

DRIVERS FOR CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF COLOMBIAN EXPATRIATES IN THE U.S.

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Abstract- This research aims to analyze the relationship between personality traits and cultural competence with the adaptation of Colombian professionals who have made the decision to migrate to the United States without the sponsorship of a particular organization and in search of personal and professional growth. Cultural Adaptation is understood as the degree of psychological comfort that an individual achieves with a new environment and leads him/her to function effectively in his/her personal and professional work. The research is carried out with data from 46 Colombian participants mostly residing in the Washington DC metropolitan area and a control group of 21 professionals from India. The results showed that all dimensions of Cultural Competence (strategy, knowledge, motivation and behavior) are related to the different levels of cultural adaptation and, on the other hand, personality traits such as extroversion and emotional stability had positive effects on the levels of cultural adaptation for Colombian professionals. This means that the higher cultural competent, the more extroverted and emotionally stable the Colombian professional is, the greater the degree of cultural adaptation.

Keywords- Expatriates, cultural adaptation, Colombian professionals, United States
Conference Topic: Business Management, Human Resources

I. INTRODUCTION

Low wages, unemployment, underemployment and increasing outsourcing have favored migration of the labor force of Latin American professionals (CEPAL, 2015). This study analyzes the phenomenon of cultural adaptation experienced by Colombian professionals who have made the decision to migrate to the United States in search of personal and professional growth.

In the decade of the 90s emigration of Colombians abroad was increased by the economic instability of the country. In the first two decades of the new century, when the economy recovered, emigration of Colombians continued but at lower levels. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), estimated that 4,700,000 Colombians resided abroad; and of these, 34.6% lived in the United States (IOM, 2013). Colombia is the South American country that has the most migrants in the United States. According to the analysis conducted by the Pew Research Center (2013), for the year 2013 there were a total of 1,073,000 Colombians living in the United States.

Traditionally, the term expatriate has referred to those professionals of multinational companies who have been assigned to offices outside their country of origin for a prolonged period of time. Organizations make these international assignments for reasons such as: filling a skills gap in another country, building experience for a future position, fostering knowledge transfer and organizational culture between the country of origin and its offices abroad (Trends BGR, 2015). However, the literature on international human resources management has expanded the definition of the term expatriate to include not only those individuals who are relocated by a multinational organization, but also those who perform their

international work experience without organizational sponsorship and who make the decision to emigrate independently, for different reasons and circumstances (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry, 1997; Richardson, 2006; Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Independent Expatriates who start their own journey to find work, professional development and new horizons in a foreign country, have a different perception of the international experience than the sponsored expatriates who have moved by the need of multinational companies. In general, the independent expatriates have higher levels of labor uncertainty and no formal support from an organization for the adaptation process. The present study focuses on the analysis of independent expatriates.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The numerous changes faced in the host country lead the expatriates to find effective ways to adapt with differences in lifestyles, attitudes, values and behaviors, both in the communities and in the workplace. For the purpose of this research, the adaptation of expatriates is defined as the degree of psychological comfort that the individual achieves with the new environment and leads him/her to function effectively in his/her personal and professional tasks (Black, 1988; Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991).

Black and Stephens (1989) identified three dimensions of the adaptation process that are related to: a) the general environment, b) interaction with the locals of the host country (social) and c) performance at work (professional). Adaptation to the general environment is related to the psychological well-being and the satisfaction in various aspects of life in the new country such as food, health and housing,

amongst others. Adaptation to interactions refers to social skills and is the ability to "fit" into the new cultural environment inside and outside of work. Adaptation to work refers to the way in which an individual develops his/her tasks and his/her positive attitude towards work in the new cultural environment. It is the degree of comfort with performance standards, work expectations and corporate values.

Numerous investigations have been carried out to study what the determining factors are in the success or failure of people when adapting to international settings. Several authors have found relevant the personality type of the individual in the achievement of a good cultural adaptation (Ataca & Berry, 2002; Caligiuri, 2000, Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black and Ferzandi, 2006). Others authors have found evidence of the importance of individuals' cultural competence to better adjust to a host country (Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, Ng, Templer, Tay and Chandrasekar, 2007; Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, and Luk, 2005; Templer, Tay and Chandrasekar, 2006).

III. METHODOLOGY

To assess the influence of personality traits and the level of cultural intelligence in the adaptation of Colombian professionals in the United States, a survey was conducted to sample 46 Colombians who had obtained their undergraduate degree in Colombia and were working for at least one year in the United States.

