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Hype or hope? A new look at the research on cultural intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Cultural intelligence (CQ), the capability by which expatriates, managers, and others involved in cross-cultural interactions function effectively in a globalized world, was introduced in 2002 and has garnered wide attention recently. In this paper, we present a detailed and up-to-date review of 142 empirical articles in the CQ research field. We first examine the concept of CQ, including its definition, structure, measurement, and validity. We then review the vast number of empirical studies that investigate the antecedents, development, direct and indirect effects, moderating effects, and aggregated effects of CQ, as well as qualitative studies. The analysis shows several issues that likely will be relevant to the research debate in the near future. These issues include investigations of (1) whether cultural intelligence is universal or culture-specific, (2) why objective measures that assess CQ are lacking, (3) to what extent a person can develop cultural intelligence, (4) to what extent there are dark sides to cultural intelligence, and (5) the role cultural intelligence plays as a predictor of individual and group performance. Addressing these questions may help us reveal the true potential of CQ in contemporary organizations and thus, affirm that the promise of CQ is more than just hype.

Introduction

The concept of globalization is key to understanding the modern world. Recent technological advances have made international communication and transportation much easier than our ancestors could ever have imagined. These advances open up new opportunities, as well as misunderstandings and conflict. Therefore, identifying competences with which individuals can be effective in cross-cultural interaction has become increasingly important to management scholars and practitioners.

Of the efforts to isolate such competences, a recently developed concept—cultural intelligence (CQ)—has emerged and captured a great deal of attention. Among the abundant constructs, terms, and models in cross-cultural research, CQ, defined as the capability to function well in culturally diverse situations (Earley & Ang, 2003), has, despite its short history, “undergone a remarkable journey of growth” (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009, p. 30). The first years of CQ focused on defining the concept; empirical research increased around 2008, focusing first on antecedents and effects and more recently, on indirect effects and methods for developing CQ. The research on CQ has become extensive, as indicated by around 30 articles in each of the years 2016 and 2017. But is CQ just hype, or is it truly helpful in dealing with contemporary cultural diversity?

The aim of the present review is to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date assessment of the literature on CQ, as well as suggestions for future research. In doing so, we build on previous review articles on CQ (Andresen & Bergdolt, 2016; Ang, Rockstuhl, & Tan, 2015; Bücker, 2014; Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014; Ng et al., 2009; Ott & Michailova, 2018). However, this review differs from previous studies in important ways. Most notably, this review includes articles that were published since 2015. Due to the rapid growth in research, this adds 59 empirical studies published after the most recent review (i.e., Ott & Michailova, 2018). The latest

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developments have introduced new variables in CQ research (Arli, Pekerti, Kubacki, & Rundle-Thiele, 2016), more complex relationships among familiar variables (M. Li, Mobley, & Kelly, 2016), and new measurement tools (Alon, Boulanger, Meyers, & Taras, 2016). Moreover, the most recent research also has a somewhat different pattern than earlier studies, for example, focusing more on the direct and indirect effects of CQ. In this review, we focus on the latest studies—research that we believe will enhance understanding of the field substantially.

Furthermore, the inclusion criteria for this review differed slightly from those of previous reviews. We included all studies on cultural intelligence that appear in the Web of Science database. Thus, this review covers a wider range of research fields—including business, management, education, psychology, as well as some rarely covered fields, such as information science and public administration—than previous reviews. We also address different levels of CQ research, including individual, dyadic, and organizational levels. In sum, this approach resulted in the inclusion of 86 empirical studies on CQ that have *not* been covered in any of the reviews mentioned above. Consequently, we aim to present a comprehensive, up-to-date picture of the origin, development, status, and potential future directions of CQ research.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we present the data collection procedure for the review (see in the Section “The data collection process”). Then, we introduce the concept of CQ, including its definition and structure (see in the Section “Cultural intelligence”). We then examine empirical studies of CQ, including measurement and validity (see in the Section “Measurement and validity of cultural intelligence”), antecedents (see in the Section “Antecedents of cultural intelligence”), development (see in the Section “Development of cultural intelligence”), direct and indirect effects (see in the Section “Effects of cultural intelligence”), moderating effects (see in the Section “Moderating effects of cultural intelligence”), aggregated effects (see in the Section “Aggregated effects of cultural intelligence”), and qualitative studies (see in the Section “Qualitative research on cultural intelligence”). In the final section, we offer suggestions for future research directions (see in the Section “Future research suggestions”).

