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## Culture's Influence on Emotional Intelligence: An Empirical Study of Nine Countries

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## ABSTRACT

While a large body of research has examined the outcomes of emotional intelligence, relatively little is known about the antecedents of emotional intelligence. Prior research suggests that emotional intelligence has different effects on management outcomes in different cultural contexts, but lacks a systematic analysis of the effect of cultural values in the development of emotional intelligence. Utilizing a sample of 2067 individuals in nine countries, the present study explores the influence of cultural dimensions on emotional intelligence. Our results show that especially collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation have a positive influence on the different dimensions of emotional intelligence. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed and future research directions are provided.

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## 1. Introduction

Culture determines the values and norms of individuals. What is considered important in a society is therefore determined to a great degree by culture. Consequently, the societal norms also determine the meaning of emotions and the controlling of them (Eid and Diener, 2001). Especially which kinds of emotions are openly shown and how emotions are communicated differ grossly across cultures (Matsumoto, 1989). Emotionally intelligent individuals are able to code and decode own and others' emotions as they are displayed in the society. Emotional intelligence (hereafter EI) can be viewed as a crucial aspect for successful management. It is a key aspect affecting the performance of leaders; EI of leaders has a positive effect on the job satisfaction of their followers (Wong and Law, 2002), as well as a wide range of other job-related behaviors and outcomes (Abraham, 2005; Cherniss and Goleman, 2001; Goleman, 1998).

Along with globalization, firms employ labor from various cultural settings. The monitoring of own and others' emotions becomes a difficult task, which, however, might be critical for the success of an organization. The human resource management of an internationally active organization has to face the challenge of finding a management team who is emotionally intelligent in various cultural settings. But so far, very little is known about the cross-cultural differences in EI. That is, how does the national culture influence the EI of individuals? While EI is clearly a topic of international interest (Schulze and Roberts, 2005), this lack of knowledge on cultural impacts on EI has been identified in the literature (e.g., Antonakis, 2003, 2004; Prati et al., 2003; Salovey, 2005) as an area which needs to be addressed.

Our study aims at providing a deeper understanding of how national cultural values influence EI. Even though previous literature has shown that EI has an important influence on work outcomes in different cultural contexts (e.g., Bell, 2007; Harms and Credé, 2010; Joseph and Newman, 2010; O'Boyle et al., 2011; Schlaerth et al., 2013; Van Rooy and Viswesvaran, 2004; Walter

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et al., 2011), the effect of cultural values on EI has not been examined across national cultures. Nevertheless, the topic is of crucial importance as more and more organizations have individuals who interact with global partners, work in multicultural teams, or communicate with international stakeholders of the organization.

Understanding what determines EI is of interest to the human resource management of the organization in order to increase the job satisfaction of employees and also to positively influence their performance. Therefore, the purpose of our study is to contribute to this gap in the literature by comparing university students across cultures so as to determine how cultural dimension influences the EI of individuals. The results of our study contribute to the existing management literature by examining culture's influence on the determinants of EI. Therefore, our study helps the human resource management of organizations to understand how to assess candidates for management positions, especially when it comes to the pivotal skill to leadership success – emotional intelligence. The influence of national culture on emotional intelligence of employees provides a guide for assessing the specific needs of training in different cultural settings. Employees in countries that score low in the cultural dimensions positively related to emotional intelligence may have a larger need for emotional intelligence training. As the cultural dimensions have different influence on the various facets of emotional intelligence, training programs can be designed more specifically to fit the need of the employees in certain countries.

## 2. Theoretical background

Contemporary theories on intelligence, such as the one by Gardner (1993), view intelligence as a multifaceted concept. Intelligence is not measured only as a cognitive intelligence but by considering various dimensions. For example, Gardner (1993) discusses seven types of intelligence: Logical–mathematical intelligence, linguistic intelligence, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily–kinesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence. It has been suggested that culture determines the emphasis placed on the various types of intelligence in the society (e.g., Furnham, 2001).

Emotional intelligence, “the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions” (Salovey and Mayer, 1990: 189), is a type of intelligence which corresponds to Gardner's (1993) interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences (Schutte et al., 1998). According to Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Mayer and Salovey (1997) EI is composed of four dimensions: 1) Appraisal and expression of emotion in the self – self emotional appraisal, 2) appraisal and recognition of emotion in others – others' emotional appraisal, 3) regulation of emotion in the self – regulation of emotion, and 4) use of emotion to facilitate performance – use of emotion.

Wong and Law (2002) recognize the need for a theory, which connects the concept of EI to organizational outcomes. Following Gross' model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998a,b), they model the influence of EI on work outcomes and test the model empirically. Wong and Law's (2002) model proposes that emotionally intelligent employees are able to revise their perceptions about their work environment. The perceptions affect the emotions of the individuals, which can be regulated by the people that the employees select to interact with, by the work environment itself, by focusing on specific aspects of the work environment, or by changing the evaluation of the work environment (antecedent-focused emotion regulation). Employees can also change the influence of an emotional stimulus from the work environment by intensifying, diminishing, prolonging, or curtailing certain emotions (response-focused emotion regulation). Employees with high EI can use such regulation of emotions to create positive emotions and promote emotional and intellectual growth; they can make use of emotion regulation. Employees with low EI have slower emotional growth due to the fact that they are not able to regulate their emotions effectively. There has been significant research which supports the importance of EI in the workplace with impacts of EI seen in the areas of personal selection, leadership, workgroup cohesion, performance feedback, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship, and job control (Abraham, 2005). Cherniss' (2001) research suggests that EI has a broad influence on organizational effectiveness across a wide range of organizational activities including teamwork, innovation, productivity, sales, quality service, and customer loyalty. This work along with that of others supports the view of Wong and Law (2002) that for virtually any organization it is of crucial importance to hire employees with high levels of EI to realize the many benefits of an emotionally intelligent workforce.

Given this suggested importance of EI, it is therefore perhaps surprising that little is known about the antecedents of EI. The existing literature on EI has not been able to identify any antecedents of EI apart from the parents' EI (Vernon et al., 2008). So far, there has been theoretical discussion in the literature as to how EI may develop, nevertheless, there is a clear need for studies examining the antecedents of EI (Barbuto and Bugenhagen, 2009). The topic is not only of interest to theory but also to the business community as more and more organizations are having a multi-cultural work force.

Ang et al. (2007) propose that a person, who is emotionally intelligent in one culture, might not be that in another one. One's norms and values determine the central importance in life, and thereby, influence the manner in which emotions are appraised, recognized, and used. Also meta-analytic evidence suggests that cultural beliefs and values impact emotions, perceptions, and cognitive schema (Taras et al., 2010). That implies that culture has an influence on EI, and therefore, can be seen as an antecedent of EI. The way emotions are displayed and dealt with in various countries has been shown to be influenced by the culture of the countries (see, e.g., Matsumoto, 1989). Previous literature has discussed the influence of three of the five dimensions of Hofstede (individualism, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation) on the display and judgment of emotions (see, e.g., Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2005; Matsumoto, 1989). So far, the influence of culture on EI has remained widely unexplored. The literature on emotions and culture has been focused only on the two facets of the model of EI, namely the perceiving and expressing emotions (see, e.g., Palmer et al., 2008). This, however, leads us to suspect that EI is a concept which is also influenced by culture. Since studies have indicated that intelligence is affected by culture (Crowne et al., 2009), nevertheless, only few efforts (e.g., Crowne et al., 2011) have been taken to examine the influence of culture on the formation of emotional

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