# COVER PAGE AND DECLARATION

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# Multiculturalism as a factor for expatriate success through cultural adjustment


## Abstract

Multicultural employees are being recognized as a great asset in both large multinational corporations as well as smaller organizations when it comes to operating in different countries and, subsequently, different cultural contexts. Understanding how cross-cultural adjustment is affected by multiculturalism is becoming more important as more and more firms internationalize their operations. This article tries to add to the growing and diversified literature dealing with expatriate adjustment by studying the specific aspects of cultural adjustment in the Portuguese expatriate community. We conducted a survey focused on the adjustment of monocultural and multicultural Portuguese expatriates in cultural contexts both similar and distinct to their original culture, across several levels of professional experience, and including expatriates who had received cross-cultural training beforehand as well as those who received no such training. Based on our results, we can conclude that previous experience abroad seems to be more conducive to a successful adjustment than being a multicultural individual, and that receiving cross-cultural training in moderate amounts can substantially improve expatriate feelings of well-being by making them feel more prepared for the challenges than culturally distant contexts inevitably bring. A certain lack of awareness by human resource operatives of these benefits appears to be present at most of the companies that participated. These results come with the caveat that the study has a rather small

sample size, but it can hopefully spur further research into the importance of employing individuals who identify with multiple cultural identities.

## Introduction

The selection of this topic was made in part due to my background in the social sciences, and in part due to my perceived impact that multiculturalism can have in the field of Human Resources. Considering how globalized the employment market is, and the costs incurred by organizations due to expatriate failure and early returns, it seems that the recruitment and nurturing of multicultural employees can be a very important asset to multinational companies. Given that rationale behind this study, the research question that this action research paper will try to answer is: Do multicultural expatriates adjust better to new cultural contexts than monocultural employees?

In order to achieve this, a survey consisting of five questions was sent to Portuguese expatriates living and working abroad. These questions try to better understand the different sort of expatriates, by asking about their previous experiences living abroad, whether they identify as mono or multicultural individual, the perceived cultural differences between their current location and Portugal, whether they received cross-cultural training before leaving the country, and finally, how they rate their current cultural adjustment and overall well-being living in another cultural context. The questions present in the survey have been translated from Portuguese and are listed below.

Q1: How many years of experience do you have working abroad? Answers varied between 1 and 11 years of experience, and they were grouped in the following manner: 1-2 years of experience: 1; 3-4 years: 2; 5-6 years: 3; 7-8 years: 4; 9+ years: 5.

Q2: With how many cultural identities do you identify yourself with?

Q3: How different is the local culture to your cultural identities? (5-point Likert scale: 1- very similar up to 5- very different)

Q4: Did your company provide you with any cross-cultural training before departure? How long was it? (1: 0hr [no training], 2: 1 to 3hr, 3: 4 to 8 hr, 4: 9 to 12h, 5: more than 12h)

Q5: How would you rate your level of adjustment and well-being in your new cultural context? (1- very poor, 2-poor, 3-average, 4-good, 5-very good)

## Literature review

### Culture

Culture is a very difficult phenomenon to define. According to Osei-Bonsu (2016), the definitions of culture can be grouped into six broad categories: descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, genetic and structural. Descriptive definitions attempt to include all the facets influenced by culture, such as art, law, customs and knowledge, while historical definitions try to emphasize shared social heritage and inherited behavior. Normative definitions are more connected to the behavioral rules that influence the way of life of different groups of people. Psychological definitions rely on how processes such as learning and adjustment are designed by different groups. The genetic definitions are focused on cultural symbols, ideas and products, and finally, structural definitions have an emphasis on the system of interdependent patterns of response created by each cultural group. Yates & Cutler (2006, p. 81), on the other hand, attempted to develop a more comprehensive definition, since despite the differences in emphasis among the six categories mentioned above, most social researchers would agree with their definition: "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts. Before we delve into psychic distance and related concepts, we should emphasize that culture is an abstraction related to social knowledge accumulated by social groups, which is taught, shared and adapted throughout the generations (Osei-Bonsu, 2016).

