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“What’s wrong with these folks?” Developing intercultural competency as the key to “merge” different world views

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Abstract: The main problem of working in multilingual crew onboard ships is that it is a double-edged sword. While it can boost the number of ideas achieved due to various perspectives coming together to solve a problem, it can also lead to higher levels of conflict other than what may be in conventional crews. If crew members are unable to set aside their differences and communicate effectively, that generates mutual understanding, the solution of bringing together all the most excellent minds in the world will not have the ability to solve that problem. When seafarers with a single cultural perspective on the world happen to come together, they will quickly finish asking themselves: *“What’s wrong with these folks?”* When seafarers with intercultural competence come together something surprising happens. The multilingual crew members can help each other to talk about their perceptions. They have the power to present to each other their new ways of thinking. They can work together to solve problems in ways that they have never tried before. *Ultimately, they can “merge” their different worldviews into a “commonly accepted” way of thinking beyond the constraints of everyone’s cultural custom.* This paper tries to identify the reasons for developing the ability of seafarers to shift their mindset from national to international, redefining which group they belong to, saying: *I am an international seafarer vs. I am a Romanian/Finnish/Swedish/Filipino/Indian/..... seafarer.*

Keywords: multilingual crews, effective communication, cultural background, intercultural competency

Introduction

People *differ* from each other. The way they differ is less clear and is the subject of the study of individual differences. The related question is that of *similarity* because people differ in their similarities to each other as well. Questions about specific groups connected by culture, age, ethnicity, or sex are similar to questions of individual differences. Research in *“Individual Differences”* addresses three broad questions: 1) developing an adequate descriptive taxonomy of how people differ; 2) applying differences in one situation to predict differences in other situations; and 3) testing theoretical explanations of the structure and dynamics of individual differences. *Taxonomic work* has focused on categorizing the infinite ways in which individuals differ in terms of a limited number of latent or unobservable constructs, such as the case of differences in vocabulary in English language (see *Classical Test Theory (CTT)* and *The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient*) (Kazdin, n.d.)

Although the term *personality* refers to all aspects of a *person’s individuality*, typical usage divides the field into studies of *ability* and *personality*. Tests of ability represent the maximal

performance measures. *Ability* is the best one can do on a specific measure in a limited time (the speed test) or unlimited time (the power test). *Personality* measures are estimates of average performance and typically include reports of preferences and estimates of what one usually does and how one perceives oneself and is perceived by others. Individual differences are significant only to the extent that they make a difference (Brody & Ehrlichman, 1997)

Hence...what makes you different?

It is *personality*, which makes us different from each other. Personality is our unique individuality. It includes how we think, feel and act differently in the same given situation. Our thought process, problem-solving capacity, the way of expressing emotion, behaviour, attitude, each of them generally varies from person to person.

I like to think of a Japanese proverb, because it makes some sense to all these: “*You have three faces. The first face, you show to the world. The second face, you show to your close friends, and your family. The third face, you never show anyone. It is the truest reflection of who you are*”.

All the time we try to satisfy some needs of our life: *Survival, Attention, Acceptance, Entertainment, Power*. That is why some people pretend around their boss because they need the job in order to survive. Some people pretend around their peers because they need acceptance. Some people pretend around their parents because they need approval. Some people pretend around other people because they are trying to get attention. Some people might pretend around anyone because they want a certain need to be met etc. For sure, we all play different roles according to our environment ... Why am I saying this? We are humans, so we are social beings, and our connections are based on interests and a common ground. Essentially for a group of people to like each other they must water down their personality and interests in order to function in that group.

Measuring our cultural competency

Cultural competency describes our ability to interact with people from different cultures and social and economic backgrounds. It measures our ability to effectively work with people who do not share our native language, who celebrate different holidays than we do, who may not share the same beliefs, principles, or lifestyle as we are doing. Nowadays, at the workplace, being *culturally competent* is critical not only to our success but to the success of our organization, as well.

All the definitions of *culture* affect the workplace. Mainly, in the workplace, we blend the cultures of every individual and group to form the organization's culture – and even the teams within this organization. How the individuals and their cultures blend and come together will determine the *culture of the workplace*. The culture of the workplace will affect our success, as well as everyone else in our organization.

