



# International career aspirations: Can multicultural personality traits predict the interest in working abroad?

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**Abstract:** The business world is faced with the need to create new strategies in order to identify a global mentality and an international motivation in professionals who hardly work anymore in monocultural environments. This study investigates the characteristics of international career aspirations to identify multicultural personality traits that may predict interest in working abroad. Empirical research has been carried out with 243 individuals using the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), a multidimensional instrument whose objective is to measure multicultural efficacy. The results of the study suggest that open-mindedness and flexibility are the main predictors of interest in working abroad. These findings have important implications for organizations that require suitable candidates to work effectively in international and multicultural environments.

**Keywords:** Multicultural personality; global mobility; intercultural management; expatriates; human resources management.

## 1. Introduction

Globalization affects a high percentage of organizations and businesses in the world. As a result, not only senior or middle managers but also many other workers have to face interaction with people from other cultures in international settings. In addition, the accelerated process of companies' internationalization has brought, among many other things, the need to develop human potential with new talents, cultivating and developing skills that allow individuals to function successfully in the global world. This explains the growing interest regarding the need to study in depth the skills necessary to optimize professional performance in international or multicultural environments. In the same way, there is necessary to identify the motivation to work in such environments since a genuine interest in intercultural contexts can facilitate success on international missions.

There is a large number of publications in the literature that refer to interpersonal skills and the characteristics necessary to work successfully in an intercultural field. Despite the ambiguity surrounding the concepts and their definitions, different authors have tried to identify and distinguish what these competencies are and what is the best way to identify and train them (Deardorff, 2006; Chiu, Chi-Yue, Lonner, Matsumoto and Ward, 2013; Matsumoto and Huang, 2013; Leung, Ang, and Tan, 2014).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, we find ground-breaking research that addresses the importance of a correct selection of personnel, taking into account certain interpersonal skills to perform multicultural activities or work successfully in international environments in order to avoid wasting time and money (Kealey and Ruben, 1983; Hawes and Kealey, 1981; Hammer, Gudykunst, and Wiseman, 1978). Arthur and Bennett (1995) present their hypothesis that psycho-social factors are more important in terms of work performance in an international environment than actual technical or related specific knowledge.

Multiple intercultural competence models can be divided into three large groups (Leung et al., 2014). One of the main ones related to intercultural characteristics is represented by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) using their model of multicultural personality. According to multiple investigations, the relationship between personality and performance in multicultural environments assumes that personality traits can predict success in international positions (Van der Zee, Zaai and Piekstra, 2003).

In this line of research, multicultural personality traits have been studied in relation to job satisfaction in international environments (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012), multilingualism

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(Dewaele and Van Oudenhoven, 2009; Dewaele and Stavans, 2014), openness to diversity (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright and McMillen, 2009), intercultural training (Kažnčić, 2011), emotional reactions in intercultural situations (Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven and De Grijns, 2004; Van der Zee and Van der Gang, 2007), multicultural experience (Margavio, Hignite, Moses and Margavio, 2005), students' adaptation to a new host country (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac and Elsayed, 2012) or professionals' (and their partners') adaptation to a new culture (Van Erp, Van der Zee, Giebels and Van Duijn, 2014).

Many of the investigations coincide in describing that certain personality traits (cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility) predict greater success in multicultural environments. However, not all investigations agree on which characteristics are the most important since the objective of the study (job satisfaction, personal adaptation, adaptation to work, interaction with diverse people, psychological well-being, etc.) differs from one investigation to another. Peltokorpi and Froese's study (2012) indicates that there is a positive relationship between expatriates' emotional stability and cultural empathy and their general adaptation to a new culture. A positive relation has also been found between social initiative and adaptation to the working environment and between open-mindedness and interaction with people from a new culture. Ali, Van der Zee and Sanders (2003) show that the variables of open-mindedness and emotional stability are associated with the adaptability of expatriate couples. For Van Oudenhoven, Mol and Van der Zee (2003), emotional stability appeared as the greatest predictor of adaptation and social initiative of psychological well-being. Cultural empathy along with flexibility predicted the amount of social support received in the host country. Open-mindedness did not show the expected results regarding high predictability due to, according to Van Oudenhoven et al. (2003), its lack of relationship with life satisfaction.

