

2010

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Chen, Guo-Ming. "The impact of intercultural sensitivity on ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension." *Intercultural Communication Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-9. <https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/01Guo-MingChen.pdf>
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The Impact of Intercultural Sensitivity on Ethnocentrism and Intercultural Communication Apprehension

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As one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence, intercultural sensitivity has shown significant impact on different culture-related variables. Among them, ethnocentrism and communication apprehension in the intercultural communication context remains unexplored. This study attempts to explore the relationship, if any, among the variables ethnocentrism, intercultural communication apprehension, and intercultural sensitivity. The survey research method was used to collect data from 432 students at a mid-sized university in the northeastern area of the United States. The results of Pearson product-moment correlations and stepwise regression analyses confirm the negative relationship between intercultural sensitivity and the two variables. Directions for future research in this line of study are discussed.

The importance of intercultural sensitivity has been emphasized by scholars from a variety of disciplines including Communication Studies, Education, and Psychology. Most have concluded that intercultural sensitivity is required for successful and productive communication between people from different cultural backgrounds (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Graf, 2004; Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2007; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rosen, Digh, Siinger, & Phillips, 2000). As Chen (2005) indicated, due to the rapid development of communication and transportation technology, globalization has brought together people of diverse cultures, ethnicities, geographies, and religions in every aspect of contemporary human life. Being sensitive to cultural differences becomes a critical ability to decrease ethnocentrism and parochialism and for being competent in intercultural or multicultural interactions. The intent of this study is to explore the relationship among the variables of intercultural sensitivity, ethnocentrism, and intercultural communication apprehension.

Intercultural sensitivity can be defined as “an individual’s ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). The concept was treated as one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence comprises three aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities; the cognitive ability is represented by intercultural awareness, the affective ability by intercultural sensitivity, and the behavioral ability by intercultural effectiveness or adroitness (Chen, 2009; Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2003, 2005; Hammer, 1989).

According to Bennett (1984, 1986), intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process, in which individuals are able to transform themselves from the ethnocentric stage to ethnorelative stage. There are six stages involved in this transformational process. First, in the *denial stage*, the persons deny the existence of cultural differences; second, in the *defense stage*, the persons attempt to defend their own world views by facing the perceived threat; third, in the *minimization stage*, the persons protect their core values by concealing

differences under the cover of cultural similarities; fourth, in the *acceptance stage*, the persons begin to recognize and accept cultural differences in both cognitive and behavioral levels; fifth, in the *adaptation stage*, the persons develop sensitive and empathic skills to adapt to cultural differences and move into the bicultural or multicultural level; and finally, in the *integration stage*, the persons are able to establish an ethnorelative identity and enjoy the cultural differences. Thus, interculturally-sensitive persons have the ability to project and receive positive emotional responses before, during, and after interactions, which in turn leads to a higher degree of satisfaction and helps people achieve an adequate social orientation that enables them to understand their own and their counterparts' feelings and behaviors (Gudykunst & Kim, 2002).

The positive emotional responses produced by intercultural sensitivity inevitably demonstrate an individual's willingness to not only acknowledge and recognize, but also to respect and appreciate cultural differences during intercultural interaction (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Chen, 2005). In other words, the acquirement of intercultural sensitivity refers to the absence of ethnocentrism and parochialism, which is a critical component for fostering successful global citizenship on both individual and organizational levels (Adler, 2008; Thorn, 2002).

Chen and Starosta (2000) contended that intercultural sensitivity is one of the essential factors for intercultural communication consists of five abilities, including (a) interaction engagement, (b) respect for cultural differences, (c) interaction confidence, (d) interaction enjoyment, and (e) interaction attentiveness, that taken together form the dimensions of intercultural sensitivity. Chen and Starosta's (2000) study indicated that individuals with high intercultural sensitivity tend to be more attentive, more able to perceive socio-interpersonal relationships in order to adjust their behaviors, to show high self-esteem and self-monitoring, more empathic, and more effective in intercultural interaction.

The research findings of intercultural sensitivity indicate that the concept is very likely related to the other two communication traits (ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension) which are central to understanding personal motivation and behavior in the process of intercultural communication. The purpose of this study then is to explore the potential impact of intercultural sensitivity on these two concepts.

