

## A Preliminary Study on Addressing Cultural Adaptation of Greek Middle Managers

**Ioannis Karras**

Department of Foreign Languages, Translation & Interpreting, Faculty of Humanities, Ionian University, Greece

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**ABSTRACT:** This Article Reports on The Investigation of The Affective Perspective of Cultural Adaptation — Namely Attitudes — Among A Small Sample of Greek Middle Managers as These Attitudes Relate to Their Suitability for A Potential Work Assignment Abroad. Data Were Gathered with The Use of Semi-Structured Interviews Involving Four Managers. The Data Revealed That Overall, The Respondents' Attitudes Towards Cultural Diversity Appear Rather Positive as They Showed Signs of Respect, Openness, And Tolerance of Ambiguity.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Adaptation, Cultural Awareness, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Competence, Greek Managers, Sojourner, Tolerance of Ambiguity,

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### I. INTRODUCTION

As The World Has Undoubtedly Become An Interconnected Global Community, Interactions Of People From Diverse Cultural And Linguistic Backgrounds Have Become A Commonplace. This Reality Has Brought About An Increased Need To Be Able To Deal Effectively And Appropriately With Cultural Diversity Which Also Presents Challenges For The Workplace. The Ability To Develop Adaptability To Culturally Diverse Environments Is Arguably A *Sine Qua Non* “Qualification” For Business Executives Who May Potentially Work In International Settings (Sojourner) Or Work Within Their Own Setting, But With A Diverse Staff Or Clientele. Furnham And Bochner (1986, P. 122) Use The Term 'Sojourner' To Refer To A Long-Term, Or Non-Tourist, Traveler And Define Sojourn As A Temporary But Unspecified Amount Of Time Spent In A New And Foreign Environment Mainly For Professional Reasons. The Degree To Which One Culturally Adapts Depends On An Acquired Degree Of Underlying Elements (Deardorff, 2006), One Of Which Is The ‘Attitude’ Someone Has Or Displays In Culturally Diverse Settings.

Hence, This Article Investigates The Affective Perspective Of Cultural Adaptation —Namely Attitudes— Among A Small Sample Of Greek Middle Managers As They Relate To Their Suitability For A Potential Assignment Abroad. The Process Of Cultural Adaptation And The Development Of Intercultural Competence Are Quite Complex, And Many Scholars Have Attempted To Create Models That Illustrate This Process And Developments Through Conceptual Frameworks (Berry, 1990; Deardorff, 2006; Kim, 2001; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Model Adopted In This Paper Is That Of Deardorff (2006), And Due To Limitations In Scope And Breadth, Only One Aspect Of The Model Is Explored —That Of Attitudes, Which Could Arguably Be Considered A Strong Starting Point For Intercultural Adaptation. This Section Provides A Rudimentary Literature Review Which Aspires To Position This Work Within An Existing Knowledge Base And To Create Conceptual Scaffolding. Since No Specific Studies To Present Have Been Found In The Literature To Be Addressing Cultural Adaptation Among Greek Executives, This Study Is A Preliminary Attempt To Start Redressing This Balance. More Specifically, This Paper Addresses The Concept Of Attitudes That The Greek Managers Interviewed For The Purposes Of This Study Have Towards Intercultural Situations As A Point Of Departure, As The Attitudinal Element Is At The Starting Point Of Deardorff's Model. Additionally, Okayama, Furuto, And Edmondson (2001, P. 97) Claim That What Is Important Is

To Maintain Culturally Competent Attitudes As We Continue To Attain New Knowledge And Skills While Building New Relationships. Awareness, The Valuing Of All Cultures, And A Willingness To Make Changes Are Underlying Attitudes That Support Everything That Can Be Taught Or Learned.

In Support Of The Importance Of Attitudes, Lynch And Hanson (1998, P. 510) Characteristically State That “After All The Books Have Been Read And The Skills Learned And Practiced, The Cross-Cultural Effectiveness Of Each Of Us Will Vary. And It Will Vary More By What We Bring To The Learning Than By What We Have Learned”. In The Same Vein, Byram (1997) Argues

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That Attitudes Are Cardinal To Intercultural Competence Because The Basis Of Intercultural Competence Lies In The Attitudes Of The Person Interacting With People With Other Cultural Backgrounds. In Other Words, Looking At Attitudes Is A Sound Starting Point.

