

SIGMA Assessments

Cross-Cultural Application

**Interpreting EI Scores and
Response Styles Across
Cultures with the
MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R**



Assessing EI Scores and Response Styles Across Cultures with the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R

Organizations worldwide have become increasingly interested in leveraging their employees' emotional intelligence (EI). EI is made of multiple dimensions that capture a person's ability to understand and regulate emotions; both their own and those of others. These skills will differ in how they are perceived and valued from culture to culture. Therefore, cultural differences must be taken into account when administering EI assessments and interpreting results.

Measuring Emotional Intelligence

In the workplace, EI is associated with improved relationships, increased job satisfaction, enhanced leadership potential, greater creativity, and reduced turnover.^{1,2} Outside of work, EI can also help individuals bounce back after stressful life events³ and it contributes to better health.⁴ Measuring EI is important, because it allows teams and individuals to work towards these outcomes by identifying their strengths and opportunities for EI development.

SIGMA's [Multidimensional Emotional Intelligence Assessment – Revised \(MEIA-R\)](#) and the [Multidimensional Emotional Intelligence Assessment – Work – Revised \(MEIA-W-R\)](#) are two tests that assess EI in different contexts. They both use a self-report format, requiring individuals to reflect on their experiences with emotions and rate themselves on a series of statements. The MEIA-R can be used by individuals to better understand their own emotions and the broad impact of emotions on others, while the MEIA-W-R focuses on understanding emotions specifically in the work environment. Both assessments are evidence-based and compare individual scores to a normative sample representing the average person. This allows each test taker to identify relative strengths and potential development opportunities.

Cultural Context Matters

The self-report method of evaluating EI has been proven to be useful and efficient⁵ because it reflects an individual's unique perspective on their own emotional competencies. However, the way people interpret, express, and understand emotions can be affected by other factors too, particularly, cultural context. If a multinational organization were to give the MEIA-W-R to its managers in Canada, Germany, and China, would there be differences in how people interpret, evaluate, and rate their own emotional intelligence and those of others depending on their cultural background? Overall, the answer is 'yes.' Culture certainly informs how we value and show emotions, as well as how we rate our own emotional intelligence. But do these differences also affect the accuracy of the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R? Let's take a look:

Culture Informs How We Value and Show Emotions

Culture affects the way people understand and express their emotions. In particular, the dimension expressive control (i.e., how emotions are expressed nonverbally) may be affected by a person's cultural environment. For example, as expatriate employees spend more time in foreign countries, they often begin to change how they show their emotions over time. Expatriate employees' emotional patterns start to resemble colleagues in their new country more than their native country, helping them fit in and succeed in a new cultural context.⁶

One way that people change how they express emotions is by adopting local "display rules." These rules dictate the emotions that are appropriate to show in various social situations and are often unconsciously learned when individuals enter into a new cultural context. Display rules indicate whether it is appropriate to express emotions to others, and how strong those emotions can be. These rules will vary widely and coincide with cultural values.⁶ For example, in some cultures it is considered appropriate to smile and greet strangers when you pass by on the street. However, in other cultures, it is considered rude to greet strangers with too much warmth, and people will often pass one another without any greeting and avoiding eye contact.

Most psychological studies of display rules have focused on the differences between North American and East Asian cultures. For example, the United States has a culture that prizes individuality and supports people defending themselves when wronged by others. Due to this cultural value, emotions like pride and anger are more acceptable to express publicly in certain situations. On the other hand, in cultures that prize the collective good, like Japan, pride and anger can disrupt social harmony, and people are more likely to be shunned by others if they show these emotions publicly. To preserve harmony and cooperation, collectivist cultures typically have more display rules about suppressing and masking emotions than their individualist counterparts.⁶ Additionally, compared to American culture, in East Asian cultures, low intensity emotions like calm are more desirable to express than high intensity emotions like enthusiasm.⁷ These different norms can even affect subtle expressions of emotion, such as how people pose in photos. East Asian leaders tend to express an unsmiling or close-lipped smile in photos, while American leaders tend to display a broad smile indicating excitement.⁸