In the English language, there are many definitions for the word *culture*, but *culture* might have just one meaning at the workplace. We may refer to the Muslim culture, the Mexican culture, etc., due to the gradual blending of native culture. *Cultural competence* is not something we can learn by working in class and taking a test. More than this, like most diversity issues in the workplace, *cultural competence* requires that we examine our thoughts and feelings and then develop the cross-cultural skills needed to excel in our career and within our organization.

Several research works identify four components to *cultural competency*. These four components are **awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills**.

In short:

Awareness is our reaction to people who are different from what we are. If someone sees persons from Syria and automatically wonders if they are illegal immigrants, then that is his/her reaction to that group of people. People must be aware of how they react. If needed, they can change their thoughts and reactions to create a more positive culture in their workplace.

Attitude examines any cultural biases that we have and our own beliefs about cultural differences. An example is believing that Muslims are wrong and Christians are right. This attitude will affect how people work with mates from Islamic cultures.

Knowledge is related to the beliefs and values regarding equality that may affect our behaviors. It is demonstrated that those who hold prejudices display behaviors that reveal their prejudices. However, someone may be unaware they are displaying these behaviors. For example, a captain must entrust the seal of the bonded stores to a crewmember. Rather than choosing the person who used to take care and control them most often, let us say a European, he chooses another crewmember, who is Indian, instead.

Communication is the most critical skill we can have in the workplace since this is the primary way we interact with our colleagues or how crew members belonging to the bridge work together with their mates in the engine room department onboard ship. It includes verbal and non-verbal communication and knowing how these tend to vary from culture to culture. Skills require working on and perfecting our cultural competence.

We must take the time to reflect on our awareness, attitude, and knowledge. We must be honest with our inner self, and we must not feel bad for any biases or prejudices we may harbor. These are human nature features. Prejudices and biases are instilled in us based on our background and experiences. What is essential is acknowledging them so that they can be overcome.

Language versus culture: does language change culture or does culture change language?

There is much exciting research on the interaction between language and culture, and it can often be challenging to tease them apart. Language and culture are intimately related. Language and culture change together. We pass on our culture through our language, and our language guides us to determine our culture. Our culture and our language, to some extent, determine possible changes in both. Frequently, people of one culture think that people of another culture are strange because they do not and cannot conceive the conceivable aspects of their culture with their language.

Language and culture are systems that reinforce each other and exclude something they cannot conceive. After all, their language does not allow them to think of those things because their culture does not contain them. International students frequently have a difficult time learning the language of another culture without living in that culture. To be bilingual in the truest sense of the word requires a learner to be bicultural. *To be, or not to be, that is the question!*¹

Quality of nationality index. Rank and how

¹ William Shakespeare, *Prince Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1

Everybody has nationality in one or more states. States differ significantly: Russia is huge, while Swaziland is tiny; Luxembourg is rich, and Mongolia is less rich. Just like states, nationalities themselves differ too. The fundamental premise of the QNI (Quality of Nationality Index) is that it can compare the relative worth of nationalities — as opposed to, simply, countries. The QNI, therefore, provides a comprehensive ranking of the quality of nationalities worldwide. To ensure a high level of reliability, the creators made a moral choice not to make it a perception-based index. A variety of quantifiable data is used instead to assess the opportunities and limitations that our nationalities impose on us. For that purpose, the QNI measures both the internal value of nationality, related to the quality of life and opportunities for individual development within the home country, and the external value of nationality, which classify the diversity and quality of events that our nationality allows us to seek outside our home country (where the majority of the holders of the nationality have the absolute right to reside) (Brody & Ehrlichman, 1997). The Henley & Partners – Kucherov Quality of Nationality Index (QNI) explained the methodology of what they rank and how by choosing France, Somalia, Sweden, Iraq, New Zealand, Tajikistan, South Africa, and El Salvador:

