

# CULTURAL DIVERSITY AT WORK: CONCEPTS, PERCEIVED CONSEQUENCES AND PERSONAL RESOURCES FOR FRENCH AGRICULTURAL EMPLOYEES

Alexandrine Ceschiutti, & René Mokoukolo

Laboratory *Qualipsy*, E.E. 190, Department of Psychology, University of Tours (France)

## Abstract

**Background:** As a result of globalization, work environments are now characterized by cultural diversity, resulting in diversified norms and approaches to quality of life at work (QWL), for which employees and organizations are unprepared (Ellemers & Rink, 2016). Consideration of this diversity is imperative because it can lead to intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts that are likely to affect employees' performance and level of QWL (Stahl et al., 2010). Thus, to adapt, employees and organizations need to develop intercultural skills (Nguyen et al., 2018). **Objectives:** This study aims at three exploratory objectives. First, we observed employees' perceptions of cultural differences, the indicators that they see as most salient, and how they evaluate them. Second, the perceived consequences of cultural diversity at work. Finally, the personal resources that can enable employees to interact effectively in culturally diverse situations. **Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 French agricultural employees (10 women and 2 men, aged between 18 and 65). An interview guide was used, and the data were analysed to identify the frequency of occurrence of each theme in text segments (Braun & Clarke, 2006). **Results:** The results show that the participants were aware of cross-cultural differences, which they perceived through 10 principal indicators. They observed that cultural diversity at work could have both positive (e.g. cohesion) and negative (e.g. racism) personal and organizational consequences and that cultural differences affect QWL and performance. Finally, with regard to the resources required to manage cultural diversity at work. The participants observed the importance of acquiring personal resources, in line with the literature on intercultural skills like cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003).

**Keywords:** *Cultural diversity, intercultural interactions, quality of life at work (QWL), cultural intelligence (CQ), qualitative approach.*

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## 1. Introduction

The globalization of the economy increases the cultural diversity of work teams and contact between employees with different cultural references (language, beliefs, values, practices). The resulting acculturative phenomenon can cause difficulties among employees because it challenges many points of reference and habits that affect their level of QWL (Stahl et al., 2010). More specifically, employees have to cope with new demands related to their interactions with colleagues with different cultural backgrounds, which can be a source of misunderstandings and conflict. Hence, there is a need for employees to acquire intercultural skills to optimize their overall level of QWL (Nguyen et al., 2018), notably CQ, defined as “*an individual's ability to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity*” (Earley & Ang, 2003). CQ has four dimensions: motivational (interest in other cultures), cognitive (knowledge of other cultures), metacognitive (awareness of cultural influences in intercultural interactions), and behavioral (behavioral adjustment of intercultural interactions). The literature shows that CQ is a key skill for promoting QWL in multicultural contexts, but studies on the subject are rare in France and focus on expatriates. This study thus concerns employees working in an intercultural situation in their home country.

## 2. Objectives

This study has three exploratory objectives. The first concerns employees' perceptions of cultural differences, the indicators that they see as most salient, and how they evaluate them. The second concerns the perceived consequences of cultural diversity at work. Finally, it explores the personal resources that can enable employees to interact effectively in culturally diverse situations.

### 3. Methods

**Sample:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 French agricultural employees (10 women and 2 men, aged between 18 and 65). All of them reported that they interacted with people from different cultures at work, all or most of the time.

**Procedure:** The participants were contacted by email or face-to-face. The interviews were conducted at the workplace and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Examples of the questions asked:

- *What do you think makes cultures different from each other?*
- *What qualities are needed to work effectively with people from different cultures?*
- *Are there any positive or negative consequences associated with working with people from different cultures?*

**Data analysis:** We conducted a thematic analysis (TA) of the participants' responses based on Braun and Clarke's method (2006). We combined two approaches: an inductive approach to identify the "themes" and "codes" in the data, and a deductive approach based on theoretical concepts of intercultural relations and three types of intelligence (Crowne, 2013). Data analysis was based on two additional indices: the percentage of participants who mentioned the themes, and the frequency of occurrence of each theme in text segments. The coding was carried out by two Ph.D psychology students.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Cultural representation and key indicators of cultural differences

Participants mentioned ten principal indicators. All mentioned **way of living**, characterized by norms, traditions and customs (157 quotes), **language** (71 quotes), and **nationality** (31 quotes).