In any case, the studies that relate multicultural personality traits with international career aspirations or motivation to work abroad are practically non-existent. Nonetheless, Leung et al. (2014) explain that intercultural motivation is a fundamental element in the development of intercultural competence since it reveals the amount of energy and interest that an individual invests into understanding, learning and experiencing different cultures. Millon (2004) analyzes the midpoint between getting involved and exploring intercultural environments or, on the contrary, avoiding them for being dangerous or threatening, thus determining people's interest in confronting, for example, an intercultural experience. Ramirez (1999) and Ponterotto (2010) also argue that individuals with high levels of multicultural personality broaden their vision of the world by interacting with culturally diverse people and affirm that these people have a strong desire to travel and live in different communities and countries.

A study that analyzes international inspiration is the one by Margavio et al. (2005). The authors conclude that those who claim to be interested in international work have significantly higher levels of open-mindedness and flexibility. Likewise, Van der Zee and Brinkmann (2004) also investigate the international orientation of a group of professionals showing open-mindedness as a predictor of this kind of orientation.

The purpose of this research is, therefore, to answer the following questions: Is there a relationship between high levels of multicultural personality and international career aspirations? Are there any personality traits that predict the interest in working abroad? Does gender or culture explain the interest to work in an international, culturally different environment?

The goal is to determine which personality traits, and in what proportion, explain international aspiration or, in other words, the interest in working abroad. Moreover, it aims to reduce the existing gap found in the literature with respect to how companies identify and assess professionals with international aspirations that can work effectively in international and multicultural environments.

To this end, this paper has been organized as follows. First, the theoretical framework is presented, and the hypotheses formulated. Then, the methodology and results are presented. Finally, conclusions are drawn indicating theoretical contributions and practical implications.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Professional skills to work successfully in a globalized world**

For Scullion and Collings (2011), effective management of human resources becomes a determinant of success or failure in international business. Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2013) suggest that research should be applied to the development and training of intercultural skills of people or groups that must deal with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds on a daily basis. An individual is effective in an international environment when, in addition to the usual professional skills (teamwork, problem-solving, conflict resolution, negotiation skills etc.), he or she has specific abilities to live and work with culturally different people in intercultural or multicultural environments. Horverak, Sandal, Bye and Pallesen (2013) and Grosse (2011) understand that this improves their professional value and contributes to the development of their work organisation. Therefore, the need to own or acquire a certain set of professional skills to work successfully in the globalized world is a fact that today would be difficult to question and that probably few researchers and professionals would argue against. Deardorff (2006), Chiu et al. (2013), Matsumoto and Huang (2013) and Leung et al. (2014) recognize that, despite the obviousness of this reality, it is not easy to address this issue due to the ambiguity surrounding the definition, identification and evaluation of this type of skills. Likewise, Burke, Watkins, and Guzman (2009) affirm that a professional's

performance in a foreign culture, where people from different countries intervene, has not been explored enough in the field of organizational behaviour.

Some authors, such as Bückner and Poutsma (2010), relate professional success to having an adventurous spirit; wanting to see and experience new things; having an open mind, and knowing how to manage uncertain or tense situations.

## **2.2. Intercultural competencies as key ability in multicultural environments**

Given this new global scenario, intercultural competence seems to represent a key ability to function successfully in the global world—an ability that encompasses many of the other competencies mentioned above up to a certain point. In this way, we observe that many scientific publications also refer to intercultural competence as necessary to work successfully in an international environment. Following Wiseman's (2002) definition, intercultural competence is based on: "the knowledge, motivation and abilities to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (p.208). For Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence is "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's own knowledge, skills and intercultural attitudes" (p.248).