Ethnocentrism teaches individuals to bond tightly with their group members and to feel "proud of their own heritages by subjectively using their cultural standards as criteria for interpretations and judgments in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 2005, p. 27). For a culture to survive, a certain degree of ethnocentrism from its members is necessary; however, when ethnocentrism grows to a certain level, it will become a barrier for communication among people from different cultures (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997a). Ethnocentrism leads persons to use their own group as the center of viewing things, which tends to develop prejudice by judging other groups as inferior to their own (Graen & Wakabayashi, 1994).

According to Lin and Rancer (2003), while ethnocentrism might potentially bring about positive outcomes such as patriotism and willingness to sacrifice for one's own group, its negative consequences are obvious in intercultural communication, because individuals with a high level of ethnocentrism tend to misperceive people from other groups and misinterpret

their behaviors. In addition, a higher degree of ethnocentrism also creates social distance in interaction among people from different cultures, which makes cross-cultural communication dysfunctional (Gudykunst & Kim, 2002; Lukens, 1978). These findings led to the following hypothesis, which indicates the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and ethnocentrism:

H1. There is a negative relationship between intercultural sensitivity and ethnocentrism.

Intercultural communication apprehension refers to “the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people from different groups, especially different cultural or ethnic groups” (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997a, p. 147). As Berger and Calabrese (1975) proposed, the lack of information about one another during initial interactions leads to the increase of the situational uncertainty or ambiguity, which in turn provokes feelings of anxiety or apprehension of interactants. The uncertainty level is especially high in intercultural communication because the novelty and unfamiliarity caused by the cultural differences is high (Gudykunst, 1995). The feeling of anxiety in an uncertain situation usually jeopardizes effective communication in an intercultural context (Gudykunst, 2005; Kassing, 1997; Kim, 1988).

Communication apprehension was found to be one of the best predictors of willingness-to-communicate in both intracultural and intercultural contexts (Lin & Rancer, 2003; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, 1991). More apprehensive individuals were not only less willing to disclose in intercultural interaction, but were also less able to adjust to a new cultural environment (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Neuliep & Ryan, 1998; Tominaga, Gudykunst, & Ota, 2003). All of these research findings infer that intercultural communication apprehension has a negative relationship with intercultural communication competence or effectiveness. As previously indicated, intercultural communication competence consists of the three dimensions of intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural effectiveness or adroitness, so thus it can be hypothesized that:

H2. There is a negative relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication apprehension.

In order to further explore the impact of the dimensions of intercultural sensitivity on the two concepts, the following research question was proposed:

RQ1. Which of the dimensions of intercultural sensitivity best predicts ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension?

Finally, the relationship between ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension was also studied:

RQ2. Is there a relationship between ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 432 undergraduate students (154 males, 275 females, and 3 missing data) in a mid-sized university in the northeastern area of the United States. The average age was 19.74 years.

Measures

Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale, Neuliep and McCroskey's (1997b) Generalized Ethnocentrism scale (GENE), and Neuliep and McCroskey's (1997a) Intercultural Communication Apprehension scale were used in this study to measure the three concepts. The 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity scale contains five dimensions: interaction engagement, respect of cultural differences, intercultural confidence, interaction enjoyment, and intercultural attentiveness. The dimension of interaction engagement concerns the participants' feeling of participation in the process of intercultural communication. Respect for cultural differences refers to how participants orient to or tolerate cultural differences in their counterparts. Interaction confidence indicates the participants' degree of confidence during the intercultural interaction. Interaction enjoyment deals with participants' reaction to communication that is culturally different. Interaction attentiveness reflects participants' efforts to understand what is going on in intercultural communication. The validity and reliability of the scale has shown stable validity and reliability in different cultural contexts (Fritz, Hentze, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2005; Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2002; Peng, 2006; Yu & Chen, 2008). The alpha coefficient of the scale was .86 in the original study and .88 in this study.

The 18-item GENE scale was used to measure the degree of participants' ethnocentrism. The original Cronbach's alpha was .92 and .80 in this study. The 14-item Neuliep and McCroskey's (1997a) Intercultural Communication Apprehension scale was used to measure the degree of participants' apprehension in intercultural context. The original Cronbach's alpha was .92 and .87 in this study.