Extract from the corpus: "*the pace of life is different, they don't rush around like us {...}. It's their way of life. They are very slow {...} for them it's normal. You wait. You've got all the time in the world*" (woman, human resources).

**Religion** (92 quotes), **male/female relations** (43 quotes), and **characteristics of the country**, such as the economic and legal system (57 quotes), were mentioned by 83.3% of participants.

Extract from the corpus: "*Moroccans are very religious, something that we don't see in France. They stop work to pray several times a day*" (man, manager in packaging).

Finally, 75% of participants mentioned cultural differences related to "**the work culture**" (52 quotes), 66.6% mentioned **values** (38 quotes) and the **way of thinking** (26 quotes), and 58.3% mentioned a different **way of behaving** (34 quotes).

Extract from the corpus: "*Africans like work {...} They are very motivated, they don't complain. They live in the present. They are always smiling, and they are positive*" (woman, manager).

These mostly normative indicators generate positive effects but also negative effects.

#### 4.2. Perceived negative and positive consequences of cultural diversity at work

**Negative consequences:** All the participants associated cultural diversity at work with negative consequences (332 quotes). More specifically, all mentioned relationship problems (134 quotes), such as conflict and racism. Moreover, 83.3% associated cultural diversity at work with emotional problems (45 quotes), such as anxiety, stress and awkwardness. Finally, all participants associated it with performance difficulties such as additional workload or staff turnover (67 quotes).

Extract from the corpus: "*I can't accept that a man of a different culture makes a throat-slitting gesture to a woman manager*" (woman, director).

**Positive consequences:** 83.3% of participants associated cultural diversity at work with positive consequences (92 quotes). For instance, 75% associated it with personal development (16 quotes), team spirit and solidarity (22 quotes).

Extract from the corpus: "*open-mindedness, economic growth, in every way it has been good for the company*" (woman, sales manager).

To optimize the benefits and overcome the difficulties, different personal resources were mentioned.

### 4.3. Personal resources that can enable employees to interact effectively in culturally diverse situations

- **“Open-mindedness”** and **“interest”**: 100% of participants (62 quotes) believed that interest in and tolerance of other cultures are essential. They also mentioned the need to communicate and “create links” with people from different cultural backgrounds (motivational CQ).
- **“Patience”** and **“Adaptation”**: All the participants mentioned the importance of adapting their behavior to the demands of the situation (123 quotes), notably through new methods of working (behavioral CQ).
- **“Knowledge”**: 83.3% of participants (48 quotes) said that it is important to know about other cultures in order to work with people from different cultural backgrounds (cognitive CQ).
- **“Self-questioning”**: 50% of participants (11 quotes) thought that it was important to think about their own way of functioning in relation to their culture (meta-cognitive CQ).

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this exploratory study was to analyze how agricultural employees perceive cultural differences, their consequences, and the resources needed to adjust to them. The results show that employees perceive culture through subjective indicators, such as way of life, work culture, values (Hofstede, 2001), which can be a source of enrichment but also of misunderstandings. They associate cultural diversity more with negative consequences such as interpersonal difficulties (e.g. conflict). To optimize intercultural communication, they agree about the need to acquire personal skills that reflect the four dimensions of CQ (Earley & Ang, 2003). The motivational and behavioral CQ are the first. The results suggest the importance of integrating both the cultural factor and CQ into research and management practices. It shows the added value of CQ in the promotion of QWL and performance in a multicultural work environment. Finally, it encourages organizations to develop their employees' CQ, by setting up training schemes for example.

## 6. Limitations

Due to the small size of our sample and the overrepresentation of women, caution should be taken about generalizing these results. Further analysis of the 3 dimensions (perceptions, skills and consequences) and the role of gender in a male-dominated profession is required.

## 7. Conclusion

This exploratory study provides the basis for an on-going, more general study using a questionnaire, dealing with the resources perceived to be necessary for personal and organizational adaptation in a multicultural work context.

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