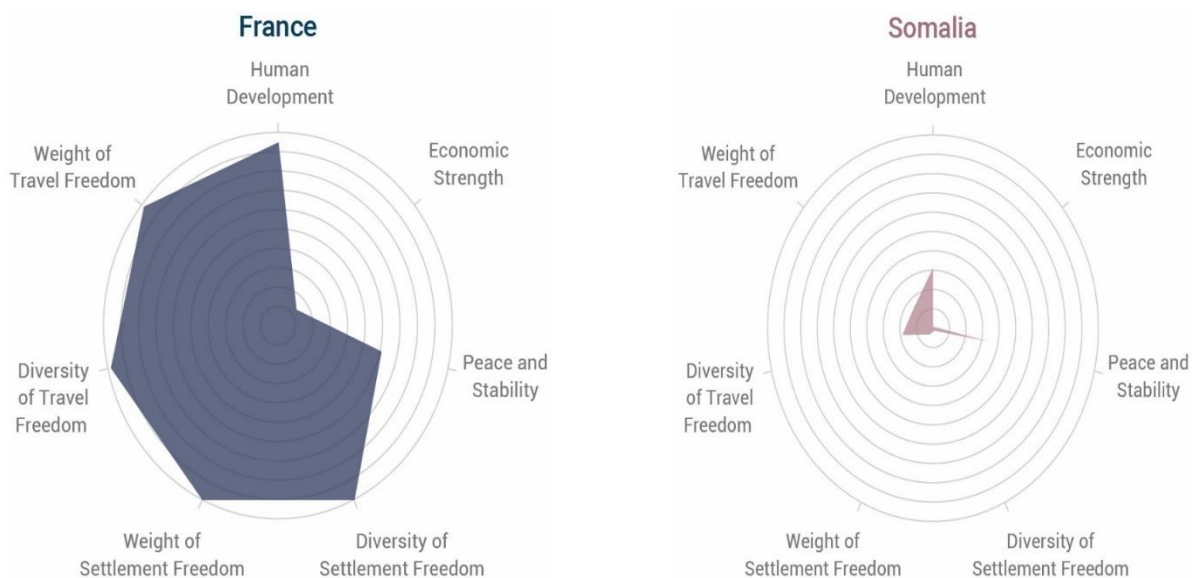


Figure 1: Human development: France and Somalia

Reproduced from Quality of Nationality Index (2018). How does it work? The QNI in a nutshell. <https://www.nationalityindex.com/methodology>

Internally, the QNI looks at how successful a country is in terms of human development, economic prosperity, and peace and stability. It is better to have the nationality of a country whose citizens have long life expectancy, a good schooling system, and a high level of prosperity — such as France or New Zealand — than that of a country that offers lower levels of security, schooling, and healthcare to its nationals — such as South Sudan or El Salvador.