Analysis

All measuring instruments used in this study are 5-point Likert scales. In order to examine the relationship among intercultural sensitivity, ethnocentrism, and intercultural communication apprehension (i.e., H1, H2, and RQ2), Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted. To answer RQ1 stepwise regression analyses were conducted.

Table 1.
Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Variables

Variables	IS	Ethno	ICA
Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)	--	-.54*	-.60*
Ethnocentrism (Ethno)		--	.28*
Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA)			--

Note. N = 432. *p<.01

Table 2.
Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses

1. Ethnocentrism					
Source of Variation	R	R ²	F	P	beta
Intercultural Engagement	.51	.26	152.57	.01	.51
2. Intercultural Communication Apprehension					
Cultural Differences	.67	.45	351.09	.01	-.50
Intercultural Enjoyment	.73	.54	351.09	.01	-.34

Note. N = 432.

Results

H1 predicted that a negative relationship exists between intercultural sensitivity and ethnocentrism. It was found that a significant correlation exists between the two variables at the $p < .01$, $r = -.54$. H2 predicted that a negative relationship exists between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication apprehension. The result showed that a significant correlation exists between the two variables at the $p < .01$, $r = -.60$. The result for the RQ2 showed that there is a positive correlation between ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension ($r = .28$, $p < .01$). Table 1 reports the results of the correlations.

Stepwise regression analyses were conducted to find out which of the five dimensions of intercultural sensitivity best predicted ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension as specified in RQ1. Each of the five dimensions was regressed into the variables separately. Results indicated that ethnocentrism was best predicted by intercultural engagement ($R = .51$, $R^2 = .26$, $F = 152.57$, $P < .01$, $Beta = .51$), and intercultural communication apprehension was best predicted by respect of cultural differences ($R = .67$, $R^2 = .45$, $F = 351.09$, $P < .01$, $Beta = -.50$) and intercultural enjoyment ($R = .73$, $R^2 = .54$, $F = 351.09$, $P < .01$, $Beta = -.34$). Table 2 summarizes the result of the stepwise regression analyses.

Discussion

The study investigated the impact of intercultural sensitivity on ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension. Both hypotheses were supported. The results showed that people with a higher degree of intercultural sensitivity were less ethnocentric and apprehensive in intercultural interaction. The results reinforced the importance of intercultural sensitivity as a necessary element for people to be competent in intercultural communication, in which using one's cultural standards as criteria for interpretations and judgments and communication anxiety are not encouraged.

Results further indicated that the lack of ethnocentrism was best predicted by intercultural engagement, and the lack of intercultural communication apprehension was best predicted by respect of cultural differences and intercultural enjoyment. The dimension of intercultural engagement reflects the aspect of intercultural sensitivity which basically refers to participants' delight and satisfaction in interacting with people from different cultures with an open mind and the ability to respond positively to their counterparts' messages. All of these characteristics of intercultural enjoyment will obviously lead to ethnorelativism rather than ethnocentrism. Respect of cultural differences and intercultural enjoyment both deal with the psychological and affective abilities that help participants better adjust to an uncertain or ambiguous situation caused by the unpredictable nature of intercultural interaction, so their prediction of psychological stresses such as intercultural communication apprehension is self-explanatory. These findings were consistent with previous research in the area of intercultural adaptation (e.g., Furnham, 1987; Kim, 1995; Ma, 2005; Ruben, 1976; Ruben & Keaey, 1979). Results of the positive relationship between ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension also supported previous related studies in this line of research (e.g., Khan & Wiseman, 2007; Lin & Rancer, 2003; Toale & McCroskey, 2001; Wrench, Corrigan, McCroskey, & Punyanunt-Carter, 2006).

Overall, the results of this study accentuate the importance of intercultural sensitivity in the globalizing society through its negative relationships with ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension that serve as the barriers in the process of communication. Because intercultural sensitivity is only one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence, future research can continue to explore the impact of other dimensions, intercultural awareness and intercultural effectiveness for example, on the same dependent variables to better understand the nature of being fully competent in the context of intercultural or multicultural communication.

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