

SIGMA Assessments

Cross-Cultural Application

Assessing Leadership Across Cultures with the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R



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In 1995, Dr. Daniel Goleman published a book on emotional intelligence (EI) and the topic has since risen in popularity around the world. A great deal of the research and development of EI assessments has come from North America and Europe, where emotional intelligence is commonly defined as the capacity to identify, regulate, and use emotions in ways that are helpful to oneself and others. Today, many organizations are keen on using EI assessments to hire 'emotionally intelligent' employees, given that research has shown them to be both self-aware and resilient to setbacks. With increased globalization, coaches, counsellors, and corporations may also be looking to use these assessments with individuals from a variety of cultures. In this guide we'll explore whether EI assessments can be used across cultures, and how SIGMA's assessments can be leveraged in such contexts.

Defining EI Across Cultures

Before an assessment can be used across cultures, the quality being measured should have an agreed-upon definition. In the case of EI, it would only be appropriate to use EI assessments in other cultures if the definition of emotional intelligence is the same and does not neglect any culturally specific components. SIGMA Assessment Systems has developed two emotional intelligence tests: [The Multidimensional Emotional Intelligence Assessment – Revised \(MEIA-R\)](#) and the [Multidimensional Emotional Intelligence Assessment – Work – Revised \(MEIA-W-R\)](#). This post will explore whether the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R are universally valid and acceptable for use in every culture.

How do Different Cultures Experience Emotions?

To understand whether the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R can be used across cultures, we first need to understand how different cultures experience and express emotions. Most of the research around cultural differences in psychology has focused on one main distinction: individualism versus collectivism. In individualist societies, like Australia, the United States, and Germany, citizens often think of themselves as independent from others, and frequently use their emotions to express their unique identity. On the other hand, in collectivist societies, such as Portugal, Mexico, and China, citizens typically think of themselves as members of a larger community, and emotions are more often used as a tool to promote collective wellbeing, rather than to allow for individual self-expression.

Regardless of the culture individuals find themselves in, everyone experiences the same basic emotions (e.g., anger, fear, surprise, joy). However, the way that people interpret, control, and use their emotions can differ due to their cultural background.¹ For example, emotional display rules are unwritten cultural norms pertaining to which emotions are acceptable and unacceptable to show in public. One well-known display rule concerns how American (individualist) versus Japanese (collectivist) citizens express happiness. In America, expressions of high energy and happiness are socially acceptable and encouraged, and people may pride themselves on being “bubbly” or “upbeat.” However, in some East Asian countries like Japan, more calm expressions of happiness are encouraged, as intense excitement may draw too much attention to oneself. For more information about how display rules relate to emotional intelligence, check out this [blog post](#).

Interestingly, people do not seem to become more emotionally intelligent by learning a greater variety of display rules. Regardless of the amount of time people spend traveling and living in a different culture, or the number of cultures they have been exposed to, individuals do not seem to show marked changes in their scores on emotional intelligence after these experiences.² They do, however, appear to improve their cultural intelligence scores.

Evidence for the Cross-Cultural Validity of Similar EI Assessments

So far, we have established that people experience similar emotions across cultures, and cultural exposure does not significantly affect emotional intelligence scores. To understand whether the MEIA-W/MEIA-W-R capture a universally valid definition of emotional intelligence, we can look at how tests like the MEIA have been used in various cultural contexts. Some emotional intelligence assessments are more similar to the MEIA than others, and this is because there are many different models of emotional intelligence in the psychological research literature. Broadly, emotional intelligence theories can be split into three camps of trait, ability, and mixed models:

- The **trait** view of emotional intelligence suggests that emotional intelligence is a stable, mostly unchanging competency like personality.
- The **ability** view of emotional intelligence suggests that there are right and wrong ways to respond emotionally in situations, and ability-based emotional intelligence tests aim to teach test-takers the “correct” ways to behave.
- The **mixed** view of emotional intelligence suggests that emotional intelligence consists of a variety of many other dispositional qualities, such as happiness, optimism, and self-control.³

The MEIA tests are a trait-based test of the Mayer-Salovey theory of emotional intelligence, and are therefore similar to other tests like the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue; Petrides, 2009),⁴ Schutte Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT; Schutte et al., 1998),⁵ and the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer et al., 2002).⁶ The first two tests are trait-based emotional intelligence tests, and the latter MSCEIT is an ability-based test but is based on the same model of emotional intelligence. Trait tests are generally superior to ability tests of emotional intelligence because they do not assume there is any single correct answer to how one *should* behave emotionally in a situation.

The SSEIT is a popular trait-based test developed in the United States that has been cross-culturally validated in countries such as Malaysia⁷ and Zambia.⁸ This research found the same factor structure and high reliability, consistent with the original validation studies for these scales. The SSEIT therefore seems cross-culturally valid, which is to say individuals across different countries had the same understanding of the dimensions of emotional stability in the test and answered in consistent ways, regardless of their cultural background.

The TEIQue is another popular trait-based test of emotional stability which has been cross-culturally validated in Chinese (collectivist culture) and British (individualist culture) adults.⁹ Like the studies of the SSEIT, the authors found that the dimensions of emotional intelligence tested by the TEIQue hold up across cultures, meaning that the way emotional intelligence is conceptualized appears to be the same. However, an interesting aspect of this study was that British adults tended to have higher global trait EI scores overall, compared to the Chinese adults. This may indicate that participants from individualist cultures spend more time reflecting on and viewing their own emotional capabilities favorably, compared to people from collectivist cultures.