Self-Rated Emotional Intelligence: The Effects of Culture

In addition to influencing how individuals show emotion, cultural context can influence how individuals perceive their own emotional intelligence. In particular, self-rated EI may be influenced by which emotions are most desirable to express in a given culture. For example, someone who is very emotionally expressive and outgoing may rate themselves as lower in expressive control if they live in a culture that values emotional suppression and a reserved demeanor. However, if the same outgoing person were to live in a culture that prized emotional expression, they may view themselves as high in expressive control, because their tendencies align well with display rules and cultural norms.

At this point it is important to mention that the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R measure multiple aspects of emotional intelligence, and cultural norms may have varying effects on each dimension. For example, a highly expressive person living in a low expression culture may rate themselves as below average on the dimension of expressive control, but they may still rate themselves as average or above average on other dimensions (e.g., empathy). Therefore, cultural context may influence self-rated emotional intelligence, but it will likely vary in the degree to which it affects scoring on different dimensions.

Do Cultural Differences Affect the Accuracy of the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R?

The good news is that despite cultural differences in how emotions are expressed and valued, the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R remain valid assessments. Both tests have been found to accurately and reliably capture an individual's EI profile, providing a picture of relative strengths and development opportunities across a variety of cultural contexts. How is this possible?

Environmental factors like culture can contribute to how a test-taker scores their own emotional intelligence competencies. However, both the MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R do not reward high scores or penalize low scores because the “ideal” level of EI competencies will vary across situations. Furthermore, culture is not the only environmental factor that influences how and when emotions are expressed; other non-cultural factors may also affect self-rated scores (e.g., gravity of a situation, level of professionalism, familiarity with the audience). Strong assessments are built to take this type of situational and environmental variation into account and are therefore able to withstand differences due to cultural differences as well. Finally, the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R also comes with a report that gives individuals personalized feedback for each dimension of emotional intelligence. This means that test-takers receive a full EI profile with in-depth analysis on each dimension, regardless of the scores they give themselves. Consequently, results can be interpreted and analyzed on a dimension-by-dimension basis, preventing cultural norms or display rules around one particular dimension from affecting the assessment as a whole.

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

Are you interested in learning more about your own or your employees' EI profile? SIGMA's MEIA-R and MEIA-W-R are comprehensive assessments that are easy to administer and grounded in psychological research. If you're new to the MEIA-R/MEIA-W-R, check out our introductory blog [here](#), or [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 Humphrey, R. H. (2013). The benefits of emotional intelligence and empathy to entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Research Journal*, 3(3), 287-294.

² Miao, C., Humphrey, R., & Qian, S. (2017). A meta-analysis of emotional intelligence and work attitudes. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 90(2), 177-202.

³ Armstrong, A. R., Galligan, R. F., & Critchley, C. R. (2011). Emotional intelligence and psychological resilience to negative life events. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51, 331-336.

⁴ Li, G. S-F., Lu, F. J. H., & Wang, A. H-H. (2009). Exploring the relationships of physical activity, emotional intelligence and health in Taiwan college students. *Journal of Exercise Science & Fitness*, 7(1), 55-63.

⁵ O'Connor, P. J., Hill, A., Kaya, M., & Martin, B. (2019). The measurement of emotional intelligence: A critical review of the literature and recommendations for researchers and practitioners. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1116.

⁶ De Leersnyder, J., Boiger, M., & Mesquita, B. (2013). Cultural regulation of emotion: Individual, relational, and structural sources. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 55.

⁷ Lim, N. (2016). Cultural differences in emotion: Differences in emotional arousal level between the east and the west. *Integrative Medicine Research*, 5(2), 105-109.

⁸ Parker, C. B. (2016, February 22). *Culture shapes how leaders smile*. Greater Good Magazine. Retrieved from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/culture_shapes_how_leaders_smile.