### Psychic & Cultural Distance

Psychic distance is defined as "the distance between the home market and a foreign market, resulting from the perception of both cultural and business differences (Evans et al, 2008). It should

be noted that the concept itself has its detractors (Stöttinger & Schlegelmilch, 2000), who believe that the operationalization of the construct is too flawed to be of much use, due to relying on available factual indicators such as statistics on economic development, education and language data; as well as due to its "summary character" and being a "simple discriminator" (Stöttinger & Schlegelmilch, 2000, p. 171). Shenkar (2012) adds to the debate by exploring the hidden assumptions in the cultural distance construct. In this article, he says that the inconsistent results obtained from the application of this construct in the field of foreign direct investment (FDI) may be the result of its conceptual and methodological properties. The hidden assumptions mentioned above emanate from those properties, and while they're not very relevant for our study, it is worthwhile to mention them: the illusions of symmetry, of stability, of linearity, of causality, of discordance are related to the conceptual properties; and the assumptions of corporate homogeneity, of spatial homogeneity, and of equivalence are related to the methodological properties. It is generally accepted that the term was coined by Beckerman (1956), in his study of the impact of distance on international trade. Differences in language, culture, level of education, political systems and level of industrial development are some of the factors that create difficulties in the flow of information and business practices, leading to another definition of psychic distance: "the distance that is *perceived* to exist between characteristics of a firm's home country and a foreign country with which that firm is, or is contemplating, doing business or investing (Child et al, 2009, p. 201). The concept is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of cultural distance, which is one of the four dimensions of distance identified by Ghemawat in his seminal work *Distance still matters* (2001). According to him, cultural distance includes differences in language and social norms, and the other three dimensions of distance are the administrative, geographic and economic dimensions, and include factors such as political system and institutions, income levels, infrastructure and human resources. Even when making use of Ghemawat's CAGE

framework, consensus in the research community seems to be that “it would be unwarranted to reduce psychic distance to cultural distance. Indeed, cultural distance was only related to two other psychic distance dimensions” (Child et al, 2009, p. 206). In the same article, Child et al use twelve items in their study of psychic distance between United Kingdom companies operating in Brazil, namely, geography, culture, language, level of education, level of technical development, level of economic development, logistics infrastructure, political system, legal system, regulations, business practices and business ethics.it is noteworthy that the perception of psychic distance is often times more pronounced than the actual impact of the differences in business practices (Child et al, 2009).

## Expatriation

Globalization has led to a pronounced increase in the number of international ventures. This increase, in turn, has led to a doubling of the number of expatriates on international assignments between 2005 and 2008 (Zhang, 2012). This sort of assignment requires from the expatriates a deviation from the accustomed behavior reflected in their native culture in order to adjust to a new cultural context (Reiche et al, 2023). The “important cultural differences create the need for expatriates who are culturally intelligent” (Zhang, 2012, p. 177), and considering the financial losses to multinational companies stemming from premature return of expatriates on foreign work assignments, it is no wonder that expatriate failure studies have become more abundant in the last couple of decades (Harzing & Christensen, 2004).

## Multiculturalism

Individuals with different cultural identities tend to have high social capital and the intercultural skills needed to excel as expatriates (Silbiger et al, 2021). This phenomenon, multiculturalism, has critical implications for multinational corporations, and the performance of the expatriates working for them (Lucke et al, 2014). In order to identify with more than one culture, individuals need to internalize different cultural schemas. According to Fitzsimmons et al (2016, p. 65), "cultural schemas are organized knowledge structures, including cultural norms, values and beliefs, that help people interpret and select information associated with a culture". These schemas, in turn, represent the availability of multicultural knowledge for any given individual, and form a multicultural structure in which the interconnectedness and the relative strength between different cultural schemas in an individual can be represented (Lucke et al, 2014). Globalization has increased intercultural contact, leading to an increase in individuals that are asked to go through the process of acculturation, and this process is different depending on whether the individual needs to acquire necessary components of the language and customs in the case of immigration-based acculturation, or whether the individual remains in their culture of origin while developing a multicultural identity from intercultural contact in the case of globalization-based acculturation (Chen et al, 2013).

## Cross-cultural training

Cross-cultural training is one of the tools available to multinational corporations in order to better prepare its global workforce, and limit the financial losses incurred when foreign assignments are cut short or when expatriates perform at a lower level than expected due to acculturation problems in the new cultural context. When the estimated direct costs for these

