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A renewed perspective on the measurement of cross-cultural competence: An approach through personality traits and cross-cultural knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The concept of cross-cultural competence (CCC) has generated considerable interest in the area of international business, but research still lacks solid measurement tools for this multidimensional construct. CCC is frequently operationalized with its components such as personality traits, but to what extent are those really linked to another dimension of CCC and therefore indicative of cross-cultural knowledge? This study combines measurement tools for two components of CCC: personality trait scales and critical incident technique. The tools are validated on a multinational sample of a working population. A structural model shows that most of the personality traits generally presented as predictive of CCC, do not significantly determine cross-cultural knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, cross-cultural competence (CCC) has generated considerable and continually growing interest. Globalization has led to an increase in cross-cultural encounters. Yet, many of these encounters are at least partially unsuccessful. Scholars and practitioners in the fields of international business, communication, and education have considered that CCC is necessary to avoid those failures. Consequently, numerous scholarly contributions have been made in this area (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Unfortunately, this interest in CCC has not led to a significantly better understanding of the concept (Van de Vijver & Leung, 2009). Even though scholars have produced numerous frameworks, definitions, and approaches related to CCC, there is yet no commonly accepted conceptualization. The fuzziness of the developments on

CCC has even led scholars to question the usefulness of the concept itself (Livian, 2011).

In line with Van de Vijver and Leung (2009), we argue that the understanding of CCC could be improved through confrontation with empirical data, which have been realized only in a few publications. Hence, we aim at contributing to the conceptualization of CCC through questioning measurement tools. CCC is frequently seen as being made of different components such as knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personal characteristics (KSAOs, Caligiuri, 2006). Empirical measures, however, generally only operationalize CCC with one of its dimensions: “other personal characteristics” such as personality traits and attitudes. It appears that these measures have rarely been compared to measures of other components of CCC. In fact, we do not really know to what extent the measures of personality traits and attitudes could grasp CCC in the context of international business and which personality traits mentioned in the literature really determine other components of CCC.

Thus, this study raises the question of whether one component of CCC influences another one. More precisely, we analyze the extent to which personality traits influence cross-cultural knowledge (CCK) in international business. To do so, we first review the

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literature on CCC and the existing measures of it. Then, we present two different measures of CCC. The first one being based on personality trait scales, while the second one relies on the critical incident technique, and the way we tested the link between them using a survey. Finally, we present our results within a structural model and discuss the contributions and limitations of our research.

2. Cross-cultural competence: conceptualizations and related measurement tools

Numerous contributions, including literature reviews, on CCC in the field of international business have been published during the last 15 years. However, this abundance of publications suffers from ambiguous construct definitions and poor integration (Ang et al., 2007). A striking example is the lack of connections between literature on CCC, intercultural competence, and cultural intelligence (CQ). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) never mentioned the term “CCC” in their literature review, while Johnson, Lenartowicz, and Apud (2006) quote “intercultural competence” in only one sentence referring to Hofstede’s (2001) formulation. More recent literature (e.g. Ang et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2008) adds a third wording “cultural intelligence.” However, no striking differences appear between this last construct based on the notion of intelligence and competence in the area of cross-cultural interaction: both involve the understanding of specificity of cross-cultural interaction and the capacity to adapt one’s behavior to this specificity. It appears that CQ largely overlaps with a fourth concept, “global mindset” (Andresen & Bergdolt, 2017). Although the definitions largely converge, scholars not only use different terms for the concept of CCC but also hardly ever integrate contributions using a different terminology. In contrast, we consider that these concepts are very close. We use the term “cross-cultural competence” here but include literature on intercultural competence and CQ within this wording.