However, Leung et al. (2014) show the existence of more than 30 models of intercultural competence and more than 300 constructs present in the literature that they divide into three large groups. The first group corresponds to the models related to a vision of an intercultural world, that is, a positive attitude towards intercultural contacts and interactions. This group is represented by Bennett (1986, 1993) and his Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, in which he developed the Inventory of Intercultural Development (IDI) (Hammer and Bennett, 1998). A second group, represented by Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, Ng, Templer, Tay, and Chandrasekar (2007), developed the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQ) based on the Cultural Intelligence Model of Earley and Ang (2003). Finally, a third group related to intercultural characteristics is represented by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) through their multicultural personality model based on relatively stable, innate and acquired personality traits, which facilitate or impede the development of interpersonal and intercultural competencies.

## **2.3. The Multicultural Personality Model**

Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000), with their model of multicultural personality, relate personality traits with sociocultural adaptation, international aspirations, job satisfaction in international environments, multicultural activity and success in multicultural teams. In subsequent studies, Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2013) demonstrate the role of personality as a predictor of intercultural competence and point out that a deep understanding between both personality and competence is very important since it provides opportunities for evaluation, training and development.

In line with previous research, Caligiuri (2000) also argues that personality characteristics are more important than skills and knowledge because they allow the individual to deal better with the stress of living in a new culture and understanding the new environment. Personality determines if an individual perceives a certain event as a challenge or a threat but also shows if that person is able to react to certain situations with constructive behaviour. In general, individuals who score high on multicultural personality scales perceive intercultural situations as safer (that is, less threatening than those who score low), and they feel more comfortable in them (Van der Zee et al., 2004). In addition, personality characteristics, apart from certain external circumstances, can provide a competitive advantage over other people (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2013).

Also, Peltokorpi and Froese (2012) indicate that involving an individual with the appropriate personality characteristics in an international mission reduces the problems associated with intercultural adaptation, such as low performance and conflicts with local employees, suppliers and clients or the early return to their country of origin. Caligiuri (2000) suggests that those who do not have certain personality characteristics may fail in these missions. Therefore, adequate identification prior to the mission can help select the right people for this type of work. Moreover, Leung et al. (2014) show in their framework of intercultural effectiveness how there is an attitude and vision of the world open to diversity and intercultural coexistence behind intercultural skills or competencies.

However, as the literature points out, in most cases, working among cultures is not usually voluntary. Fanjul (2010) explains how many people consider the possibility of expatriating for some time as a necessity to progress economically and professionally. This lack of motivation to travel, get to know other countries and learn about their cultures, according to Fanjul (2010), makes intercultural adaptation more difficult.

From all this, we can deduce the advantages of trying to learn the relationship between a high degree of multicultural personality and a genuine interest in living and working in an intercultural and international environment, as well as analyzing the role of multicultural personality traits as possible predictors of interest in working abroad.

## **3. Hypotheses**

Given that previous research has shown that there is a relationship between multicultural personality and success in international positions (Van der Zee et al., 2003), this study analyzes the relationship, rarely researched, between

multicultural personality and international aspirations with the purpose of helping clarify whether multicultural personality traits predict the interest in working abroad, that is, the international career aspirations of a person. The objective is to identify the personality factors that should be taken into account when determining a candidate's motivation for a position in an international and intercultural environment. For this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** Higher levels of multicultural personality will predict greater international career aspirations.

