A study of the adjustment of Western expatriates in Taiwan ROC with the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ)

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Abstract

The present paper examined the validity of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). As criteria of validity three levels of adjustment were used. The study took place among a sample of expatriates (N = 102) during their assignment in Taiwan. The MPQ has scales for cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. The MPQ-scales appeared to be positively related to expatriates' personal, professional and social adjustment. In all three domains, emotional stability appeared most consistently as predictor of adjustment. Social initiative was an additional strong predictor of psychological well-being, and so was cultural empathy of satisfaction with life and of the amount of social support in the host country. Flexibility was a predictor of job satisfaction and social support. The study also examined the effects of marital status on adjustment. Married expatriates showed higher levels of adjustment than expatriates who were single or separated.

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When one examines the research literature on expatriate adjustment, one will quickly find that a rather grim picture is being painted. Many authors indeed mention high failure rates (e.g. Black & Gregersen, 1999). It has become, as Harzing (1995) points out, almost traditional over the last three decades to open an article on expatriate management by stating that expatriate failure rates are high. Remarkably, she states that there is almost no empirical foundation for the existence of high expatriate failure rates when measured as premature re-entry. With respect to that criterion they are probably not much different from domestic failure rates. Nevertheless, there are quite a few compelling reasons why we should pay attention to expatriate adjustment. From the standpoint of the expatriate enormous changes are brought on by accepting the overseas assignment. The expatriate has to leave friends, relatives, and colleagues behind in search of a new life in a country that he or she often knows little about. When spouses and or children are involved, they too will have to cope with drastic changes in their lives. On top of that, the overseas assignment is binding in the sense that one cannot easily quit the job and return home. In addition from the standpoint of the employer, huge costs are involved in overseas assignments. Obviously, the ability to predict expatriate adjustment is of great interest not only for selection purposes, but also for assessing possible training needs.

What do we mean by expatriate adjustment? In the literature, a distinction is made between personal and sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990). Personal adjustment refers to internal psychological outcomes such as mental health and personal satisfaction. Sociocultural adjustment refers to external psychological outcomes that link individuals to their new context such as the ability to deal with daily problems, particularly in the areas of family life and work (See Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). In the present study in addition to personal adjustment we focused on two areas of sociocultural adjustment: professional adjustment referring to the amount of satisfaction with the new work environment in the host country, and social adjustment referring to satisfying social relationships in the host country. Together, these three domains provide a useful framework for studies on expatriate adjustment.

So, how can expatriate adjustment be predicted? The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ: Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000, 2001) was developed as a personality instrument aimed at measuring the dimensions that underlie multicultural effectiveness of expatriates. The instrument has scales for cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. In contrast with general personality questionnaires, the MPQ-scales are tailored to cover more narrowly those aspects of traits that are relevant to multicultural success. In large, the MPQ-questions refer to behavior in multicultural situations, making the relation between test behavior and the aspired international position transparent to its respondents, thereby enhancing the acceptability of the instrument. The instrument may be used for the selection and training of international employees, that is, employees who have a job with an

international scope, whether in an expatriate assignment, or in a job dealing with international issues more generally (Schaeffer, 1985).

The MPQ scales

Cultural empathy, also referred to as 'sensitivity' (e.g., Hawes & Kealy, 1981), is probably the most frequently mentioned dimension of multicultural effectiveness (Arthur & Bennet, 1995). This dimension refers to the ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of members of different cultural groups. Second, open-mindedness refers to an open and unprejudiced attitude towards outgroup members and towards different cultural norms and values (Arthur & Bennet, 1995; Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978; Ronen, 1989). Third, social initiative is defined as a tendency to approach social situations in an active way and to take initiatives. Several researchers have pointed at the relevance of the ability to establish and maintain contacts with people from the host country and of making friends among the locals. (Hawes & Kealy, 1981; Kets de Vries & Mead, 1991). More convincingly, empirical evidence underlines the relevance of this dimension (Abe & Weisman, 1983; Hammer et al., 1978). The dimension of emotional stability refers to a tendency to remain calm in stressful situations versus a tendency to show strong emotional reactions under stressful circumstances (e.g., Abe & Weisman, 1983, Caligiuri, 2000, Church, 1982). The final dimension is flexibility. Several authors have stressed the importance of this dimension (Arthur & Bennet, 1995; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Torbiorn, 1982). The international employee has to be able to switch easily from one strategy to another, because the familiar ways of handling things will not necessarily work in a new cultural environment.