Finally, the MSCEIT has also been studied and compared in a Pakistani (collectivist culture) and French (individualist culture) context.³ The results revealed that the MSCEIT was cross-culturally valid (i.e., measured emotional intelligence as it was supposed to) and reliable (i.e., participants responded in similar patterns even though they lived in different cultures). Since the MSCEIT test measured the same concept of emotional intelligence in both Pakistani and French participants – emotional intelligence factors, like control, use, and understanding of emotions – these elements of emotional intelligence appear to be universal and serve similar purposes. However, as stated above in the display rules example, the way that people express their emotions can appear different based on culture. Similar to the results of the TEIQue study, French participants also scored higher overall on emotional intelligence than Pakistani participants, creating further speculation that people from individualist cultures may rate their own emotional intelligence more positively than those from collectivist cultures.

To summarize, findings from cross-cultural studies on EI assessments suggest a few things:

1. People around the world define EI in the same way (i.e., the ability to understand, regulate, and use one's own emotions and the emotions of others effectively).
2. The validity and reliability of EI tests (or at least those mentioned above) will likely stay the same regardless of the kind of culture they are administered in.
3. There may be general differences in average EI scores between members of individualist and collectivist societies. People belonging to individualist societies, like the United States, France, and Australia, may tend to have higher emotional intelligence scores than people from collectivist cultures. This may be attributed to the fact that people from individualist cultures tend to spend more time reflecting on their own emotions and perceiving them as a personal strength. As such, higher average EI scores among these individuals are likely reflective of a cultural difference rather than a true difference in competency compared to those from a collectivist culture.

Can You Use the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R in Different Cultures?

Having seen the evidence for how tests like the SSEIT, TEIQue, and MSCEIT can be used in different cultures around the world, you're probably wondering whether the same findings apply to SIGMA's MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R tests as well.

As discussed previously, the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R shares several theoretical similarities to the measures above. Additionally, the samples used in the cross-cultural studies were similar to the normative group that test-takers are compared to when they take the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R tests. Like the norm group for the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R, participants in the comparison studies were adults, most were under the age of 40, and most samples had a relatively even gender split between male and female participants (no information on non-binary gender participants was reported). Taken together, although the MEIA tests were developed in a Western context, we suggest that our clients can confidently use the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R in non-Western cultures with the same high degree of validity and reliability.

Be cautious of potential cultural differences affecting test scores if you are looking to compare the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R results of someone from an individualist culture against someone from a collectivist culture. For example, an organization may be looking to compare the emotional intelligence scores of leaders from their office in New York, USA (individualist culture) to their office in Beijing, China (collectivist culture), to determine which leader to promote. The leaders from the American office may have generally higher self-rated emotional intelligence scores, but this elevation may not be due to the leader themselves being more "emotionally intelligent". Instead, the higher emotional intelligence scores of the American leaders could be influenced by the increased attention and importance that people from individualist cultures

tend to place on their own emotions. As a reminder, the MEIA assessments are not meant to make decisions on hiring/promotions and should be used primarily for personal development in counselling and work contexts.

Get Started with the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R Today

Are you interested in learning more about emotional intelligence profiles for coaching, counselling, or development? SIGMA's MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R are comprehensive, easy to administer EI assessments grounded in psychological research. You can assess the EI profiles of clients or leaders at your organization using the MEIA-W-R, or of individuals outside of a workplace context using the MEIA-R. [Contact us](#) to learn more about how the MEIA-R and/or MEIA-W-R can be used to identify your leaders' emotional competencies.

How SIGMA Can Help

If you're looking for more information about developing your leadership competencies and using the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R or other psychological assessments, SIGMA offers [individual and group coaching](#) and [consulting services](#). To learn more about SIGMA's solutions, click [here](#), or contact us directly for more information.

¹ Bagheri, Z., Kosnin, A. M., & Besharat, M. A. (2013). The influence of culture on the functioning of emotional intelligence. *2nd International Seminar on Quality and Affordable Education*. [PDF]. Retrieved from <https://humanities.utm.my/education/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2013/11/181.pdf>

² Crowne, K. A. (2013). Cultural exposure, emotional intelligence, and cultural intelligence: An exploratory study. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 13(1), 5-22.

³ Karim, J., & Weisz, R. (2010). Cross-cultural research on the reliability and validity of the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT). *Cross-Cultural Research*, 44(4), 374-404.

⁴ Petrides, K. V. (2009). Psychometric properties of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire. In C. Stough, D. H. Saklofske, and J. D. Parker, *Advances in the assessment of emotional intelligence*. New York: Springer.

⁵ Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., Hall, L. E., Haggerty, D. J., Cooper, J. T., Golden, C. J., & Dornheim, L. (1998). Development and validation of a measure of emotional intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 25(2), 167-177.

⁶ Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P., Caruso, D. R., & Sitarenios, G. (2003). Measuring emotional intelligence with the MSCEIT V2.0. *Emotion*, 3, 97-105.

⁷ Hussein, A. R., Acquah, E. O., & Musah, M. B. (2019). Testing the cross-cultural validity of Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) scale. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences*, 9(12), 835-847.

⁸ Musonda, A., Shumba, O., & Tailoka, F. P. (2019). Validation of the Schutte self report emotional intelligence scale in a zambian context. *European Journal of Psychology and Educational Research*, 2(2), 31-41.

⁹ Gökçen, E., Furnham, A., Mavroveli, S., & Petrides, K. V. (2014). A cross-cultural investigation of trait emotional intelligence in Hong Kong and the UK. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 65, 30-35.