THE CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTABILITY AMONG UNIVERSITY FACULTIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine Islamic Azad University’s faculties’ cross-cultural adaptability. These faculties attended a presentation conducted by the authors that addressed Cross-Cultural adaptability. A total of 33 individuals completed the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory and a Demographic Data Sheet. The Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) is a tool used to provide information to one about his/her potential for cross-cultural effectiveness. Developed by Kelley and Meyers (1995), it is cultural-general and consists of 50 items spread across four scales: Emotional Resilience, Flexibility/Openness, Perceptual Acuity, and Personal Autonomy. Findings show that the strongest CCAI scale was emotional resilience and the lowest scale was flexibility/openness. Key Words: Faculties, Islamic Azad University’s, Cross-Cultural Adaptability

INTRODUCTION

There are many areas in which culture can be a factor in education, business, and life; consequently, culture may be defined in many ways. Jacobson (1996) defines culture as “first and foremost a shared way of making sense of experience, based on a shared history”. The definitions of culture continue with Rosenzweig’s (1994) explanation of “a set of taken-for-granted assumptions, expectations or rules for being.” A current definition of culture reads “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004). A variety of cultures exist in a multitude of areas. There are business/organizational cultures, societal cultures, group/team cultures, individual cultures, and basic beliefs. Therefore, one person can belong to several different cultures. However, as educators, all of these realms need to be dealt with and taught in an educational environment. Cultures are ever evolving and should not be thought of as stagnant. Cultures have positive and negative aspects and both are shared and learned in a variety of ways. Thus, developing an awareness of one’s own ability to adapt to cultural differences is key to success in education and business today.

Looking inward to first develop self-awareness before judging others may help one view others in a different light. One must realize that his/her culture regulates or influences how he/she communicates, views, and accepts other cultures through their own “cultural eye.” Newman (1997) notes that as individuals are generally raised in one particular culture, their own culture becomes mutually exclusive; when other cultures are viewed and/or experienced, those cultures may seem unusual and hard to accept. Therefore, before individuals can accept others, it is important for them to accept themselves and their cultural adaptability.

The Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) provides a new model for improving organizational performance and competitive position through effective cross-cultural interaction. It helps individuals gain insight into their likely ability to adjust to a new culture and environment and the potential stressors that lie ahead. It is specifically designed to

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develop an individual’s readiness for travel or relocation abroad. The CCAI not only raises awareness, but focuses on the skill-building that is necessary to put this heightened awareness to use. Based on significant research, this tool goes beyond awareness to focus on developing the communication and behavioral skills believed to be most critical to successful cross-cultural interaction. By integrating individual self-assessment, observe feedback, skill-building exercises and action planning, the CCAI provides the foundation for immediate action and ongoing development. It can also be used to counsel individuals considering life changes that could expose them to people from different cultures, backgrounds, values or experiences (Vangent, 2011).

The purpose here is to describe the cultural adaptability of Islamic Azad University’s faculties. The following questions were addressed:

- How culturally adaptable were the faculties based on the four scales (Emotional resilience, Flexibility/openness, Perceptual Acuity, and Personal autonomy) of the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory?

- What are specific strategies used by the faculties to help their students adapt to cultures different from their own?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cultural problems arise from differences in behavior, thinking, assumptions, and values between countries and cultures with whom they associate. These cultural differences often produce misunderstandings and lead to ineffectiveness in face-to-face communication (Tuleja, 2005). Promoting cross-cultural competence has been a topic of much research. Ward and Ward (2003) discussed how this was being developed in pre-service teachers. These authors noted that “future teachers will be faced with greater diversity in their classrooms, schools, and communities as a result of over five hundred distinct ethnic groups in the United States. “The International Society for Business Education (ISBE) is an organization for teachers, students, and business professionals who are interested in international business” (ISBE, 2004). With international business and its impact on curriculum and instruction in mind, it is essential that business educators recognize their own strengths and weaknesses in the area of cross-cultural adaptation.