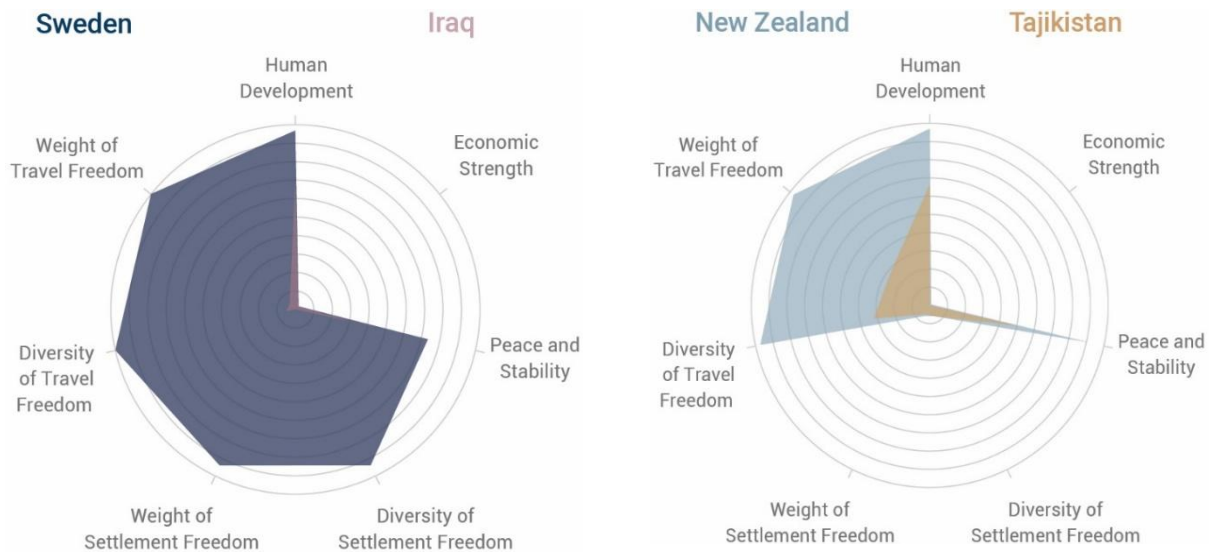


Figure 2: Human development: Sweden and New Zealand
 Reproduced from Quality of Nationality Index. (2018). How does it work? The QNI in a nutshell. <https://www.nationalityindex.com/methodology>

Updating this index annually will make sure that an up-to-date picture of the quality of world nationalities is readily available at any moment in time, illuminating medium- to long-term trends in nationalities' development.

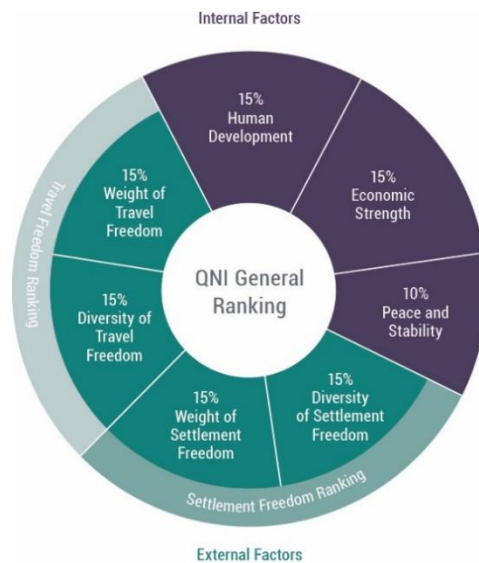


Figure 3: Internal and External Factors
 Reproduced from Quality of Nationality Index. (2018). How does it work? The QNI in a nutshell. <https://www.nationalityindex.com/methodology>

People differ within any given nation or culture more significantly than differences between groups. Education, social standing, religion, personality, belief structure, experience, affection shown at home, and other factors will influence human behavior and culture.

Are some people *better* than others? You might wonder what kind of a question that is. On the one hand, there is no controversy—some people are more intelligent than others, some are

much more creative, some are stronger or faster, and some are kinder or more virtuous. So, if that is all we are asking, the answer is obvious. In certain respects, and domains, some people are *better* than others. However, if we ask whether some people are just better human beings in general, it becomes much harder to answer the question.

I am an international seafarer! Communication skills and cultural awareness onboard ship

The sea has always been a challenging and hazardous friend to humankind despite its all benefits. The ships today are technologically advanced and highly reliable. But the maritime casualties rate is still high. Why? Because the maritime system is a people system. *“Communication within the maritime industry in general and at sea, in particular, requires a high level of competency and that is axiomatic”* (Brody & Ehrlichman, 1997). Not only communication but cross-culture communication is very important in the shipping industry. *“The safe operation of vessels depends on effective and efficient maritime communication, which requires seafarers to communicate linguistically, cross-culturally, and interpersonally”* (Cole, 2005). The fact that ships’ crews are multinational, and multilingual needs no emphasis, but the fact that English language is not the native language of many seafarers needs reiteration. Accident reports frequently cite poor communications as a contributory factor. *“We, therefore, need to actively encourage higher levels of English language competency through effective language education and training, which closely reflects the practical communication skills required by the shipping industry. The key to this being spoken fluency and proficiency in Maritime English through using it in practice* (Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1985).

MET institutions train seafarers and keep pace with the developing technologies but developing onboard cultural and communication skills training can be more fruitful. All stakeholders in the maritime domain must join hands to eliminate accidents occurring due to human factors through comprehensive training by creating joint ventures. Institutions need financial and technical support to keep pace with the advancement in technologies. Seafarers should adhere to quality training. But there is a gap in the training MET institution curriculum and ship technology. Ships are built by the most advanced countries using high techs, like Japan, Korea, Europe, and China, but sometimes the seafarers are from underdeveloped countries. Their technology is rarely transferred to the MET institutions. Syllabi take a lot of time to harmonize with the pace of technology.