Cultural Competence was measured with the Cultural Intelligence Scale (Ang et al., 2007), a 20-item instrument that includes four dimensions. The cognitive dimension refers to the knowledge of cultural values, economic and legal systems, religious beliefs and language. The motivational dimension represents the intrinsic interest and confidence in the ability to deal with and learn from situations that involve cultural differences. The strategic dimension refers to the individual's ability to think strategically about the culture and its differences; it represents the

ability to acquire cultural knowledge and understand norms. The behavioral dimension refers to an individual's ability to change his/her behavior and adapt to other cultures; they can be non-verbal (e.g., body language, physical gestures and facial expressions) as well as verbal (e.g., accent, tone and expressiveness).

To measure cultural adaptation, the Expatriate Adaptation Scale (Black & Stephen, 1989) was used. It is composed of 14 items and evaluates three dimensions of the expatriate adjustment. Respondents were asked to answer how well adapted they felt to various aspects of life abroad. Seven items evaluated the general adaptation (for example housing, food and shopping); four items evaluated the adaptation of their interactions (for example, socializing with people) and three items evaluated the adaptation to work (for example, work responsibilities, performance, standards / expectations).

Personality factors were measured with The Big Five model (Mc Crae and Costa, 1987), which assesses five broad dimensions of personality: 1. Extraversion (level of sociability and enthusiasm); 2. Agreeableness (level of friendship and kindness); 3. Conscientiousness (level of organization and work ethics); 4. Emotional stability (level of calm and tranquility) and 5. Openness to experience (level of creativity and curiosity). These are not "types" of personalities, but personality dimensions. Accordingly, someone's personality is the combination of each of the five personality characteristics.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for personality factors, cultural competence and adaptation. Interestingly, the dimension of motivation of the scale of cultural intelligence is the one which results are in higher average, while the cognitive dimension is the one with lower average. Regarding the levels of cultural adaptation, the highest average level of adaptation is recorded in the labor dimension.

Table 1. Predictors of cultural adaptation

		Mean	Std. Deviation
Age		40,27	8,91
Years living in the U.S.		10,01	7,15
Personality Factors	Extroversion	3,44	0,52
	Agreeableness	3,90	0,36
	Conscientiousness	3,79	0,37
	Emotional Stability	3,58	0,64
	Openness to experience	3,98	0,43

Dimens. of Cultural Competence	Strategy	5,82	0,78
	Knowledge	5,03	0,96
	Motivation	6,00	0,64
	Behavior	5,23	0,91
	Cultural Competence	5,52	0,67
Dimens. of Adaptat.	General Adaptation	6,01	0,75
	Interaction Adaptation	6,07	1,01
	Work Adaptation	6,45	0,53
	Adaptation	6,18	0,64

Table 2 presents interesting findings from the point of view of variable correlations. Age is not correlated with adaptation whereas the number of years living in the U.S. is associated with cultural adaptation. Of the five personality factors, extroversion is the only one that is correlated to the global measure and all of the three dimensions of adaptation, followed by emotional stability (related to two out of three dimensions) and conscientiousness (one out of three dimensions). The personality factor agreeableness has no statistically significant correlations with cultural adaptation.

In relation to cultural competence, all the dimensions of cultural intelligence (strategy, knowledge,

motivation and behavior) are related to the different levels of cultural adaptation, being the strategy dimension the one with the strongest correlation. A cultural competent professional that is high in the strategic dimension, is able to plan cultural encounters, review presumptions during meetings and readjust the mental map if the experience differs from expectations.

These findings suggest that the cultural adaptation process of Colombian professionals who migrated to the U.S. as independent expatriates, has been influenced by their level of cultural competence and their personality factors.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Adaptation

Dimensions of Cultural Adaptation

	General Adaptation	Interaction Adaptation	Work Adaptation	Global Adaptation
Age	0,29	0,01	0,28	0,19
Year in the U.S.	.376 *	0,24	.302 *	.360 *
Extroversion	.351 *	.335 *	.325 *	.403 **
Agreeableness	-0,11	0,08	0,04	0,01
Conscientiousness	0,22	0,22	.367 *	.300 *
Emotional Stability	0,25	.393 **	.394 **	.412 **
Openess to Experience	0,24	0,22	0,23	0,27
Strategy	.578 **	.587 **	.487 **	.669 **
Knowledge	0,28	.355 *	0,13	.332 *
Motivation	.316 *	.427 **	0,11	.378 **
Behavior	.436 **	0,27	.329 *	.401 **
Cultural Competence	.495 **	.493 **	.326 *	.543 **

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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