In earlier studies of the MPQ among student samples, support was obtained for the reliability and validity of the instrument. Relationships with related personality constructs were in the expected direction (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000, 2001). Moreover, two longitudinal studies showed that the instrument could predict psychological well-being and social support among international students (Mol, Van Oudenhoven, & Van der Zee, 2001; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, in press).

So far, the MPQ has not yet been applied to expatriate employees. The study that is presented below, was aimed at establishing the predictive value of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire against the adjustment of expatriates living and working in Taiwan. Taiwan offers an interesting situation because the country definitely has an eastern culture whereas most of the expatriates come form western nations. Due to the horrific logistics of conducting a predictive study amongst expatriates, a concurrent design was chosen in which the independent variables (the MPQ scales) were assessed at the same time as the dependent variables. A distinction was made between personal, professional and social adjustment in the host country. Personal adjustment was operationally defined in terms of satisfaction with life, physical health, and psychological health. Professional adjustment was assessed by respondents' job satisfaction. Social adjustment was measured by social support by peers in the host country. Our main prediction was that expatriates with high levels of cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability, and flexibility would be better adjusted to their foreign assignment.

Finally we looked at marital status. We checked whether married people had a higher level of well-being than expatriates who were single or separated. This distinction

is particularly important in view of the role of expatriates' spouses (e.g. Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi & Bross, 1998). Their role becomes increasingly crucial for the success of foreign assignment due to the professional ambitions of many young spouses in particular. Our expectation – in line with the general literature on intimate relations – that married people would be better adjusted.

Method

Respondents

Several distinct approaches were used in finding respondents for this study. Permission was obtained from the two largest employers of expatriates in Taiwan and the European Chamber of Commerce in Taipei, to distribute the questionnaire amongst its employees. Besides that, several organizations that deal exclusively with the expatriate community in Taiwan cooperated in the study. The questionnaire was sent to 386 – mostly western - expatriates and 102 were returned, making for an overall response rate of 26.4%. The actual response rate was probably higher because the expatriate community is rather volatile. This means that the questionnaire most probably was also sent to a number of expatriates who had already left the country, or who were on a business trip abroad. The sample of 102 respondents consisted of expatriates from 24 different countries and territories, with the Netherlands (30%), the United States (18%), the United Kingdom (16%), and France (6%) accounting for 70% of the sample. Respondents had to meet three criteria in order to participate. They (1) had to have a foreign passport, (2) they had to be living in Taiwan, and (3) they had to be employed in Taiwan.

Of the respondents, 80% was male and 20% female. Age varied between 24 and 65 with a mean of 42.4 years (SD = 9.69). Respondents had been living abroad for an average of 119 months (SD = 104.70) and in Taiwan for an average of 61.16 months (SD = 73.13). Of the respondents, 91% indicated that they were college graduates or beyond. Respondents indicated that they spoke and understood the English language at least 'reasonably well' with most respondents indicating that they spoke it 'fluently'. Respondents participated voluntarily. After the respondents received personal feedback regarding their scores on the various scales, their names were removed from the questionnaires and the data file.

Instruments

A questionnaire was constructed that consisted of the following sections: biographical information, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire, scales for personal adjustment and social support. The final section assessed respondents' professional adjustment.

Biographic information. In the first section respondents were asked to provide their name, address, nationality, date of birth, occupation, company, total time spent living abroad (in months), total time spent living in Taiwan (in months), gender, father's nationality and mother's nationality. Their mastery of the English language was assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from I speak it poorly [1] to I speak it fluently [5].

The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). In the current study, the MPQ (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2000, 2001) consisted of 78 items spread over five dimensions. Cultural empathy (14 items) is measured by items such as ‘Tries to understand other people's behavior’ (+), ‘Is attentive to facial expressions’ (+), and ‘Finds

it hard to emphasize with others'(-). Second, the open-mindedness subscale (14 items) consists of items such as 'Gets involved in other cultures' (+), 'Is open to new ideas' (+), and 'Finds other religions interesting' (+). Social initiative (17 items) is measured by items such as 'Takes initiatives' (+), 'Takes the lead' (+), and 'Is a slow starter' (-). Examples of the Emotional stability subscale (20 items) are 'Is not easily hurt' (+), 'Keeps calm at ill-luck' (+), and 'Is nervous' (-). Finally, a subscale for flexibility (13 items) is included in the instrument. Examples of items from this scale are 'Changes easily from one activity to another' (+), 'Functions best in a familiar setting' (+), and 'Avoids surprises' (-). Respondents could give their answers on a 5-point scale ranging from totally not applicable [1] to completely applicable.