‘Attitude’ Will Be Looked At As It Relates To Three Aspects. The First Aspect Is ‘Respect’, Which Refers To The Extent To Which One Values Cultures And Overall Cultural Diversity. Secondly, ‘Openness’, Which Refers To An Open Attitude To Intercultural Learning And To People From Other Cultures, Will Be Addressed. It Should Be Noted That The Notion Of Openness Is Also Connected To Withholding Judgment. The Final Point Is This Article Considers In Relation To Attitude Is ‘Curiosity And Discovery’, Which Refers To The Extent To Which One Tolerates Ambiguity And Uncertainty With Little Discomfort (Ruben, 1976). It Should Be Underscored That All Three Aspects Are Fundamental Ingredients To Cultural Adaptation.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **A. Overview**

In Order To Investigate The Potential Level Of Cultural Adaptation Of Greek Middle Managers, A Small Sample Of Middle Managers Was Selected And Interviewed From A Greek (Southwest Greece) Business Context. Different Companies Were Chosen In An Effort To Create A Wider Representation Of Company Sectors So As To More Accurately Explore And Reflect On The Issue At Hand.

#### **B. Research Design**

Due To The Small Sample Of Participants, A Qualitative Study Has Been Carried Out To Obtain Various Perspectives. More Specifically, Semi-Structured Interviews Were Conducted To Collect Data. A Qualitative Research Method Was Used, As Is Appropriate For Studies Of Small Scale, Which Renders It Ideal For In-Depth Descriptive And Interpretive Analyses, And As Richards (2011) Asserts, To Help Develop Insight. Interviews Increase The Amount And The Quality Of Data Gathered, And They Are A Direct Approach To The Elicitation Of A Respondent’s Ability To Display Intercultural Competence (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006).

The Inclusion Of The Interview As A Qualitative Dimension Provides A Lens Through Which To Capture The Participants’ Views And Beliefs As It Seeks To Give A “Voice” To The Participants, Who Are The “Key Informants”. An Interview Can Assess The Interviewees’ Assertions Underlying Attitudes. The Use Of A Phenomenological Interview Was Considered Vital As An Interview Records And Describes A Subject’s Experiences With A Concept Or Phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989). A Phenomenological Study Describes The Meaning Of The Lived Experiences Of People About A Concept Or A Phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Polkinghorne (1989) Characteristically Says That Phenomenology Explores The Structures Of Consciousness In Human Experiences. This Data Analysis Involved Horizontalization (I.E. Extracting Significant Statements From Transcribed Interviews). The Significant Statements Were Then Transformed Into Clusters Of Meanings According To How Each Statement Falls Under Specific Psychological And Phenomenological Concepts. Finally, These Transformations Were Tied Together To Make A General Description Of The Experience —Both The Textural Description (Of What Was Experienced) And The Structural Description (Of How It Was Experienced). It Ought To Be Noted That The Researcher Can Incorporate His/Her Personal Meaning Of The Experience Here On Condition That He/She Decides As To How And When His/Her Personal Experiences Will Be Incorporated Into The Study.

To Ensure Elaboration And To Avoid Any Misunderstanding Resulting From Linguistic Proficiency Barriers, The Interview Was Conducted In Greek And The Responses Were Subsequently Translated Into English. Responses Were Recorded, Transcribed, Translated And Back Translated. Back Translation Allows For Comparison Of The Translations With The Original To Increase Quality And Accuracy And Avoid Ambiguities, Especially Regarding Emotionally Or Psychologically Loaded Language. Notes Were Also Taken During The Interviews To Record Any Aspects That Would Not Become Apparent In The Actual Recording (E.G., Nonverbal Communication Gestures, Facial Expressions). Most Questions Were Open-Ended (See Below), And Interviewees Were Encouraged To Express Their Views Through Various Probing. Questions That Would Explicitly Ask Respondents About Their Values Were Avoided So As Not To Trigger Answers That Would Be Socially Desired And/Or Acceptable. The Questions Used In The Semi-Structured Interviews Reflect The Aspect Of Attitudes (I.E., Respect, Openness, Tolerance Of Ambiguity). Moreover, The Interviews Were Conducted Face-To-Face In The Managers’ Professional Settings And Each Interview Was Limited To Approximately Thirty Minutes To Avoid Fatigue.

