The emic–etic approach to personality measurement in personnel selection

Andrei Ion [a],*, Dragos Iliescu [a], Alexandra Ilie [b], Dan Ispas [b]

[a] University of Bucharest, Romania
[b] Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the incremental validity of emic personality traits over etic traits and GMA in predicting job performance. Demographics, cognitive ability and personality data from two samples, of Chinese and Romanian workers from the same company, were collected and contrasted with performance data collected at two points in time. Etic personality constructs in the area of conscientiousness have criterion validity for both the Chinese and the non-Chinese sample. Emic personality dimensions don't have incremental validity over etic traits for the Chinese sample. Potential predictive bias associated with measures of cognitive ability and personality on a sample including Romanian and Chinese working adults was also investigated.

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1. Introduction

Due to the rapid and continuing globalization of labor it is quite common for contemporary organizations to have a workforce consisting of both native and immigrant workers. Do the well-established predictors of job performance, such as general mental ability or conscientiousness predict job performance for both native and immigrant employees? Do culture-specific psychological constructs play an important role in predicting work related outcomes?

1.1. Personality in selection settings

show reduced Extant research indicates that personality traits predict job performance across virtually all jobs and along the whole range of job complexities (Schmidt, Shaffer, & Oh, 2008). In addition to their direct relationship with job performance (Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007), personality traits have incremental validity over cognitive ability (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), and can reduce adverse impact against protected groups (Hough, Oswald, & Ployhart, 2001). Reviews published during the past decade acknowledge the fact that early debates regarding the role of personality assessment in I–O psychology have now been mostly resolved: an impressive amount of evidence indicates that personality traits are valid predictors of job performance (e.g. Sackett & Lievens, 2008). However, one of the central controversies in personality research has to do with the relatively low personality validities in predicting organizationally relevant outcomes, especially job performance (e.g. Morgeson et al., 2007a; Ones et al., 2007). This issue has been tackled time and again via different approaches such as matching predictors to criteria or uncovering additional performance variance explained by traits lying beyond the FFM, such as narrow traits. Potential personality related variance could be explained by culturally specific personality (emic) personality dimensions.

The "emic" approach to personality focuses on formulating personality theories, debating constructs and delineating measurements which refer to constructs which are specifically salient and meaningful for the indigenous culture (Church, 2009). These dimensions typically lay beyond the FFM (e.g. Cheung, van de Vijver, & Leong, 2011). Some of the emic dimensions identified so far are Interpersonal Relatedness, dimension covering harmony and reciprocity in relationship (China), Selfless-Self (India), and Ubuntu, becoming through others (South-Africa) (Valchev et al., 2011).

The existence of these traits does not suffice to assume that the respective dimensions are performance relevant. Culture shapes the patterns of social investment, or of the investment and commitment to work, family and religious roles, and as a result both the roles and the behaviors associated with them vary between cultures to a greater or lesser extent (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). This differential knowledge and cultural values are transferred from parents to offspring, resulting in different values and behavioral patterns in adulthood (e.g. Hofstede

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Bucharest University, Sos. Panduri nr. 90, Bucharest, Romania.
E-mail address: andrei.ion@fpse.unibuc.ro (A. Ion).

& McCrae, 2004). Specific culturally moderated behavioral patterns can then in turn influence the way in which individuals seek, interact with or respond to the different demands of the work environment. Consequently, we investigated the incremental validity of emic personality dimensions over etic personality dimensions in predicting job performance:

H1. Culture-specific (emic) personality dimensions which are typical for the culture of immigrants have incremental validity over universal (etic) dimensions in predicting job performance.

1.2. Differential prediction of personality

Differential prediction is defined as the situation when "slope or intercepts of the regression line relating the predictor to the criterion are different for one group than for another." (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2003, p. 32). Differential prediction has serious ethical and sometimes legal implications and should be investigated both at the measure level and at the construct level.

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Some researchers have argued that when used in selection settings, personality measures show reduced or even no adverse impact for different racial groups (e g. Ones & Anderson, 2002). At the same time, meta-analytical reviews (Foldes, Duehr, & Ones, 2008) have identified significant personality differences between participants that belong to Asian (e.g. higher scores on Order, d = .50) and non-Asian (e.g. higher scores on Even-tempered, d = .38) groups. One severe limitation of existing research is that most if not all of the studies investigating the personality-related differences between different ethnicities or races, do not specify whether participants were born and bred in the same culture. We hypothesize that there is no personality related differential prediction between Chinese (immigrant) and White (Romanian indigenous) participants.