Personal Adjustment. Satisfaction with Life. This construct was measured by the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The reliability of this scale in the sample was high (α = .84). The construct was measured by five items on a 5-point answering scale ranging from strongly agree [1] to strongly disagree [5]. Examples of these items are: 'In most ways my life is close to my ideal'(+) and 'The conditions of my life are excellent'(+). Physical health was measured by the Rand 36-item Health Survey (Rand Health Sciences Program, 1992). The subscale for physical health consisted of six items, using a 5-point scale (α = .76). On the first of these items 'In general would you say your health is...' this scale ranged from poor [1] to excellent [5]. On the second item, 'During the past four weeks, how much of the time have your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends, relatives, etc.)?' this scale ranged from all of the time [1] to none of the time [5]. The other four items were scored on a scale ranging from definitely false [1] to definitely

true [5]. Psychological Health was measured by two additional subscales of the Rand 36-item Health Survey, the mental health and the vitality scale, that were combined into one 9-item scale. The scale ranged from none of the time [1] to all of the time [5]. Items referred to how the respondent had been feeling over the past four weeks: 'Did you feel full of pep?'(+) and 'Have you felt downhearted and blue?'(-) are illustrations of items on this scale. The internal consistency of the scale was high (α = .83).

Professional Adjustment. The professional adjustment of the respondents was assessed using the Job Satisfaction Survey which is a 36-item scale to assess employee attitudes about the job and aspects of the job (Spector, 1997). All questions on this questionnaire could be answered on a scale ranging from disagree very much [1] to agree very much [5]. This scale was used because it's items referred to a wide range of job aspects: rewards, opportunities for promotion, supervision, relationships at the workplace, the nature of work, and satisfaction with operating conditions. Satisfaction with the just mentioned aspects was assessed by items such as: 'I feel I am being paid a fair amount for the work I do' (+), 'There is really too little chance for promotion on my job' (-), 'My supervisor is quite competent in doing his/her job' (+), 'I like the people I work with' (+), 'I sometimes feel my job is meaningless'(-), and 'I have too much paperwork' (-). Cronbach's alpha was .94.

Finally, Social Adjustment was assessed by social support by peers (α = .90). Items could be answered on a 4-point scale ranging from seldom or never [1] to very often [4]. The scale (17 items) was a shortened version of the 41-item Social Support List-Interaction (Van Sonderen, 1993). All items started with the phrase 'Does it ever happen to you that people…', followed by items such as '…are affectionate to you?' (+).

Design

A cross-sectional design was used in which the 'predictive' variables (MPQ-scales) and criterion variables were measured simultaneously. The instruments had quite different response categories which decreases the chances of an inflated correlation between the independent and dependent variables.

Results

Means, Standard Deviations, Missing Values and Internal Consistencies

As can be seen in Table 1, the scores on all the MPQ scales (1-5) were slightly above the midpoint of the scale. This finding is consistent with earlier studies among students (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2001). The number of missing values, which did not exceed 1% for any single item, was extremely low. This means that the respondents were motivated to fill out the questionnaire. Reliabilities of all the MPQ scales were sufficiently high, except for the flexibility scale (α = .64). Table 1 shows that all correlations between the subscales of the MPQ were significant, except for the correlation between cultural empathy and flexibility and the correlation between cultural empathy and emotional stability. The correlation between open-mindedness and cultural empathy was the highest, which could have been expected due to the theoretical relatedness of the constructs. The correlations between the adjustment variables, excepted the relation between physical and psychological health, were rather low, which implies that they are relatively independent indicators of adjustment.

Table1 about here

Regression of Personal Adjustment on the MPQ-dimensions.

Several hierarchical regressions of personal adjustment criteria on the MPQ dimensions were performed, after controlling for biographical data. Table 2 shows that the MPQ-scales explained 8 % variance in satisfaction with life in addition to the 22 % variance explained by the biographical data. Significant predictors are cultural empathy and emotional stability. The negative ß for open-mindedness must – in view of its non-significant correlation with satisfaction with life – be interpreted with caution. Emotional stability emerged as a significant predictor of physical health; the MPQ scales accounted for an additional 19% of the variance. The MPQ dimensions accounted for a staggering 39% of additional variance in psychological well-being, with emotional stability and social initiative emerging as significant predictors. Unexpectedly, the beta-weight for open-mindedness was negative, but must again be interpreted with caution considering its non-significant raw correlation with psychological well-being.

