Then, during each of the team member's downtime, the effective use of advice from local culture link-pins such as liaison officers and interpreters is implemented in order to maximise the ability to enjoy and successfully navigate the local culture and interactions within it.

It is noteworthy to add that author's non-participant observation fieldnotes also clearly showed that functional intercultural behaviours based on such advice were consciously and successfully introduced into the environment the teams were placed in. Coupled with the participant responses, the fieldnotes strongly suggest that high-performance cultures such as international rugby teams possess the tools to provide their members with learning, strategising and action planning for culturally diverse situations.

Not only do these findings fit perfectly within the cycle of CQ, but they also support Cox's (1994) notion of effective cultural diversity management starting with cultural sensitivity and encompassing the cycle of creation, strategic innovation, success and prosperity. All of these elements have appeared through the voices of the participants.

## **5. Conclusion**

As stated at the beginning, this study has attempted to explore and analyse patterns of CQ in one example of a high-performance sport context, namely that of the RWC2019. The paper began by outlining the research situation and how it was situated within the field of cultural intelligence. The RWC2019 featured twenty international teams all competing in Japan for the Rugby World Cup for an extended period of time ranging from six through to eight weeks in total.

Among those teams, the author was successful in surveying seventy-two participants across four international teams through an open-ended questionnaire and his own observation fieldnotes. These two data collection instruments produced an array of data that was thematically analysed into three main themes—1) intercultural sensitivity, 2) intercultural adaptability and 3) intercultural efficacy. Accordingly, the remainder of this section will focus on two points. Firstly, it will explain the significance of the findings in the context of CQ, and secondly, it will offer implications for future research in the area of high-performance international sports.

Regarding the significance of the findings, the most noteworthy finding identified was the transferability of the high-performance mindset to intercultural settings. Not surprisingly, differences in language, communication-style, customs and behaviours were acknowledged by the participants and observed by the author. However, as the findings suggest, all participant teams concluded that when placed in a foreign setting the ability to be sensitive to; the willingness to adapt to, and the motivation to effectively function within such settings were fundamental traits to possess by all team members when seeking to maintain a high-level of performance.

Related to this point, the inclusion of local bilingual and bicultural staff was

recognised as an important cultural link-pin for the team members. In order to aid the transition from the stages of intercultural sensitivity, adaptability through to efficacy for team players, coaches, management and support staff, all responses confirmed that the inclusion of cultural link-pins was paramount as their advice and assistance enhanced intercultural efficacy. Overall, the results from this study revealed the conscious use of CQ is regarded as one part of the high-performance mindset. It is conceptualised as part of the support network and mechanism created within the team environment when faced with the challenge of touring overseas, such as in the context of the RWC2019.

In terms of implications for future research, this study was able to identify a number of factors that create a framework of reference when analysing other high-performance sporting contexts. In 2022, the Japan Rugby Football Union will launch a new three-tier professional league to replace the present corporate-hybrid based Top League that is currently in place. The new league will feature twenty-five teams split across three divisions. With the aim of becoming one of the world's best leagues, the intercultural blend of foreign and Japanese players, which is already heavily evident in the Top League format, will continue to grow as overseas players are recruited into local teams (Tarrant, 2021). As such, the need to be interculturally sensitive, adaptive and effective will most likely increase with the new league's inception. As such, it provides the ideal research context to conduct further in-depth study of effective cultural intelligence practices in high-performance multicultural rugby environments within Japan.

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**Appendix**

**Assessing High-Performance Cultural Intelligence:  
RWC2019 Thoughts and Experiences**

**Questionnaire**

Please complete all questions below.

**I. Personal Background Information**

1. First name, last name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_
3. My native language is: \_\_\_\_\_
4. My nationality is: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Gender: Male                      Female                      Other
6. My team: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Role: Player / Coach / Management / Support Staff

**II. Cultural Intelligence in High-Performance Sport**

1. How important do you think it is to be culturally sensitive?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
2. What kind of mindsets and/or skills do you need to function effectively in foreign cultural settings?  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_

3. How do you usually acquire those mindsets and/or skills?

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**III. Experiences in Japan**

1. What kind of intercultural experiences have you had in Japan during the RWC2019?

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2. Please explain how (or whether) your own cultural intelligence helped you enjoy your experiences in Japan.

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Thank you for your participation in this study.

Sean O'Connell  
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