According to Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002), the five dimensions that describe multicultural personality are cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. Cultural empathy, also called sensitivity, is the ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of members of other groups culturally different from one's own (Ali et al., 2003, page 566). It has been defined as "*the ability to project a clear interest in others, as well as to obtain and reflect a complete and accurate idea of the thoughts, feelings and/or experiences of others*" (Ruben, 1976, p.340). Individuals who achieve a high score in cultural empathy tend to easily decipher the norms of cultures unknown to them (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2013). Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1A:** *A higher level of cultural empathy will predict greater international career aspirations.*

Open-mindedness refers to an open and non-judgmental attitude towards members of other groups with different norms and values. People with greater open-mindedness when faced with different behaviours or value systems are more capable than others of not making immediate value judgments (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2013). Open-mindedness requires authentic interest and sincere respect for other individuals and their cultures. These are essential aspects of understanding the values and norms of other cultures and working with them effectively (Borca, Popescu and Baesu, 2014). That is why we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1B:** *A higher level of open-mindedness will predict greater international career aspirations.*

Social initiative reveals the ability of a person to establish and maintain contacts and, in general, to be active in a social environment and take the initiative. These people tend to be proactive when interacting with others instead of waiting for others to approach them (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2013). Several empirical studies point out the importance of this personality dimension (Hammer et al., 1978, Abe and Weisman, 1983, Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002), which is related to extroversion and which multiple authors consider fundamental for multicultural success (Ali et al., 2003). "Individuals with a high social initiative tend to be able to build social networks and lead actions in a multicultural environment" (Borca et al., 2014, page 149). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1C:** *A higher level of social initiative will predict greater international career aspirations.*

Emotional stability refers to the tendency of an individual to remain calm in stressful situations as opposed to demonstrating strong emotional reactions in the same circumstances. Intercultural situations often involve a high degree of stress, a lot of uncertainty and a sense of lack of control (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2013). It is a key dimension for professional success in international environments, according to several authors (Hammer et al., 1978, Abe and Wiseman, 1983, Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002), although it is not commonly mentioned in the literature on intercultural competence. Experts agree that an individual who is able to remain calm in a new or unknown situation that may be ambiguous or uncertain possesses a valuable professional characteristic. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1D:** *A higher level of emotional stability will predict greater international career aspirations.*

Flexibility is the ability to easily change from a known strategy that a person would use in a familiar environment to a new one that is more effective and works better in the new environment. Flexibility includes the ability to learn from experience (Spreitzer, McCall, and Mahoney, 1997; Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002) and also to learn from mistakes made, as well as the ability to change behaviours if the circumstances require it (Dewaele and Stavans, 2014). The idea is not only to not be afraid of new and unknown situations but also to see them as a challenge rather than as a threat (Kets de Vries and Mead, 1991; McCall, 1994). Consequently, we formulate the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1E:** *A higher level of flexibility will predict greater international career aspirations.*

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Sample

The data for this research comes from the answers of 243 students from a private university located in the city of Madrid (Spain), which offers official degrees in the areas of Engineering, Architecture, Social Sciences, Tourism, Health Sciences, Communication Sciences, Performing Arts, Fine Arts, Languages and Education. At present, it has approximately 6,000 students, of which approximately 1,500 are international students.

For this research, a non-probabilistic sampling of convenience was carried out. The informants of this study are Spanish and foreign students studying in Madrid between the month of July 2015 and the month of July 2016. It is a sample of informants from different areas of study who voluntarily participated in the research.

Regarding age, 58.43% of the students (142 respondents) are between 18 and 20 years old. Then 35.80% (87 students) are between 21 and 23 years old, and 5.77% (14 students) have age between 24 and 26. Of the total respondents surveyed, 107 have Spanish nationality, 97 have United States nationality, and the remaining 39 indicate that they have another or other nationalities. About 23% of the individuals said they had never had an international experience, and 51% had not received any type of intercultural training.