Therefore, if crew members are unable to set aside their differences and communicate in an effective way that generates mutual understanding, the solution of bringing together all the most excellent minds in the world simply will not have the ability to solve that problem. When seafarers with a single cultural perspective on the world happen to come together, they will easily finish asking themselves: *“What’s wrong with these folks?”* Diverse true stories demonstrate that the problem arises when the crew members lack intercultural competency. When seafarers with intercultural competence come together something surprising happens. The multilingual crew members can help each other to talk about their perceptions. They have the power to present to each other their new ways of thinking. They can work together to solve problems in ways that they have never tried before. Ultimately, they can “merge” their different worldviews into a “commonly accepted” way of thinking beyond the constraints of everyone’s cultural custom.

Conclusion and recommendations

“Life is a team effort. No one gets very far alone” [and] “this planet is a crowded place, and the only way we are going to survive is to learn to get along with one another” (Iaccoca, 2007). Shipping industry is a globalized world. It has an indispensable role in the world trade and economy. There is no doubt that without shipping, the world will freeze and starve. We can imagine the role of shipping in world trade, but ships can only sail with trained seafarers onboard. Connected with other global issues, culture and language barriers foreground another life-sized issue. There are a lot of civilizations, cultures, languages, and dialects in the world. Religions have great influence on individuals and societies. Every individual thinks, and acts in his/her own way and manner. We share the same goal and aim of safer shipping and cleaner oceans, but we cannot fix these without sharing the only way that is to dignify and respect each one’s belief, culture, language, and religion. In this context, there are some words often used: *harmonization, unity in diversity, tolerance, understanding*, but they cannot be applied easily for description of life and work on board ship. It is not easy unless we have strong beliefs that a Filipino, Indian or Pakistani seafarer has the same feelings, beliefs and values as the ship-owner or CEO of the shipping company. It is difficult to change one’s culture, values, ethics, and beliefs. What we can do from our position as teachers, trainers, or employers is simply making aware of our seafarers about knowing and respecting each other’s cultures and values. In short, we can design the way to this ‘*mutual understanding*’. For years, we have struggled to harmonize and improve upon training standards in the form of STCW, legislation, model courses and instructions by IMO and other related organizations. A lot has been done to improve upon the communication skills and cultural awareness. but still, it is not enough. The seafarers’ training is not the sole responsibility of MET institutions. Every stakeholder like IMO, shipping companies, ship-owners, flag states, port authorities, manning agents, and seafarers themselves are responsible. So, shifting of seafarers training responsibility from one shoulder to the other will not serve the purpose. Everyone should equally share this responsibility.

1. IMO needs to embark on a comprehensive model course on “Developing communication skills and cultural awareness onboard ship”.
2. *International Regulation of Education* is required to include *Developing communication skills and cultural awareness onboard ship* issues in the curriculum of every MET institution. It should be made part of STCW, introducing a distinct table of competence.
3. It is mandatory for MET institutions to tailor this course according to the requirements of their seafarers.
4. Shipping companies should be involved in the development of this course considering the multilingual crew they employ on board ship.
5. Manning agents should have a pre-sea joining training for the seafarers. They should provide instructions and first-hand information to fresh-joining seafarers about the crew they will work with.

A recent graduate seafarer without any multicultural training, when he/she joins a ship with twenty-five people speaking twelve different languages, he/she will be in a very awkward situation. At this point of time one can realize that either he/she chose the wrong profession, or his/her communication skills and cultural awareness were not addressed properly by the MET institution. Can this be avoided? Maybe, maybe not.

“ Now it matters not to waste time but to begin to adapt, update or newly develop the curricula of Maritime English courses, the teaching materials and assessment tools in order to embrace the new or amended requirements set out in the Convention..[...] All this is no easy task but necessary not only to satisfy the new provisions but also to simply benefit our students by

enhancing their safety in the fleets they will serve and the safety of shipping in general” (Trenkner & Cole, 2021).

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