#### **C. Setting And Participants**

As Noted, The Participants Of This Study Come From A Body Of Middle-Level Managers From Various Companies As The Aim Was To Include An Appropriate Range And Balance Regarding Age And Gender. The Four Participants Of The Study Consented To Being Recorded And Were Informed That The Data Provided Would Be Used Anonymously And Confidentially. Another Noteworthy Point Is That All The Participants Have Travelled Abroad Briefly For Work And/Or Leisure, But Have Not Gone On Any Long-Term Foreign Work Assignment. More Specifically, The Participants Of This Study Are Ellie, 39 (A Female, Sales

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Manager Of A Company That Sells Heavy-Duty Equipment); Nicos, 57 (A Male, Financial Manager Of A Transportation Company); Kosmas, 43 (A Male, Corporate Finance And Planning Manager Of A Telecommunications Company); And Andreas, 45 (A Male, Quality Control Manager Of A Dairy Company). These Companies Are Subsidiaries Of Other European Corporations (The Names Of The Companies Have Been Withheld To Conceal Identity And Pseudonyms Of The Managers Have Been Used To Ensure Anonymity).

### **IV. RESULTS**

Responses To The Various Interview Questions Were Recorded And Analysed. What Follows Is A Summary Of These Responses.

Question 1 (How Would You Feel About Being Sent To Another Country To Work?) Was Meant To Establish The Degree To Which The Respondents Would Be Willing To Work Abroad. The Respondents, Except Nicos, Were Rather Reluctant To The Idea Of Working Abroad. They Stated That Despite The Often Challenging Economic Situation In Greece, They Were Quite Content With Staying In Greece. Nicos Expressed The Fact That He Would Be Willing To Become An Expatriate If Certain Conditions Were Met In That Country —Namely That Of Security And Quality Of Life.

Question 2 (What Difference Might You Anticipate When Working In Another Country? How Do You Think You Would Feel About These Differences?) Aimed At Engaging The Participants In Reflective Thinking Regarding Their Expectations And Their Level Of Ambiguity Tolerance —A Basic Element Of The Attitude Construct. The Responses To Question 2 Could Be Divided Into Two Groups: Those That Put An Emphasis On The Personal And Social Life And Those That Focused On The Former Elements As Well As The Professional Aspect. With The Exception Of Kosmas, The Other Three Respondents Centered Their Attention On Difficulties Regarding Communication (Verbal And Non-Verbal). Nicos Highlighted The Fact That His Communication Style Might Often Be Misinterpreted And That He Might Find Understanding Others Challenging. Ellie Said “I Might Find Myself Not Being Able To Fully Express Myself [...] And How About Entertainment? I Think I Would Have A Problem With That, Too” And Continued To Say That “Foreigners” Tend To Be Colder And More Distant Compared To Greeks. Kosmas Also Expressed His Concern About Issues Regarding Interpersonal Communication, But He Also Talked About The Importance Of Recognizing And Respecting Culturally Different Approaches To “The Way Things Are Done At Work Abroad” And Then Went On To Raise Concerns About Work Ethics.

Question 3 (How Do You Feel When You Are In A Situation Where Things Are Not Certain Or Clear?) Aimed At Eliciting Responses That Reflect The Respondents’ Attitudes Towards Discovery, Curiosity, And Tolerance Of Ambiguity. In Response To The Third Question, Nicos Said That “At The Beginning, I Would Feel Uncomfortable, But Eventually I Would Adapt” And When He Was Asked To Further Elaborate, He Simply Stated That He Would Have To Try To Integrate. Ellie Mentioned The Fact That She Would Feel Insecure And Probably Would Have A Problem Concentrating And Focusing On Work. Andreas Also Talked About The Fact That Perhaps He Would Not Feel Comfortable At The Beginning Of His Assignment, But With Time He Would Adapt. Kosmas Felt That He Would Not Have Any Problems With Feeling “At Home,” As He Characteristically Put It.

Question 4 (What Attitudes Are Important For Intercultural Success On A Foreign Assignment?) Provides Insight Into The Attitudes That The Respondents Feel Are Important For Intercultural Success As Sojourners. In Answering Question 4, All The Interviewees Talked About Open-Mindedness And Flexibility As Being The Key Traits They Would Consider For Achieving Effective Intercultural Competence. Kosmas Commented On The Fact That It Is Important For One Not To Be Self-Centred Nor Ethnocentric And Judgmental. Andreas Also Talked About Ethnocentrism, Which He Found To Be An Obstacle For Cultural Adaptation. All The Managers Also Referred To Being Educated And Cultured As Vital Ingredients For Effective And Appropriate Intercultural Communication To Occur. Nicos Also Found Inquisition, Respect For The Other Culture As Well As Being Social And Not Reserved As Important Attitudes To Have.