## 4.2. Measures

For this study, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) has been used to measure the levels of the multicultural personality of the participants. The MPQ elaborated by professors Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001) of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands has been used successfully, validated and recommended in different researches such as: Van der Zee et al. (2004); Leone, Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, Perugini, and Ercolani (2005); Van der Zee et al. (2013); Dewaele and Stavans (2014); Van Bakel, Gerritsen, and Van Oudenhoven (2014); Peltokorpi and Froese (2014); Van Erp et al. (2014); Wang, Ni, and De la Flor (2014); Halim, Bakar, and Mohamad (2014); Van Oudenhoven and Benet-Martínez (2015); Schartner (2016) among many others.

It is a multidimensional instrument whose objective is to measure the multicultural efficacy of individuals whose work has an international scope or is related to international issues (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002). The personality characteristics measured through the MPQ, based on the Big Five personality model developed by McCrae and Costa (1987), are designed to accurately predict multicultural success more than the scales of a normal personality questionnaire.

The MPQ uses five different dimensions or factors: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility. The questionnaire includes 91 items using the Likert scale with five positions each, ranging from *totally not applicable* to *completely applicable*. The questionnaire was completed by the informants in Spanish and English, depending on their native language or preference.

Some of the items in the MPQ are stated as follows:

Cultural empathy (18 items): "Tries to understand other people's behaviour", "Pays attention to the emotions of others", or "Takes other people's habits into consideration."

Open-mindedness (18 items): "Has a feeling of what is appropriate in another culture", "Finds other religions interesting", or "Is fascinated by other people's opinions".

Social initiative (17 items): "Takes initiative", "Makes contacts easily", or "Likes to speak in public".

Emotional stability (20 items): "Is self-confident", "Gets upset easily", or "Has a solution for every problem".

Flexibility (18 items): "Seeks challenges", "Works mostly according to a strict scheme", or "Enjoys unfamiliar experiences".

Regarding the validity and reliability of the MPQ, Cronbach's Alpha was used to check the reliability of its internal consistency with our data sample. All dimensions have high-reliability values, from 0.79 for flexibility and 0.87 for cultural empathy. In addition, a confirmatory factorial analysis was carried out to confirm that the MPQ factors and their factorial loads correspond, in our sample of individuals, with the factors established by the authors of the questionnaire. These results were also satisfactory.

Likewise, and regardless of the fact that the questionnaire has been widely validated, we submitted the Spanish and English versions of the MPQ to a language review to ensure that all items were understood correctly, making the necessary modifications with the approval of its authors.

In order to obtain information regarding international career aspirations, a questionnaire of closed questions focused on collecting data related to age, sex, and nationality were elaborated.

To determine the interest of the respondents to work abroad, the following was asked:

*Would you like to have a job outside of Spain? Would you like to have a job in a foreign country? (in the case of international students). A multiple-choice type of answer was given I would like it very much, I think I would like it, I would not like it at all, or if I have no other choice.*

Gender and nationality have been included in the study as control variables. The reason is that with respect to the gender variable, significant differences have been found between men and women regarding personality traits. In studies on multicultural personality (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012; Dewaele and Stavans, 2014), the influence of gender on personality has been posited.

With respect to the variable nationality, the literature has shown the existence of cultural differences measured by different cultural patterns such as uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, etc., in different societies (Hofstede et al., 2010). Moreover, Bobowik, Van Oudenhoven, Basabe, Telletxea and Páez (2011) find empirical evidence that personality traits may be influenced to some extent by cultural factors. Therefore, an individual's personality could be influenced by cultural factors, or the way that personality is expressed could have a cultural bias. Since, in our study, the surveys have been conducted with

people from different nationalities and cultures, we have considered it convenient to control the nationality of the individuals that make up the sample.

Additionally, questions referring to the international experience and previous intercultural training of participants were included.