Connolly, Darby, Tolle-Watts, and Thomson-Laky (2000) note that educating dental hygienists to provide services for culturally diverse clients is essential. Forty health sciences faculty were involved in this study and represented a range of areas such as dental hygiene, medical laboratory sciences, nursing, and physical therapy. Their study involved the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) and resulted in all faculty groups exhibiting higher average CCAI scores than the CCAI norm group. The authors noted that results of these CCAI scores indicate that these “qualities should provide a strong foundation for the development of additional competence in cross-cultural health care and preparing practitioners who can provide culturally sensitive health care”. Use of the CCAI with dental hygienists indicates how this instrument can be used with a variety of results to identify adaptability in various occupations. Educators in all areas must develop this foundation to help others learn how to self-analyze their own cultural adaptability and then emphasize the importance of reviewing personal strengths and weaknesses in adapting to other cultures.

The globalization trend has enhanced the number of research projects conducted in cross-cultural studies. Wellins and Rioux (2000) learned that 88% of organizations in a global environment reported that the method of conducting business and training in a particular
location is affected by the local culture. Therefore, when educating/training individuals from other cultures, communication, understanding, and acceptance can be obstacles in the educational process. Chang (2004) noted that “studying culture can improve our understanding of people’s environments and how environments may influence them but cannot help us to make conclusions about people themselves”.

Language is one barrier that typically comes to mind first when dealing with other cultures, but it is not the only limitation. Color, clothing, gender, educational level, societal status, profession, sexual orientation, personal space, and more are related to culture. The way we view other cultures as inferior or as an extension of our own is often based on wrong or stereotypical information. One may be insecure about stepping across that cultural boundary to move beyond culture shock and investigate another culture so that an understanding or a better way to communicate can be achieved. For example, DuPont incorporated a multicultural team to investigate how to bring in new business; and an approximate $45 million gain was achieved after the team’s experiences with other cultures. Adapting colors that appealed to overseas customers was one major factor that led to the gains in revenue (Speechley & Wheatley, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

Purposive sampling was used for this study. The study faculties were Islamic Azad University’s faculties in Ardabil Province. These faculties attended a presentation conducted by the authors that addressed Cross-Cultural adaptability. A total of 33 individuals completed the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory and a Demographic Data Sheet.

The Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) is a tool used to provide information to one about his/her potential for cross-cultural effectiveness. Developed by Kelley and Meyers (1995), it is cultural-general and consists of 50 items spread across four scales: Emotional Resilience (ER), Flexibility/Openness (FO), Perceptual Acuity (PAC), and Personal Autonomy (PA). After reading each question, faculty responded to each with a choice from a six-point Likert scale: definitely true, true, tends to be true, tends not to be true, not true, and definitely not true. The four scales are described next.

**Emotional Resilience (ER);** This dimension shows the degree to which individuals are able to regulate their emotions and maintain an emotional balance while dealing with setbacks, difficult feelings, and challenging environments in a cross-cultural experience. Eighteen of the 50 items deal with emotional resilience.

**Flexibility/Openness (FO);** This dimension shows the extent to which a person enjoys the different ways of thinking and behaving that are typically a part of the cross-cultural experience. Fifteen of the 50 items deal with flexibility and openness.

**Perceptual Acuity (PAC);** This dimension shows the degree to which individuals have established a cultural empathy through investigating the confidence in their own ability to actually perceive others’ feelings, possess a non-judgmental attitude toward others, and value other cultures. Ten of the 50 items deal with perceptual acuity.

**Personal Autonomy (PA);** This dimension shows the extent to which individuals have a strong sense of self, respect for themselves and others, and clearly defined personal values and who do not feel like they must abandon this “self” when in a different culture. Seven of the 50 items deal with personal autonomy.
The potential range of scores for each dimension (ER, FO, PAC, and PA) differs due to a set subscale for each dimension. The range of scores for ER, FO, PAC, and PA are intervally scaled and analyzed using central tendencies on the following scales: 18-108, 15-90, 10-60, and 7-42 respectively. While the subscale may be different for each of the four dimensions, this is true for all: The higher the scores, the higher the level of the particular cross-cultural attribute being assessed.

Connolly, Darby, Tolle-Watts, and Thomson-Lakey (2000) describe the CCAI as a tool which is “designed to help people learn useful information about themselves that can guide them in developing cross-cultural abilities and skills and to better understand the importance of living and working among people, of different cultures”. The CCAI does not predict success or failure, but helps individuals examine a person’s ability or lack thereof to adapt to cultural situations. If weaknesses are identified, then one has the opportunity to strengthen that area to enhance his/her ability to adapt to different cultures.