The data collection process

The studies reviewed were identified through the Web of Science database, which was selected because it is a leading database for scientific articles that provides scholarly criteria for its journal selections. We used the search terms *cultural intelligence* or *CQ* and searched for these terms in the title or the topic of the article.

Articles outside the study scope, in fields such as anthropology, biology, medicine, neurosciences, psychiatry, and zoology, were excluded. Furthermore, we included only articles written in English and only journal articles—thus excluding, for example, book reviews, meeting abstracts, and proceedings. We tracked all studies until the last update on 1 April 2018, while the earliest publication related to CQ appeared in 2002.

The selection process resulted in 186 studies in total. The journals that published the most articles on CQ research were *Academy of Management Learning & Education* (15), *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (15), *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (14), and *Group and Organization Management* (12). These journals together published around 30% of the total 186 publications. Other studies on CQ were dispersed among 87 other journals.

For the convenience of analysis, we classified the publications on CQ as theoretical or empirical articles. The total numbers of the two types of publications were 37 and 149, respectively. The percentage of theoretical vs. empirical articles has been decreasing somewhat, which seems reasonable during the establishment of the conceptual framework of CQ. Specifically, after 2006, nine theoretical articles focused on the conceptual framework, including a special issue in *Group and Organization Management*. Thereafter, the focus of research has shifted to empirical studies.

The empirical studies included in the present review measured CQ as a variable. Four articles examined CQ as a control variable, and three articles measured derivative measures of CQ, for example, the malleability of CQ (Cuadrado, Taberner, & Briones, 2014). Therefore, we focused on the remaining 142 empirical publications. Among these articles, 128 studies employed a quantitative method to measure CQ, while 14 studies employed qualitative methods, including interview, case study, and content analysis.

The studies that used quantitative methods were further classified according to their main themes: measurement scale and validity, antecedents of CQ, CQ development, effects of CQ, CQ as a moderator, or CQ at the aggregate level. This classification was applied for the convenience of this review, and each article was categorized into one theme only when presented in the subsequent tables. The vast majority of the studies fell easily into one of the categories, but some studies covered different themes simultaneously, in which case the studies are assigned to the most prevalent theme when we discuss the studies.

An overview of the research on CQ is illustrated in Fig. 1. The recent rapid increase in studies on CQ makes it difficult for previous reviews to keep track of the literature. Therefore, we distinguish between articles published before 2015 and those published from 2015 to the present. This categorization also makes potential trends and changes of topics in CQ research more visible. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the latest studies focus on the empirical part of CQ—quantitative studies in particular. The four studies that used CQ as control variable were published in recent years, which indicates that CQ research has not been confined to its own field but has also been noticed and acknowledged in the wider field of cross-cultural competence. Furthermore, publications concerning antecedents and direct and indirect effects of CQ have increased rapidly in recent years, while the number of studies measuring CQ development and CQ at the aggregate level and studies adopting qualitative methods have decreased since 2015.

Importantly, this review includes only studies that explicitly addressed the issue of CQ. The area of intercultural competence is clearly much more than just CQ (see for example the reflections by Kealey (2015) and Ruben (2015)). However, although examining a broader scope in intercultural competence would provide a more extensive analysis, the amount of research is simply too large to integrate in a single review article. Moreover, the concept of cultural intelligence is well defined and highly cited, and no other measurement of intercultural competence has resulted in such a vast amount of scientific studies in recent years. Therefore, we

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