### 4.3. Analysis

For the contrast of the hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis has been carried out in which the dependent variable is the interest in working abroad, and the independent variables are the different characteristics of the multicultural personality (cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, emotional stability and flexibility). Gender and nationality have also been included as control variables. The model that we estimate is as follows:

$$\text{International motivation} = a + b\text{Empathy} + c\text{Openness} + d\text{Initiative} + e\text{Stability} + f\text{Flexibility} + g\text{Gender} + h\text{Nationality} + \varepsilon$$

The hypothesis is that the values of b, c, d, e, f, g and h are positive. Higher values in multicultural personality traits predict a greater intention to work abroad. It is also expected that people from cultures with less uncertainty avoidance have a greater interest in working abroad. Gender has also been taken into account in case it affects international career aspirations.

## 5. Results

Regarding the interest in working abroad in relation to gender and nationality, the results show that approximately 44% of respondents have a moderate interest in working abroad, while 38% said they are very interested. Only 17% express a lack of international career aspiration, 15% of women do not show interest in working abroad, while in the case of men, it is 20%. About 40% of women and 33% of men said they have a lot of interest. With regard to nationality, 22% of Spaniards do not show any international aspiration compared to 13% of Americans and 10% in the case of other nationalities.

**Table 1:** Correlation table

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 International Career Aspirations	1							
2 Cultural Empathy	.171**	1						
3 Open-mindedness	.405**	.558**	1					
4 Social Initiative	.197**	.419**	.439**	1				
5 Emotional Stability	.131*	.152*	.260**	.363**	1			
6 Flexibility	.241**	.415**	.363**	.401**	.395**	1		
7 Gender	-.084	-.130*	-.089	.042	.166**	.017	1	
8 Nationality	.092	.007	.237**	.061	.120	-.148*	-.144*	1

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral); \*The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral).

Table 1 presents the correlations between all the variables considered in the analysis. The results show that there are correlations between personality characteristics, which, as the authors of the questionnaire (Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2002) point out, is normal because there are conceptual similarities among the five characteristics. However, the correlations between the variables do not indicate that there may be problems of multicollinearity. With regard to the five personality characteristics, it is observed that all have a positive correlation with interest to work abroad, including, to a lesser extent, emotional stability. Regarding gender and nationality, neither of them correlates with the interest to work outside the country of origin.

**Table 2:** Results of regression analysis

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients
Constant	0.112	
Cultural Empathy	-0.217	-0.135
Open-mindedness	0.588**	0.414**
Social Initiative	0.028	0.02
Emotional Stability	-0.017	-0.011
Flexibility	0.238*	0.146*
Gender	-0.101	-0.065
Nationality	0.007	0.008
R	0.434	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.188	
R <sup>2</sup> Adjusted	0.164**	
F	7.771**	

Dependent variable: interest in working abroad. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.001

Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis; we can see that the model formed by the variables *cultural empathy*, *open-mindedness*, *social initiative*, *emotional stability*, *flexibility*, *gender* and *nationality* explain 16.4% of the variance of interest in working abroad. But really, only the variables *open-mindedness* and *flexibility* predict international career aspiration. *Open-mindedness* (typified coefficient = 0.414,  $p < 0.001$ ) predicts more than *flexibility* (standardized coefficient = 0.146;  $p < 0.05$ ) interest in working abroad.

All this leads us to partially confirm the hypothesis since not all multicultural personality traits predict, as was proposed, interest in working abroad. Therefore, we can confirm sub-hypotheses 1B and 1E and reject the rest of the sub-hypotheses proposed. *Open-mindedness* corresponds to hypothesis 1B, which is related to the fascination for other cultures and flexibility with hypothesis 1E refers to the search for adventures and the fact of seeing unknown situations as a challenge rather than a threat.

## 6. Discussion

The contrast revealed that certain multicultural personality traits, specifically open-mindedness and flexibility, explain the interest of working abroad. With respect to other studies, there are similarities in terms of open-mindedness since Van de Zee and Brinkmann (2004) conclude that it has explanatory power over international aspiration. Nonetheless, in their case, they measure it through a series of questions related to aptitudes and different interests, unlike ours, where we asked about the degree of interest specifically in living in a foreign country. Moreover, Aytug, Kern, and Dilchert (2018) recently presented a Multicultural Experience Assessment Scale (MExA) while found a positive correlation between multicultural experience and openness to experience by which individuals that are open-minded, hence open to new experiences and opinions, might seek exposure to different cultures and interacting with people from other countries. This, in turn, would increase their multicultural exposure and interaction and could also help explain their international career aspirations.