ANALYSES

The CCAI was used to determine faculties’ ability to adapt culturally in four areas: emotional resilience, flexibility/openness, personal autonomy, and perceptual acuity. This study also sought specific strategies used by faculties to help their students learn to be culturally adaptable.

Table 1 provides mean scores for the four CCAI scales for study faculties. Also included is the 50th percentile spread as reported in the CCAI Manual (Kelley & Meyers, 1995).

Table 1 - CCAI Scale Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>faculties</th>
<th>50th percentile spread</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional resilience</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>77-81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual acuity</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>45-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility/Openness</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>65-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal autonomy</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>31-33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For every CCAI scale, these study faculties ranked higher than the 50th percentile as reported in the CCAI manual. Two points are worth noting here. Two-thirds of the faculty’s attendees were, from a Moghan regain, with only one-third from the Ardabil city. And of the 653 subjects involved in the norming process for the CCAI, 80% were Ardabil province citizens and 20% were not citizens of the Ardabil province this study’s faculties, 70% reported traveling frequently (3-4 times per year) outside the country where they live; 9% reported traveling occasionally (once a year) outside the country where they live.

Comparing faculties’ scale scores with mean scale scores reported in the CCAI Manual also yields interesting data.
Table 2 - Comparison of Faculties’ Scores with CCAI Manual Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Faculties</th>
<th>Age 50+</th>
<th>Travel &lt; 1 month</th>
<th>Travel 1-12 Months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional resilience</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual acuity</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility/Openness</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal autonomy</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, the study faculties’ scores exceeded those reported in the CCAI Manual for every scale. The mean age of study faculties was 53.7 years.

When asked if they used specific strategies in their classes to help student learn to adapt to cultures different from their own, 63.6% (n=21) of faculties answered “yes.” Of those responding “yes”, 43% (n=9) were from the Mohgan and 57% (n=12) were from Ardabil. The strategies reported varied widely. Simple conversation/dialogue that specifically addressed issues of diversity, cultural variances and working in a diverse workforce was used by several faculties. Small group work where a mix of cultures, races, genders, and ages are included was another strategy used. The most frequently cited strategy, clearly, was the use of case studies. For example, one respondent wrote, “I discuss and use case studies to create awareness and understanding of ethical and cultural considerations in designing training and education programs.” Some encouraged students to create class presentations that highlighted their own cultures and experiences.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study clearly points to the need for continuing investigation of strategies used to help university students learn to live and work in culturally diverse settings. Based on this small, purposive sample, one may conclude that international travel and study does, indeed, affect one’s ability to adapt to culturally diverse situations. The impact of international travel can also be felt in the travelers’ classrooms where specific opportunities are provided for their students to learn about cultural adaptation.

For these study faculties, the strongest CCAI scale was emotional resilience. Emotionally resilient people are more likely to have a positive attitude, are typically more self-confident, and are more able to deal with ambiguity. They are more excited about new experiences and less concerned about making mistakes. These characteristics are often associated with a spirit of adventure and a tendency to experiment or take risks (Kelley & Meyers, 1995). Curiously, the lowest scale was flexibility/openness. One must note, however, that even though this was the lowest scale score, it was still at the top range for the 50th percentile. Flexible, open people like being around and interacting with people who think differently from themselves. People who are open and flexible tend to be nonjudgmental and tolerant of people who are different from them (Kelley & Meyers, 1995).
When these study faculties were compared with CCAI norm scores for age (50+) and travel outside one’s home country (less than one month and from 1-12 months), the faculties’ scores for all four scales exceeded the norm scale scores.

A major factor that may have affected the study faculties and affected their scale scores was the extent to which they travel frequently outside their countries. As stated earlier, 70% (n=23) of the faculties traveled frequently (3-4 times per year) outside the countries where they live. This international travel often affects one’s world view and, thus, one’s ability to more effectively adapt in culturally different circumstances.

International travel or overseas experience allows others to experience and explore other cultures and may also influence career development (Inkson & Myers, 2003). It also appeared that the effects of this international travel surfaced in the classes these faculties teach and their interactions with students. Strategies used to help students learn how to adapt to cultures different from their own included group work, case studies, directed discussion, and class assignments.

A specific recommendation would be to use the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory or a similar instrument with undergraduate students as way of determining a benchmark regarding their cultural adaptability. A second recommendation would be to determine those business teacher education programs with a heavy focus on international business to establish strategies used in educating students about cultural differences.
References