Question 5 (Can You Think Of Some People Who Are Competent In Intercultural Communication? What Qualities Or Characteristics Do They Have?) Aimed At Having The Participants Reflect On The Qualities Of People They Considered To Be Competent Intercultural Communicators. Therefore, It Was Worded In A Way That Probed The Respondents To Think Of Someone Else And Reflect On Someone Else’s Characteristics So As To Answer In A More Objective And Non-Face Threatening Way. Aspects Of Question 4 Were Repeated (I.E., Openness, Flexible, And Social) And Additionally, A Good Educational Background Were Thought To Be Strong Characteristics.

With Regard To Question 6 (Would Learning The Host Language Be Important To You, Why Or Why Not?), The Responses Were All Quite Similar In Nature. All The Respondents Acknowledged The Importance Of Learning The Host Language. Nicos Mentioned That His Main Reason For Learning The Host Language Would Be To Enhance His Communication Skills And To Show Respect For His Host Culture. Ellie Stressed The Communication Element As Well. Kosmas Stated That Learning The Host Language Would Enhance His Communication Skills On Both A Social And Professional Level. Andreas Talked About The Fact That He Would Feel Left Out If He Did Not Speak The Host Language And Thus Speaking It Would Facilitate His Integration.

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The Final Question, 7 (Would You Be Willing To Undergo Intercultural Training Before Your Assignment Abroad?) Received A Similar Answer By All. All The Participants Agreed On The Value Of Intercultural Training And As Such Would Be Willing To Undergo Such Training If They Were To Be Sent On A Foreign Assignment.

### **V. DISCUSSION**

A Short Discussion With Respect To Each Interview Question Is Provided In This Section. Regarding Question 1, The Respondents Showed An Overall Reluctance To Working Abroad Except Nicos, Who Would Only Be Comfortable Working Abroad If Certain Criteria Were Met. In Being Asked Why They Would Not Readily Accept To Go Abroad, Their Responses Were Limited To The Fact That They Were Comfortable Living In Greece And Did Not Want To Give This Up. In Essence, All The Respondents Appear To Lack Any Sense Of Discovery Or Inquisitiveness And Curiosity About A Foreign Assignment.

Question 2 Revealed That All The Respondents Appeared To Be Concerned With Being Able To Communicate Effectively And Appropriately And How This Would Be Affected In A Foreign Environment. Moreover, Since This Question Tried To Probe Reflective Responses Regarding The Extent To Which They Would Be Compelled To Judge Or Withhold Judgment, It Could Be Said That Ellie Appeared To Be Expressing Judgment Or Having Preconceived Notions About Foreigners As She Was Stereotyping When She Said That Foreigners Tend To Be Distant And Cold. Overall, These Statements, To A Certain Extent, May Be An Indictment Of “Greek Thinking”. Greek Culture Being A High Context (Hall, 1976) And Collectivist Culture (Hofstede, 1984) Imply That Communication Tends To Be Implicit And Thus Relies Heavily On Context. Additionally, Much Value Is Placed On Interpersonal Relationships, And Their Members Form Stable And Close Ties. Hence, The Emphasis On Social And Interpersonal Relationships As Well As The Collective Are Congruent With The Aforementioned Types Of Culture.

Looking At The Responses To Question 3, Except For Kosmas, Who Felt That He Would Not Have A Problem, The Other Respondents Identified Some Potential Challenges With Being Placed In An Unfamiliar Environment And Commonly Reported Feeling Uncomfortable And Uncertain, At Least Initially. These Responses Are In Line With What Gudykunst And Hammer (1988) Report In Their Findings With Reference To Acculturating Individuals, Who Seem To Face Challenges With Uncertainty.

The Responses Provided To Question 4 Unveil Some Of These Managers’ Underlying Values And Assumptions. They Seem To Accept The Fundamental Validity Of Openness And Flexibility As Salient Features Of Sojourner Success. The Notion Of ‘Respect’ Brought Up By Nicos Is Also Stressed By Hanvey (1979, As Cited In Shaules, 2007, P. 98), Who Contends That Respect Is An Important Ingredient, Among Others, To Attain Cross-Cultural Understanding And Awareness.

