Predicting Intercultural Success

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Over the last century, global mobility has seen a vast increase. People connect with other people from different cultures more frequently, both online as well as face-to-face. Many businesses send their employees abroad, people work in multicultural teams and nearly everyone travels to another country at some point in their life. Having successful interactions with people from other cultural backgrounds is not a given. What makes some people successful and others fail miserably has been of much interest to the academic world over the past few years. The ability to have effective contact with individuals from other countries has been labeled 'intercultural competency', however there is no consensus over what this exactly entails and how it manifests itself in intercultural interactions.

One of the most prevalent ideas is that certain personality traits are helpful in intercultural situations. These 'multicultural personality traits', such as cultural empathy, flexibility, open-mindedness, emotional stability and social initiative, have been shown to positively affect international aspirations and orientations in previous research. The aim of this study was to examine how these personality traits relate to observable behavior in intercultural interactions and whether they predict intercultural interaction success.

Participants (n = 97) completed the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) and subsequently took part in an intercultural simulation game (Barnga: a popular game in intercultural training sessions) in groups of 10-20. Interaction success was measured on two scales: an interaction assessment scale (positive/negative interaction evaluation) by self-report and peer-evaluated interpersonal trust, as reported by co-players. Structural Equation Modeling yielded a positive relationship between emotional stability and self-reported positive interaction assessment as well as positive evaluation by peers. This effect was mediated through the amount of stress perceived during the interaction. Social initiative was positively related to evaluation by peers. This means that in this setting, emotional stability and social initiative lead to behavior in interactions and consequently to interaction success. The other multicultural personality traits were unrelated to communicative behavior or interaction outcomes in this intercultural simulation game.

These findings are innovative in the way that it concretizes current intercultural competency models to an extent which has not been done before, by including observable behavior and interaction success measured by self-report and peer-evaluations. Therefore this study contributes to the current body of knowledge in this field, and gives valuable new insights into the dynamics of intercultural competences. These findings benefit social and corporate organizations all around the world, and hopefully ensure more effectivity when people communicate cross-nationally.