failures reached $2 billion a year in 1985, it is no wonder that cross-cultural training "has long been advocated as a means of facilitating effective cross-cultural interactions (Black & Mendenhall, 1990, p. 114). In the same article, Black & Mendenhall state that cross-cultural training can provide the skills needed for successful intercultural interactions and fostering of relationships with individuals outside one's in-group; skills related to the maintenance of mental health, psychological well-being, self-confidence and stress reduction; as well as cognitive skills that promote a correct perception of the host culture and social systems. These skills, in turn, "allows individuals to more rapidly adjust to the new culture and, therefore, to be more effective in their new roles" (Black & Mendenhall, 1990, p. 118), since this adjustment involves the development of familiarity and comfort with entirely new values, customs and assumptions derived from a different cultural context. According to Selmer (1999), the process of adjustment has four phases: the tourist phase, usually marked by a euphoric response to the new environment; the culture shock phase, where stress is incurred due to over-stimulation; the conformist phase, where the progressive recovery from the culture shock happens; and finally, the assimilation phase, which completes the adjustment process. Selmer states that culture shock is now seen by most researchers as a "normal process of adjustment to cultural stress, involving such symptoms as anxiety, helplessness, irritability, and a longing for a more predictable and gratifying environment" (p. 518). Nonetheless, the wide application of non-systematic training methods has led some researchers to debate about the actual benefits derived from cross-cultural training (Morris & Robie, 2001).

## Methodology / Research Design

The population selected for this survey consists of Portuguese expatriates working abroad on the behalf of Portuguese companies. Non-probability sampling was used in order to achieve a sufficient number of participants, who, on a voluntary basis were kind enough to spend some of their time responding to our survey. The total number of participants in the survey came to 27, from a total of 191 survey requests. This comes to a response rate of 14%, and constitutes a large enough sample size to allow for the study of our hypotheses. The response rate is in line with some of the papers cited (Evans et al., 2008) but the total number is much lower than in those studies (Selmer, 1999). Listed below are a number of steps that were taken in order to achieve the results explained further on, in as much detail as possible.

Methodology:

1. I have canvassed data from the Portuguese stock exchange website (Euronext Lisbon[1]) and from AICEP's (Portuguese Trade & Investment Agency[2]), as well as several business & financial news websites[3] in order to have a list of Portuguese companies operating abroad.

2. I have collected email addresses to all the companies I could find that information on, mainly through the organization's website (178 email addresses).

3. I prepared a survey with only five questions and no open-ended ones in order to improve the response rate and sent it to the addresses collected in the previous point, asking for the forwarding

[1] https://live.euronext.com/en/markets/lisbon; last accessed on 26/03/2025.
[2] https://www.portugalglobal.pt/en/about-aicep/; last accessed on 26/03/2025.
[3] https://listagem.pt/melhores; https://www.jornaldenegocios.pt/cotacoes/indice/EURONEXT-100; https://pt.investing.com/equities/portugal; last accessed on 26/03/2025.

of said survey to employees working abroad, or for the email addresses to said employees. Consent to publish the results of the survey was obtained for each respondent.

4. I took the time to thank the organizations I reached to, and to the respondents in advance.

5. I have collected all the scholarly articles I could that seemed relevant to my study according to their titles and my preliminary research on my topic of choice. Following the reading of each article, the articles cited that seemed relevant were also collected, whenever they were available.

6. A summary of each article's main argument, methodology, results and actual relevance to my own study was written, and saved for use at a later time.

7. When I felt my grasp of the subject matter was sufficient, I prepared my literature review, making use of the summaries from the previous point.

8. I have done my references list according to APA style for all the articles cited or paraphrased throughout this action research paper.

9. Two weeks after the sending of the survey I resent it to all companies that didn't respond as well as any other additional company I managed to discover since the sending of the survey, which brought the total amount of sent surveys to 191.

10. After giving some more time to ensure all participants were included in the results gathered, I thanked every respondent who took the time to complete my survey in a follow-up email.

11. Since I received more than 20 responses, I proceeded to test my hypotheses with the data gathered in the surveys.

12. The conclusions drawn from the data analysis were collected, and after due consideration, they were shared in the discussion part of this research paper.

13. From all the readings collected and from studying the data gathered, further avenues of research were identified, as well as possible improvements to similar studies.

## Research Design

Three hypotheses were created after receiving the responses to the survey. H1 posits that multiculturalism will be positively related to cultural adjustment, H2 that previous expatriate experience will be positively related to cultural adjustment, and H3 that cross-cultural training will be positively related to cultural adjustment. The independent variables will be the number of years previously spent as an expatriate, as well as the number of cultures the individual identifies himself with (which ranges from one in the case of monocultural individuals, to 2 and 3 for the multicultural participants). The dependent variable will be the perceived cultural adjustment and overall well-being, measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). The average value of the answers to question five form the basis of our study, and several subsamples were chosen in order to achieve our conclusions.