Responses To Question 5 Are Very Similar To Those Of 4. It Appears That The Respondents Understand The Importance Of Being Open And Flexible Which Translates Into The Fact That One Needs To Challenge His/Her Own Values And World Views, Especially When Put Into A Situation Where People Do Not Subscribe To Their Worldviews. This Potential Lack Of Alignment On Worldviews Appears To Be Anticipated. Moreover, Nicos’ Comment About Inquisition Shows That He Identifies With The Third Aspect Of Deardorff’s (2006) Model — That Of Discovery And Curiosity.

In Reference To Question 6, The Respondents Basically See Language As Providing A Shared Framework, Since, As Shaules (2007, P. 32) Puts It, Language Is “A Reflection Of The World View Of Its Speakers”. The Respondents Seem To Be Aware Of The Fact That Learning A Language Is Not Merely Learning A New Code But That It Actually “Represents The Conceptualization Of The Values And Worldview Of Its Speakers And Speaking A Language Implies Membership” (Shaules, 2007, P. 101). This Desire Implies That The Respondents Are Prepared To Go Into A ‘Deep Acceptance’ Of Which Learning The Host Language Is Part Of The Process. According To Shaules (2007, P. 174) “[D]eep Acceptance Requires Not Only The Ability To See Individual Elements Of Cultural Difference As Valid, But To Accept The Fundamental Premise That Other Worldviews Have A Consistent Internal Logic Which, Once Understood, Can Be Operated Within”. Sojourners Who Do Not Go Beyond ‘Surface Acceptance’ (The Idea That Certain Sojourners Accept Differences “At A More Surface Or Explicit Level” Tend To Reflect This In Their “Attitudes Towards Language Learning” (Shaules, 2007, P. 177), Which Further Implies That They Are More Resistant To Intercultural Difference.

Regarding The Last Question, The Willingness To Undergo Training Is Indicative Of The Respondents’ Beliefs That Intercultural Communication Can Be Enhanced Through Systematic And Methodical Training Or Coaching. Only Kosmas Elaborated More On This Question By Saying That Training Would Not Only Give You Some Practical Information, But It Would Also Help You With Developing Another Mindset. Ward Et Al. (2001) Contend That Providing Training To Sojourners Is Crucial As It Is Empirically And Theoretically Justified. Training Needs To Move Away From Only A Perfunctory Amount Of A Mere “Information-Giving Approach” Into Something More Systematic And Comprehensive In Order To Provide The Sojourner With The Necessary Intellectual And Personal Resources. However, One Must Bear In Mind That Such An Undertaking Is Quite Difficult Within Limited Timeframes (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin 2009). This Limitation Often Leads To Training That Focuses On “Tour-Guide” Aspects Of Culture Or Looking At Culture As A Static Product Rather Than A Dynamic Process. Training Should Emphasize Developing Intercultural Knowledge And Intercultural Communication Skills, As They “Do Not Come Naturally; They Have To Be Acquired Through Conscious Learning” (Liu, Volcic And Gallois, 2011, P. 26). It Becomes

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Apparent That Systematic Training Is Fundamental In Cultivating Intercultural Awareness, Which In Turn May Influence Attitudes One Might Have Prior To An Assignment Abroad.

### VI. CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, One Could Argue That The Respondents Showed Evidence Of Reflection On Issues That They Could Face On An Assignment Abroad. Overall, The Respondents' Attitudes Towards Cultural Diversity Appear Somewhat Positive As They Showed Signs Of Respect, Openness, And Tolerance Of Ambiguity. It May Be Safe To Assume That These Respondents May Not Face Serious Adaptive Problems As Sojourners On A Future Assignment Especially Kosmas, Who Appears To Have Very Good Potential To Go Through A Smooth Adaptation Process As His Attitudes To Pertinent Intercultural Matters Suggest A Positive Stance. Obviously, Such Conclusions Are Premature, And One Must Be Circumspect Of The Limitations In Only Including An Interview Of A Limited Number Of Individuals As The Means To Gather Data (I.E., Certain Responses May Be Those Which Are Socially Acceptable). In Any Case, Further Research (E.G., In The Form Of Observation, More In Depth Interviews, Questionnaires) Would Be Needed To Further Ascertain Whether The Managers Herein Would Be Deemed Suitable Candidates For An Overseas Assignment.

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