Contrary to previous studies, this study also reveals that flexibility also explains this interest or aspiration. Therefore, individuals that have the ability to easily change strategies in order to work better in new environments and that are able to learn from experience would be more likely to show genuine interest in working abroad. With respect to the other three characteristics (cultural empathy, social initiative and emotional stability), it could be that the very nature of these dimensions that explain the results. Firstly, empathy towards other cultures, although it helps decipher other cultural norms, might not necessarily be linked to a greater interest in experiencing them outside of their usual environment. Emotional stability (Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2001; Mol, Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee, 2001; Ali et al., 2003) and social initiative (Leong, 2007; Van Oudenhoven et al., 2003; Yakunina et al., 2012) are considered predictors of intercultural adaptation and psychological well-being essentially. However, these factors do not necessarily have to enhance interest to work in such environments since they could simply show that once abroad, there are greater guarantees of success if they have high levels of both. On the other hand, in the regression analysis, the results point out, contrary to the initial presumption, that gender and cultural factors linked to the nationality of individuals lack explanatory power of international career aspirations. Although some personality traits, as demonstrated by the previous analysis, do have a relationship with gender or nationality, in our study, neither of them explains the interest of working abroad. This relationship can be relevant for organizations since it allows through the characteristics of multicultural personality to identify in advance the future professionals who are motivated to work abroad without taking into account gender or the culture where they come from.

On the other hand, contrary to what has been stated in other research where differences in the nationality of the participants are not taken into account, in our study, nationality interestingly is correlated to open-mindedness and flexibility. The US students show higher levels of open-mindedness, while the Spanish students show higher levels of flexibility. This indicates that the culture itself could be influencing the results of this scale. Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) explain how some authors, such as Markus and Kitayama (1991) or Yoshida, Kojo and Kaku (1982), consider that this phenomenon can occur in scale questionnaires. It is possible, therefore, that there is a cultural bias when answering certain questions. In the case of flexibility, this bias could be related to the concept of time. Students coming from monochronic or polychronic cultures (Hall, 1989), also known as sequential or synchronic (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2010), could have different perspectives on the same claim. In this way, in affirmations such as "work according to a scheme", "work according to a plan", "work according to strict norms", or "have fixed and rigid customs", the students coming from more monochronic cultures (where, unlike polychronic cultures, plans and schedules are to be followed strictly) could have a certain tendency to respond positively to these affirmations (totally or fairly identified), which would reduce, according to this scale, their level of flexibility.

Regarding open-mindedness, the differences between the US and Spanish students may be due to cultural issues as well. There are studies in which US expatriates initially presented higher levels of open-mindedness than Europeans (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012). In our study, the fact that the US students had international experience since they were abroad at the time of completing the questionnaire could also explain the correlation. However, students of other nationalities who, like the US nationals, were also living an international experience did not present significant differences from the Spaniards. Therefore, the theory of cultural bias prevails.

## 7. Conclusions

Companies and organizations are mostly immersed in a globalizing process that has been increasing for decades. The search for strategies to favour the commercial exchange that accompanies globalization undoubtedly involves the development of human resources at different levels. All these suggest that in the near future, most of the working environments will be of a multicultural nature and, whether inside or outside national borders, professionals will be involved in intercultural commercial and labour relations where new professional skills will be required. Only those who are prepared to face the challenge of understanding and respecting other cultures will be able to successfully and sustainably develop the future of their organizations.