H2. Etic (universal) personality traits show no differential prediction between non-acculturated Chinese immigrants and Romanian (non-Chinese) indigenous participants.

1.3. General mental ability in cross-cultural selection settings

Cognitive ability measures are considered by and large the best predictors of job performance (e.g. Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). However, GMA's role in predicting job performance in Asian cultures has not been extensively explored. As Byington and Felps (2010) note, there is surprisingly little research on the link between cognitive ability and job performance in Asian countries. In fact, the only study with a Chinese sample they found (Law, Wong, Huang, & Li, 2008) reported a non-significant negative relationship ($r = -.07$) between cognitive ability and job performance. Studies that analyze the predictive validity of GMA against other criteria than job performance, e.g. academic achievement or academic admission performance, reveal that GMA is an equally powerful predictor for performance in Asian as in non-Asian groups (e.g. Berry, Clark, & McClure, 2011). There is no theoretical rationale for which GMA would have less validity in the prediction of job performance in Asian populations. Therefore, we hypothesize in the context of our study that GMA plays an equally important role in predicting the job performance of non-acculturated Chinese (immigrant) and White (Romanian indigenous) groups.

H3. General mental ability shows no differential prediction between non-acculturated Chinese immigrant participants and Romanian (non-Chinese) indigenous participants.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 439 employees of a Romanian textile production company, representing the entire workforce operating the production lines. There were 121 males in the sample (28%). The ages of the participants range from 20 to 52 years ($M = 36.9, SD = 9.0$). In terms of ethnicity, the participants were 253 (58%) Romanians and 186 Chinese. The Chinese workers were from Mainland China and had been working abroad in Romania. Although it would be useful to have an understanding of their actual level of acculturation or biculturalism, including such variables as their language skills in the language of the host country, their acculturation attitudes, or their psychological and social adaptation, such data have unfortunately not been collected. However, we suggest that acculturation is minimal, as they are living in relatively closed communities, were not required to learn the Romanian language and therefore most of them do not speak Romanian at all.

Among the Romanian workers there were 57 males and 129 females, ages were between 20 and 52 years ($M = 41.1, SD = 8.7$). Among the Chinese workers were 64 males and 189 females, ages were between 20 and 48 years ($M = 33.8, SD = 8.0$). The age means for the two cultural groups differ significantly: $t (437) = 9.03, p < .001, d = .86$. The Romanian and Chinese participants occupy similar roles in the organization, operating various production equipment. All the participants worked in shifts and have educational levels ranging between 8 and 12 years of formal education. There were no significant differences between the groups with respect to tenure in company ($t [429] = .164, ns.$) and educational levels ($t [437] = .67, ns.$).

3. Measures

3.1. Personality

Personality was assessed with the Cross-Cultural Assessment Personality Inventory (second version) - Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (CPAI-2), which has been developed initially as an indigenous Chinese broadband measure of personality (Cheung et al., 2011). The CPAI-2 is built on a combined emic–etic approach, including both universal and indigenous constructs (Cheung et al., 2011). The CPAI-2 comprises many personality traits deemed as universal, but also measures traits considered important for the Chinese culture, such as Ren-Qing (Relationship orientation), with such items as "After I have been treated to a meal, I will try to return the favor as soon as possible", or face, with such items as "I would rather cut down on my regular expenses. Previous cross-cultural research has shown that the CPAI captures personality variance that lying beyond the FFM (Cheung, Cheung, Leung, Ward, & Leong, 2003). The CPAI-2 was translated into Romanian closely following the guidelines for test translation recommended by Hambleton (2005).

3.2. Cognitive ability

Cognitive ability was measured with the General Adult Mental Ability (GAMA) test. The GAMA (Naglieri & Bardos, 1997) is a non-verbal test of cognitive ability, consisting of 66 items. In terms of criterion-related validity, scores on the GAMA have been found to predict academic achievement (Bardos, 2003) and job performance (Ispas, Iliescu, Ilie, & Johnson, 2010).

3.3. Job performance

The job performance ratings were retrieved from organizational records at two points in time: at the same time the predictor data were collected and one year later. At Time 2 performance data were available for a total of 360 participants (142 Chinese and 218 Romanians).