Table 2 about here

Regression of Professional and Social Adjustment on the MPQ-dimensions

A hierarchical regression of job satisfaction on the MPQ dimensions yielded 12 % of additional variance accounted for with flexibility as a significant predictor (Table 3). Finally, of the variance in social support by peers, the MPQ dimensions accounted for an

additional 26% of variance, with emotional stability, cultural empathy, and flexibility emerging as significant predictors (see Table 3).

Table 3 about here

Biographical data

Several regressions of the adjustment criteria on the biographical data were performed: age, time spent in Taiwan, gender, mastery of English, and level of education. Satisfaction with life and physical health were predicted by level of education. Age was a predictor of satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, and job satisfaction. Satisfaction with life was related to gender, which means that males on average were slightly happier than females. Mastery of English and time spent on Taiwan were negative predictors of satisfaction with life. There were no significant biographical predictors of social support.

We also examined the effect of marital status on adjustment. When we compare married and single persons on the personal adjustment criteria we found clear and meaningful differences between the two marital status groups, multivariate F (3,89) = 3.40; p <. 05. Married expatriates were more satisfied with their lives, M = 3.65 versus 3.23 (F (1,91) = 5.10; p < .05), physically more healthy, M = 4.13 versus 3.77 (F (1,91) = 4.40; p < .05), and psychologically more healthy, M = 3.92 versus 3.57 (F (1,91) = 7,29; p < .05).

Discussion

The current study examined the validity of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire with respect to three adjustment criteria. First we found that the MPQ scales could significantly predict all three facets of personal adjustment: satisfaction with life, physical health, and psychological well-being. Although both cultural empathy and social initiative were related to personal adjustment, the strongest relationship was found between emotional stability and personal adjustment. This is not surprising: emotionally unstable persons are in general characterized by a tendency to experience negative emotions. Common method variance and content overlap between the items may have caused the strong beta-weight. The MPQ-scale for emotional stability contains items such as 'keeps calm at ill-luck' whereas the psychological well-being scale has items like 'How much of the time during the past four weeks did you feel nervous?' However, psychological well-being was also significantly predicted by the scale for social initiative, which does not share its content with the well-being scale. Moreover, in two longitudinal studies with international students (Mol et al. 2000; Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, in press) emotional stability also was an important predictor of psychological well-being.

Second, with regard to the relationship between job satisfaction and the MPQ-scales flexibility, in particular, emerged as a significant predictor. The expatriate who scores high on this dimension may easily adjust his or her behavior to the different working conditions in the host country. It should pay off for companies to take flexibility into account in the selection of expatriates. The importance of reaching a satisfactory level of well-being at work should not be underestimated. Job satisfaction is an important predictor of commitment and turnover (e.g., Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996).

Nevertheless, in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the intercultural traits and work outcomes, future studies should also include performance criteria.

The third relation, social adjustment, concerned social support by peers. Although the relatively stable traits of emotional stability and flexibility were predictors of social support, cultural empathy, which is probably more trainable, came also out as a significant predictor of social support by peers. Surprisingly, the dimension of social initiative did not appear as a significant predictor of social support. Apparently, in intercultural interactions, lack of neuroticism, flexibility and being sensitive to other persons' perceptions and intentions is more critical to building up a satisfactory social network than taking an active approach in social interactions. The importance of cultural empathy as a determinant of social support in the host country implies that it may be desirable to focus training efforts on this dimension.

There were some weak relations between some of the biographical data and the adjustment criteria. The positive relationship between level of education and satisfaction with life and physical health has been found in many studies. Female expatriate employees are still rare and role models are almost absent. That may be a reason that female expatriates are slightly less happy than their male colleagues are. However, many other explanations may be equally plausible. Older expatriates were more satisfied with their job and their lives. This may well be explained by an attrition effect. Those who do not like their job or their lives in Taiwan probably drop out, whereas those who are positive about those aspects tend to stay. A remarkable finding was that length of stay in Taiwan was negatively related to satisfaction with life. This might be a consequence of

lack of promotion. For many expatriates a foreign assignment is a necessary step in order to be promoted. Those who stayed longer in Taiwan apparently may not have been offered a higher rank position elsewhere. Finally, a finding that confirms common sense is that married people have a higher level of well-being. This finding is particularly important in view of the role of expatriates' spouses (e.g. Caligiuri, Hyland, Joshi & Bross, 1998).