Therefore, there is an incipient need to study in depth the professional skills necessary to optimize professional performance in international or multicultural environments. However, there is still little research-oriented in this regard. On the one hand, the theories that explain cultural differences based on solid empirical research and that identify cultural patterns in different societies are barely a few decades old. The Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede was a pioneer in this field at the beginning of the 1980s, and over time, the interest in interculturality has increased, and so has the number of specialists and researchers in different parts of the world. It is, however, remarkable that the concept of intercultural competence understood as a common professional skill is relatively new.

The empirical studies on intercultural competence so far have been applied mostly to populations of immigrants, expatriates or international students. Van Oudenhoven and Benet-Martínez (2015) suggest that the results could be different in samples with a wider range of experience and intercultural education. Our study contributes to research on multicultural personality since it has been applied to people with multicultural experience and orientation as well as to others without it.

Likewise, Leiba-O'Sullivan (1999) distinguishes between relatively stable intercultural competencies (personality traits) and dynamics (knowledge and interpersonal and intercultural skills). The author concludes that if the stable traits limit in some way the dynamics, then the organizations should make it a priority to look for individuals who have a basic level of stable competencies.

For this reason, the results presented in this study are important for organizations since they allow them to deepen their understanding of multicultural personality characteristics and relate them to international and intercultural interests or aspirations. They can then identify in advance future professionals through their personality traits who are highly motivated to work abroad.

Specifically, in this study, we have been able to, on the one hand, confirm that all personality characteristics are correlated with an interest in working abroad and, on the other hand, that this interest is mainly explained by the combination of two components: chiefly open-mindedness and, to a lesser extent, flexibility. Therefore, evaluating these personality characteristics by human resource departments can be very useful in identifying potential candidates for international missions. A person with high levels of open-mindedness and flexibility, by stating that he or she would like to work abroad, shows a genuine interest in getting to know other cultures and people from other countries. This, in turn, provides the organization with a greater guarantee of success with respect to this employee or potential candidate and their professional performance.

The results obtained coincide partially with some previous studies, in which the aim was to predict international aspirations or the interest to study abroad of a group of students, but with new contributions. Margavio et al. (2005) measured the interest in international professional environments finding only significant differences in the case of two of the characteristics, and Van der Zee and Brinkmann (2004) indicated only open-mindedness as an explanatory factor.

Furthermore, in our study, we have taken into account nationality, showing that it does not explain the interest in working abroad. Our results with respect to gender also show a lack of relationship with international career aspirations.

In summary, our study is innovative insofar as it establishes a close relationship between showing explicit interest in working abroad and high levels of multicultural personality, considering gender and nationality. This research, therefore, contributes to the field of professional skills in international environments since it allows distinguishing future employees with international aspirations from those who lack this interest or motivation. It also allows firms to partially sketch the intercultural profile of future professionals and, at the same time, provide tools to identify global talent. In the same way, the research attempts to contribute more knowledge to this new field in terms of the development of intercultural competence to support business internationalization and the development of human resources in multicultural areas.

## 8. Limitations and future research

As with any scientific study, this research presents some limitations. We must consider that using nationality to determine the culture of individuals is, in a certain way, a limitation. However, as the literature confirms, nationality is the most precise unit of analysis that we have at the time of using a self-assessment questionnaire. On the other hand, the social desirability bias, by which a person may want to present themselves with a more positive image than the one that corresponds with reality, is a limitation when using self-evaluation questionnaires and, therefore, this research is not exempt from this bias. It is possible that in a job interview, the phenomenon of

social desirability and interest in achieving the position modify the results, all the more reason to take into account the international aspirations of future professionals in advance.

Future lines of research should study, beyond personality, the role of other influences related to both formal and informal education and how this affects the development of intercultural competence and interest in working and living abroad that could eventually be reflected in the professional development of an individual. It would also be interesting to place greater emphasis on the study of open-mindedness and flexibility in relation to international success to train and develop these skills through international experiences and intercultural training.

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