Spitzberg and Changnon’s (2009) presentation of 22 models of CCC makes evident that conceptualizations are highly diverse in their disciplines and terminologies and their scholarly and practical objectives. The main categories of models are as follows: (1) compositional models listing elements/components of CCC such as individuals’ knowledge and behavior (e.g. Deardorff, 2006), (2) co-orientational and adaptational models focusing on communication and interaction between people from different cultures (e.g. Fantini, 1995), and (3) developmental models including successive competence levels that can be reached through learning processes (e.g. Bennett, 1986; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). In other words, the huge majority of contributions on CCC define the concept in terms of components, interaction processes, or levels. Among these, the compositional conceptualizations predominate in the subfield of CCC, and this approach has been adopted by the subfield of CQ. This paper also adopts a componential approach to CCC. In the following subsections, we present and discuss the componential definitions and measures of CCC.

2.1. Componential definitions of CCC

Componential definitions of CCC provide lists of components that together are thought to constitute the concept. Four types of components of CCC have been identified (Ruben, 1989): attitudes, personality traits, cognitive abilities and skills, and actual behavior. These types of components roughly correspond to KSAOs (Caligiuri, 2006), with the particularity that abilities are addressed through actual behavior and other personal characteristics through specific personality traits and attitudes. For each type of component, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) list dozens of elements mentioned

in the literature. They argue that “the more a model incorporates specific conceptualization of interactants’ motivation, knowledge, skills, context, and outcomes, in the context of an ongoing relationship over time, the more advanced the model” (2009: 44) of CCC. However, the authors also recognize that “there is a need to provide a more parsimonious model” (2009: 45) than the list of 300-plus terms and concepts related to CCC they provide.

In the field of international business, CCC has been defined as “an individual’s effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad” (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 530). In other words, CCC includes the ability to draw on personal resources and traits to understand the specifics of intercultural interaction and to adjust one’s behavior to these specifics.

Personality traits and attitudes that are most frequently quoted in the literature (e.g. Black, 1990; Caligiuri, 2006; Cui & Van den Berg, 1991; Dirks, 1995; Johnson et al., 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001) as being strongly linked or equivalent to CCC are open-mindedness (or openness), absence of ethnocentrism, sociability (or extraversion), emotional stability, self-confidence, empathy, attributional complexity, and tolerance for ambiguity. Some of them are stable personality traits (openness and extraversion are two of the “big five” personality traits), while others such as ethnocentrism and empathy are more specific attitudes (Shaffer et al., 2006).

Cultural intelligence is defined as the “capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings” (Ang et al., 2007, p. 335). It includes at least the following three components: metacognitive, cognitive, and behavioral CQ (Thomas et al., 2008). Some scholars (among which Ang et al., 2007) add a fourth component motivational CQ. Ang et al. (2007) argued that CQ and CCC are entirely different constructs. In contrast and as stated earlier, we consider instead that they are very close: both involve the understanding of specificity of cross-cultural interaction and the capacity to adapt one’s behavior to this specificity.

The components of CCC included in this definition of CCC can be represented as shown in Fig. 1. The figure does not include successful work with people from other cultural backgrounds as this is an expected consequence of CCC in international business but is not one of its components.

2.2. Existing componential measurement scales of CCC

The field of CCC lacks confrontation with empirical data. However, various measures of constructs related to CCC exist and have been reviewed by Van de Vijver and Leung (2009) and Bückner and Poutsma (2010), among others. Although some measure “levels” reached in CCC (Hammer et al., 2003), most focus on components of CCC. In this article, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), Multi-cultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), and Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) are described in detail. We focus on these measurement tools because they have been developed and used in scholarly research, presented and discussed in academic journals, and reused and extended by other authors, thus making them well known in the field.

The ISS (Chen & Starosta, 2000) measures attitudes toward cross-cultural situations such as motivation and engagement. It is composed of five emotional dimensions of CCC: respect for cultural differences, interaction engagement, self-confidence, enjoyment, and attentiveness. Each subscale is composed of three to seven items. The scale has been tested on a student sample with an average age of 20 years and shows good reliability (Cronbach’s alpha of 0.89 according to Graf & Harland, 2005).

Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven’s (2001) MPQ measures five

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