At this point, the reader will probably have noticed that although the effect sizes that were obtained within the current study were significant, they were not large. A number of reasons may be put forward as to why this was so. First, the respondents in the current study were still at work on their assignment and no data were available for those who left their jobs or were not hired in the first place, resulting in a restriction of range. A possible cause of the relatively small effect of flexibility, in particular, may be that the flexibility scale had a low reliability. Nevertheless, the present study provides support that the personality dimensions of the MPQ are indeed related to expatriate adjustment. The possession of emotional stability, in particular, seems to have helped the expatriates - who were in majority from Western countries - in their adjustment to life in a non-Western society.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Scale Intercorrelations of the MPQ-scales and dependent variables

	M	SD	α	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Cultural empathy	3.86	.44	.83	.67**	.31**	.19	.18	.13	-.02	.07	.06	.32**
2. Open-mindedness	3.91	.46	.84	-	.58**	.40**	.41**	.12	.13	.17+	.12	.34**
3. Social initiative	3.77	.53	.89		-	.49**	.42**	.16	.28**	.44**	.19+	.34**
4. Emotional stability	3.48	.44	.84			-	.47**	.21*	.43**	.63**	.23*	.39**
5. Flexibility	3.29	.40	.64				-	.23*	.29**	.32**	.28**	.39**
6. Satisfaction with life	3.60	.71	.84					-	.31**	.30**	.38**	.15
7. Physical health	4.07	.69	.76						-	.46**	.28**	.13
8. Psychological health	3.83	.50	.81							-	.33**	.30**
9. Social support peers	2.58	.49	.90									.04
10. Job satisfaction	4.12	.97	.94									

Significance level + $p < .10$;* $p < .05$;** $p < .01$

Table 2

Results of Hierarchical Regression of Indicators of Personal Adjustment on the MPQ-dimensions, Controlling for Biographical Data.

Dependent variable:	Satisfaction with Life		Physical Well-being		Psychological Well-being	
	ß$_{step\ 1}$	ß $_{step\ 2}$	ß$_{step\ 1}$	ß $_{step\ 2}$	ß$_{step\ 1}$	ß $_{step\ 2}$
age	.25*	.24*	.18	.15	.26*	.21*
time in Taiwan	-.34**	-.25*	-.28*	-.13	-.23*	.00
gender	.25*	.30**	.08	.20*	-.15	.04
mastery of English	-.19*	-.25**	.08	.01	.03	-.11
grades completed	.23*	.26**	.25*	.25**	.06	.07
Flexibility		.11		.11		.05
Social Initiative		.10		.16		.32**
Emotional Stability		.19*		.39***		.56***
Cultual Empathy		.25*		-.05		.08
Open-mindedness		-.28*		-.19		-.31**
R	.47	.55	.36	.56	.34	.71
R^2	.22	.30	.13	.32	.12	.51
R^2change	.22	.08	.13	.19	.12*	.39***
F_{change}	5.31*	2.17^{1}	2.86*	5.03*	2.49*	14.52***

Note ^{1} marginally significant at $p < .10$. Significance level * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Results of Hierarchical Regression of Indicators of Professional and Social Adjustment on the MPQ-dimensions, Controlling for Biographical Data.

Dependent variable:	Job Satisfaction		Social Support	
	ß$_{step\ 1}$	ß $_{step\ 2}$	ß$_{step\ 1}$	ß $_{step\ 2}$
age	.27*	.28*	-.07	-.06
time in Taiwan	-.12	.00	-.14	.00
gender	.14	.20	.04	.13
mastery of English	-.08	-.12	-.01	-.10
grades completed	.02	-.01	-.02	-.08
Flexibility		.24*		.20^{1}
Social Initiative		.12		.10
Emotional Stability		.15		.27*
Cultural Empathy		.03		.23^{1}
Open-mindedness		-.08		-.02
R	.26	.44	.19	.55
R^2	.07	.19	.04	.30
R^2change	.07	.12*	.04	.26***
F_{change}	1.43	2.76*	< 1	6.79***

Note ^{1} marginally significant at $p < .10$. Significance level * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ *** p <.001.