## Discussion

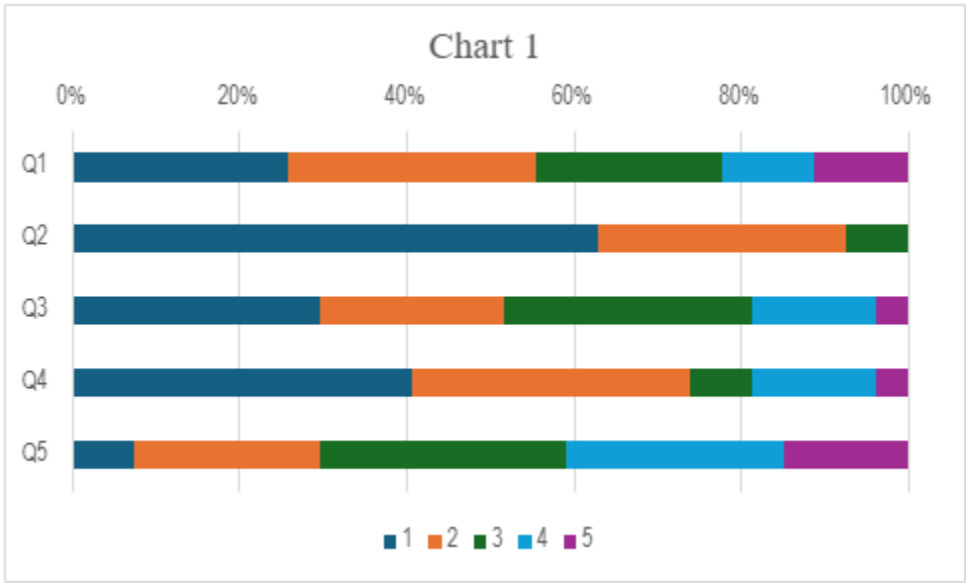
The main objective of this paper was to offer a discussion on the importance of using individuals with multicultural traits on international assignments, where those traits can help with the overall adjustment to a new cultural context. I will now proceed to do a more detailed analysis of the data collected through the survey in order to test the hypotheses posited in the research design part of this action research paper. Below is Table 1, where the answers to the survey have been grouped together:

Table 1 Responses to the survey

| Participant Number | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 | Q5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 001 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| 002 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| 003 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| 004 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| 005 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 5 |
| 006 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| 007 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| 008 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| 009 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 010 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 011 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 012 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| 013 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 014 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| 015 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 016 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 2 |
| 017 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| 018 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| 019 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| 020 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| 021 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| 022 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| 023 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 024 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| 025 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| 026 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| 027 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| **Average** | **2.5** | **1.4** | **2.4** | **2.1** | **3.2** |
| **Median** | **2** | **1** | **2** | **2** | **3** |
| **Mode** | **2** | **1** | **1 & 3** | **1** | **3** |

As we can see from the table, the average experience of the participants as an expatriate is between 3 and 6 years, and the overall rate of adjustment is slightly above 3 (average on our Likert scale). Over 60% of the respondents identify as monocultural (see chart 1 below for cumulative percentages for the five questions in our survey), and only around 7% identify with three different cultural identities, while the remaining respondents are bicultural.



The average score for Q3 seems to demonstrate that Portuguese expatriates tend to work in cultures similar to their own, probably in neighboring European countries. As for Q4, the fact that the mode is 1 indicates that Portuguese companies don't see much value in providing cross-cultural training, possibly because most of them operate in countries with similar cultural values. The expatriates themselves perceive their new cultural context as being similar to Portugal, with an average score of 2.1 and a mode of 1. Table 2 shows the number of answers on our Likert scales that each question received.

Table 2 Number of answers for each question

| **Likert scale** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| Q2 | 17 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Q3 | 8 | 6 | 8 | 4 | 1 |
| Q4 | 11 | 9 | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| Q5 | 2 | 6 | 8 | 7 | 4 |

Hypothesis 1: Multiculturalism will be positively related to cultural adjustment

Given the small sample size of this study, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed, since average adjustment for multicultural individuals (3.3) is only slightly higher than for the monocultural participants (3.1). This may be due to the fact that most Portuguese expatriates operate in similar cultural contexts as back home, as can be seen by the fact that more than half of our respondents considering that their new cultural context is either a 1 or a 2 in our Likert scale. These findings go against what Silbiger et al. (2021) and Fitzsimmons et al. (2016) found during their examinations of the impact of multicultural traits have on expatriate adjustment.

Hypothesis 2: Previous expatriate experience will be positively related to cultural adjustment

As a sort of control group for our main hypothesis, a question concerning the previous experience of our respondents was asked, and the results received ended up confirming our expectations. Respondents with at least five years of experience present an average adjustment value of 3.7, respondents with at least seven years of experience present an even higher value of 4.2, while the average adjustment value for our sample is 3.2 and the value for those who have less than five years of experience abroad is a mere 2.8. This is a clear indication that cultural adjustment is a trainable skill, since experienced expatriates have a clear advantage in their perceived adjustment, leading to a higher state of well-being. These results are in line with the scholarship on the matter at hand (Wang & Varma, 2017, p. 3).

