



## Cross-cultural training effects on cultural essentialism beliefs and cultural intelligence

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### ABSTRACT

The study reports on the implementation of a brief intercultural training intervention as part of a university course. The intervention consisted of a series of six lectures, one simulation game and one behaviour modification session, administered over a period of four weeks. Measures of cultural essentialism and cultural intelligence (CQ) were obtained prior to the first lecture and one week after the completion of the last training session. A total of 107 students participated and pre-post test scores were matched for 49 participants. The findings show that cultural essentialism increased, but cognitive and meta-cognitive scores decreased following the intervention. Personality moderated the trainings' effectiveness: more open-minded students at Time 1 were more likely to report increases in motivational CQ at Time 2. Challenging claims about negative effects of psychological essentialism, cultural essentialism beliefs were positively related to both open-mindedness and cognitive CQ over Time. Implications for brief intercultural training interventions are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The increasing diversity in Western society requires greater cultural awareness of citizens. One of the main goals of intercultural training is to raise awareness and to sensitize individuals to cultural differences (e.g., Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000). Intercultural training has been shown to have some positive effects on the attitudes, beliefs and intercultural effectiveness of managers, although the effects are not always consistent (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Deshpande & Viwesvaran, 1992; Mendenhall et al., 2004; Morris & Robie, 2001). More work on the effectiveness of intercultural training is needed (Mendenhall et al., 2004), especially since much research has focused on expatriates or managers preparing for overseas assignments (Morris & Robie, 2001). The increasing diversity in Western society makes intercultural competency an important skill set for all citizens, especially young people preparing to enter the workforce. Therefore, it is timely to investigate whether intercultural training methods can sensitize individuals to cultural differences, even when they are not actively planning to work overseas. The first contribution is the reporting of the effects of a brief intercultural training intervention implemented within a university course. Are intercultural training components implemented in a university course curriculum effective in increasing raising cultural awareness?

Second, much research has focused on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, often in relation to specific target cultures. However, such an assessment may be insufficient for testing generalized effects of intercultural training and awareness programmes. The migration patterns over the last few decades have shifted so that Western societies such as the US, Canada, Australia, UK, The Netherlands and New Zealand have become truly multi-cultural. Individuals are likely to interact with members of various different cultural and ethnic groups within short periods of time. This requires both different types of

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skills and a broader assessment of programme effectiveness, focusing on general abilities and beliefs about culture (Earley & Peterson, 2004). Here, I focus on two such variables, namely essentialist beliefs about culture (whether cultures are seen as having some underlying essence that influences how members of a culture behave, see Fischer & Tilyard, *submitted for publication*) and cultural intelligence (Ang & van Dyne, 2008). These variables are not specific to any particular culture but capture general beliefs and self-reported abilities about culture and cultural sensitivity.

Third, intercultural training has focused on the effectiveness of various training methods. Less attention has been paid to effects of individual differences in training receptiveness (Mendenhall et al., 2004). In particular, the extent to which individuals are open-minded towards other cultures may strongly influence how people react to intercultural awareness training. Open-minded individuals are more likely to be creative, show higher training performance and are more likely to become entrepreneurs (e.g., Baer, 2010; Lievens, Harris, van Keer, & Bisqueret, 2003; Zhao & Seibert, 2006). Here, I am testing whether open-mindedness as a personality variable affects training effectiveness.

### 1.1. Intercultural training

The goal of intercultural training is to prepare individuals to deal effectively with cultural differences. There are various different training approaches. Brislin (1989) distinguished programmes in terms of (a) whether participant involvement is high, medium or low and (b) the focus of the intervention, that is whether the objective is to change cognitions, affect or behaviour. Historically, one of the most common methods is the lecture method (Fowler & Blohm, 2004; Mendenhall et al., 2004), in which participants are lectured passively on some specific culture-related topic. Positive aspects are the cost-effectiveness of lectures, the non-threatening nature to participants, the possibility to transmit large amounts of information in short periods of time and the high acceptability by participants (Fowler & Blohm, 2004). However, the passive nature and the lack of active engagement (low involvement, Brislin, 1989) with the topic might hinder its effectiveness (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000). Another large class of training methods are more experiential and involving, involving role-plays, simulation games and behaviour modification training (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Fowler & Blohm, 2004). There is some evidence that a combination of lecture and experiential methods is particularly effective (Bhawuk, 1998; Gannon & Poon, 1997; Mendenhall et al., 2004), as they balance the objective of training (involving cognition, affect and behaviour) and involvement of participants (Brislin, 1989).

I will briefly discuss two of these more experiential methods: BAFA BAFA (Shirts, 1977) and Excell (the excellence in cultural experiential learning and leadership programme, Mak, Barker, Logan, & Millman, 1999). BAFA BAFA is an intercultural simulation game (Shirts, 1977) that aims to increase intercultural awareness and adaptability to new cultural environments. Participants are divided into two different groups and are taught how to behave in a new culture (including complex values, behavioural norms and communication styles). Then, individuals from the two cultures interact with each other using their previously learned cultural scripts. These interactions simulate culture shock, communication barriers and the common experience of interacting with someone from another culture with very different cultural norms. It is highly challenging and emotionally involving as the cultural norms differ dramatically and participants typically cannot decode the values and behaviours of the other group and experience communication breakdowns. At the end of the session, participants take part in a thorough debriefing and discussion to share reactions, perceptions and feelings. Therefore, the focus is on sensitizing participants to the power of cultural norms and allowing trainees to question their own cultural norms, preconceptions and cultural identity (see Gannon & Poon, 1997; Gillespie, 1979). No specific cultural knowledge or behaviour is being trained.

In contrast, Excell (Mak, Barker, Logan, & Millman, 1999) is a behaviour modification training that uses principles of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) for teaching key sociocultural competencies (e.g., expressing disagreement, participating in group discussions, making contact) that enable newcomers to a culture to obtain access to the cultural context and to be able to negotiate successfully in the new environment. In contrast to programmes such as BAFA BAFA, the focus is on behavioural competence training involving observational learning and guided practice. Specific steps are taken to identify and reduce potential barriers such as anxiety and identity threats during intercultural interactions. Explanations are provided for specific behaviours and why they are or are not appropriate in certain situations. Participants construct a 'cultural map' to help them negotiate the new cultural surroundings. These behavioural maps are first modelled by actors behaving in culturally appropriate ways and trainees then repeatedly practice these skills while receiving feedback. Homework is often assigned and participants are encouraged to practice their skills outside the training environment. A typical training course stretches over six sessions. Excell has been used extensively with students and sojourners and has been shown to improve social efficacy and social interaction skills (Mak & Buckingham, 2007). Therefore, simulation games like BAFA BAFA challenge individuals to step out of their comfort zone and encourage critical reflection about cultural differences, whereas Excell allows participants to practice culturally appropriate skills in a safe environment.

In the current study, a combination of lectures, simulation and behavioural training was used to raise awareness about cultural differences. Training theory (Goldstein & Ford, 2002; Simpson, 1972) suggests that effective training is distributed and involves cognitive, affective and behavioural components. Similarly, cross-cultural training models (Bhawuk, 1998) suggest four major stages of intercultural expertise development, with a combination of methods being most effective in moving individuals to higher levels of expertise. The first stage discussed by Bhawuk (1998) is the unconscious incompetence stage in which participants are not aware of cultural differences. Conscious incompetence at the next state is associated with an awareness of cultural differences (participants have some declarative knowledge about these differences), but individuals cannot yet effectively interact with people from different cultural groups. Individuals at the conscious competence stage

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