



# Cultural intelligence (CQ) in action: The effects of personality and international assignment on the development of CQ<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

We examined (1) the effect of international assignments on the development of cultural intelligence – CQ over time (2) whether crucial personality traits (i.e., extraversion and openness to experience) had a moderating role in the relationship between international assignments and CQ in a longitudinal design. A total sample of 145 military personnel participated in the study at the beginning of the deployment (Time 1) and 121 persons participated at the end of the deployment (Time 2) in a multinational and multicultural military organization. Repeated measures multivariate analysis of covariance showed that the 6-month international assignment did have a statistically significant effect on the development of all four facets of CQ over time. Moreover, moderated multiple regression analyses demonstrated that individuals who are high on extraversion improved their metacognitive CQ and behavioral CQ more than did individuals who are low on extraversion. Similarly, individuals who are high on openness to experience improved their motivational CQ more than did individuals who are low on openness to experience. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Although cultural intelligence (CQ) is a new construct, it has attracted considerable attention worldwide and across diverse disciplines ranging from international management to cross-cultural psychology. Prior research has demonstrated the predictive power of CQ on several beneficial individual and organizational outcomes (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2012; Van Dyne et al., 2012).

Despite much research indicating that CQ offers great promise as an antecedent to many individual and organizational outcomes, there has been limited research on antecedents of CQ. Ng et al. (2012) reported that antecedents of CQ have been studied in terms of individual differences such as personality traits and prior international experience. Previous research has accumulated important findings on the effects of international experience (e.g., Shannon & Begley, 2008; Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008; Tay, Westman, & Chia, 2008) on CQ. Of the Big Five personality traits, openness to experience was found to be positively related to all factors of CQ (e.g., Ang, Van Dyne, & Koh, 2006; Moody, 2007). However none of these studies, to date, has examined whether personality variables affect the relationship between international experience and CQ over time, despite recent calls for longitudinal research on international experience and CQ (Ng et al., 2012). Given that CQ has been argued to be an important individual capability to function and to manage effectively in cross-cultural contexts (Earley

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& Ang, 2003; Earley & Peterson, 2004), a study examining the effect of personality variables on the relationship between international experience and CQ over time would provide valuable cues for assessing readiness for further international assignments and training needs.

The present study investigates the effect of international assignments on the development of CQ over time. More specifically, we focus on certain personality traits (i.e., extraversion and openness to experience) and examine in a longitudinal design how individuals with these personality traits change their CQ following international assignment.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Cultural intelligence and international experience

Earley and Ang (2003) defined cultural intelligence (CQ) as “a person’s capability to adapt effectively to new cultural contexts” (p. 59). CQ is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct made up four components: Metacognitive (an individual’s consciousness and awareness during intercultural interactions), cognitive (general knowledge about the norms, practices and of a culture), motivational (capability to direct attention and energy toward learning about appropriate responses and functioning effectively), and behavioral CQ (flexibility in exhibiting situationally appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions during intercultural interactions) (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Ng & Earley, 2006).

CQ is based on capabilities that can be enhanced through training, experience, and education (Earley & Peterson, 2004; Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2009). According to situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), exposure to different cultural environments provides individuals with the social context and authentic activities to learn how to live and work in different cultural environments (Ng et al., 2012). According to Lave and Wenger (1991) learning is “an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (p. 31). In a situated learning approach, knowledge, skills and behaviors are learned in social and cultural contexts that reflect how knowledge is obtained and applied in everyday situations (Fox, 2000). Hence, international experience provides knowledge and social context that can affect individuals’ CQ. In thinking about international experience and the four factors of CQ, we predict that international work experience is related to all components of CQ.

International experience can influence mental (metacognitive and cognitive) components of CQ. Working and living in other cultures provide individuals with unique cultural consciousness, awareness, and knowledge. Exposure to other cultures offers individuals the opportunity to consciously examine their own cultural assumptions, and to be actively engaged in thinking and reflecting before and during interactions. Moreover, international experience can enhance the appreciation of the similarities between cultures and understanding of how cultures are different through gaining the knowledge of norms, practices, and conventions in other cultures. Individuals with international experience are more aware of the similarities and differences in cultural universals and cultural values which reflect high cognitive CQ. Prior findings have confirmed that international experience is related to mental components of CQ. For example, studies have found that international work experience predicted metacognitive CQ (Shannon & Begley, 2008; Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008) and cognitive CQ (Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008; Tay et al., 2008).

International experience should also relate to motivational CQ. International studies have shown that international work experience can impact expatriates’ success in international assignments because experienced individuals are likely to be willing to relocate in different environments (Brett & Reilly, 1988), able to exert more effort (Feldman & Bolino, 2000), work with other individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Richard, 2000), and communicate well with host nationals (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Moreover, prior research has reported that international work experience is positively related to motivational CQ (Shannon & Begley, 2008; Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008).

Finally, international experiences should relate to behavioral CQ. Individuals who live or work in other cultures gain knowledge than can further affect his or her attitudes and behaviors through mental structures (Shannon & Begley, 2008; Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008). Walsh (1995) defined mental structures as a “mental template that individuals impose on an information environment to give it form and meaning” (p. 281). These mental structures have influences on individuals’ interpreting and reacting to the information environment which may further facilitate situationally appropriate behavior in diverse cultural settings (Tarique & Takeuchi, 2008).

Previous research has accumulated important findings on the effects of international experience on CQ (Ng et al., 2012). In addition to real life experience, several specific programs (e.g., Fischer, 2011; MacNab, 2012; MacNab & Worthley, 2012) intended to provide individuals with cross-cultural experience have been found useful in the development of CQ. Thus, we predict the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1.** Individuals’ levels of metacognitive CQ (H1a), cognitive CQ (H1b), motivational CQ (H1c), and behavioral CQ (H1d) will be higher after the international assignment than at the beginning of the international assignment.

### 2.2. Moderating role of personality

Earley and Ang (2003) conceptualized CQ as a state-like individual difference that can be influenced by trait-like individual differences such as personality traits. To date, several researches (Ang et al., 2006; Moody, 2007; Oolders, Chernyshenko, & Stark, 2008; Ward & Fischer, 2008) indicated that significant relationships exist between specific personality traits and CQ. In general, researchers have concluded that openness to experience (Ang et al., 2006; Caligiuri, 2000; Moody, 2007; Oolders

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