Hypothesis 3: Cross-cultural training will be positively related to cultural adjustment

Cross-cultural training, as expected from our readings, raises the value of expatriate cultural adjustment according to the hours of training provided by the organizations sending the individuals abroad. Individuals who received no cross-cultural training presented the same adjustment value as the average for our population, but those who received at least 4 hours of training had a higher adjustment value (3.6 compared to 3.2). In our sample, the benefits after 8 hours of training are quite small (adjustment value of 3.8), which seems to suggest that the sweet spot for the amount of hours would be four to eight hours of training, easily attainable for most companies operating in multiple countries. Scholars cited in this research paper agree with these results, both Black & Mendenhall (1990) and Morris & Robie (2001) came to the same conclusion, and others emphasize the validity of cross-cultural training in conjunction with finding employees with enough cultural intelligence to excel in their foreign assignments (Zhang, 2012). Morris &

Robie (2001) emphasize that cross-cultural training can take many forms and has been applied somewhat haphazardly more often than not, and that the type of training needs to be adapted to the cultural context expatriates are moving into.

Cultural distance

It is worthy of mention that the difference in cultural context is a big factor in the adjustment difficulty for expatriates. As expected, expatriate cultural adjustment is much harder to achieve in countries with a high perceived difference with the original culture. The adjustment value for our respondents who selected 4 (different) or 5 (very different) in question 3 is 2.4, against 3.4 for similar cultural contexts, 1 (very similar) and 2 (similar) in our Likert scales.

| Chart 2 | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Subsamples** | **Adjustment value (Q5)** | **Pax in subsample** |
| Being multicultural (Q2) | 3.3 | 10 |
| Being monocultural (Q2) | 3.1 | 17 |
| Having 5+ years of professional experience (Q1) | 3.7 | 12 |
| Having 7+ years of professional experience (Q1) | 4.2 | 6 |
| Having less than 5 years of professional experience (Q1) | 2.8 | 15 |
| Received at least 4 hours of CCT (Q4) | 3.6 | 7 |
| Received at least 9 hours of CCT (Q4) | 3.8 | 5 |
| Received no CCT (Q4) | 3.2 | 11 |
| Living in a different or very different cultural context (Q3) | 2.4 | 5 |
| Living in a similar or very similar cultural context (Q3) | 3.4 | 14 |

## Conclusion

The main objective of this action research paper was to study the impact of multiculturalism on expatriate cultural adjustment. For our sample, that impact was very low, but given a larger sample and considering all the previous scholarship on this topic, it is still my opinion that hiring multicultural individuals is a winning strategy when foreign assignments are expected from a workforce. On the other hand, it became clear that cultural adjustment is both a skill that can be improved upon, by the high adjustment values perceived by our most experienced respondents; and also the impact that cultural distance has on the difficulty of adapting to new cultural contexts, given the higher adjustment values experienced by the expatriates living in different and very different cultural contexts.

The survey that was sent out was the result of two main drives: being short enough and containing only multiple option questions; this in order to communicate to all prospective participants that their time was highly valued, and to improve the response rate. While the sample ended up being on the smaller size, it is nonetheless representative of the way Portuguese companies operate in foreign markets. More needs to be done in this field of study in our country, and hopefully someone will have the will to build upon the foundation offered by this research paper in order to perform a larger and more detailed study of multicultural expatriate performance and well-being while living abroad. Future research questions could focus on African descendants and their performance as expatriates, both in African countries and in other, more culturally diversified settings. Given the close connection that Portugal retains with its former colonies, seen through organizations such as the Community of Portuguese Language Countries[4] (CPLP), such a study could attain solid participation and interesting data and conclusions. Another possible avenue

[4] https://www.cplp.org/; last accessed on 26/03/2025.

for future research is the actual performance of expatriates in different cultural contexts, and whether a certain individual performs well everywhere and adjusts quickly to most conditions, or whether the cultural makeup of an individual predefines where he will be of most use for an organization.

It remains to be seen whether this action research paper can assist other researchers in pursuing this line of thought in more in-depth detail but, on its own, it does an adequate job in bringing to light certain limitations in how Portuguese companies operate which can, in turn, perhaps explain their lack of competitivity in the global market. Human resource departments in these companies could benefit from the scholarship in this area in order to boost the productivity and recruitment processes of their organizations.

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