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The relationship between ethnocentrism and cultural intelligence

Cheri A. Young^a, Badiah Haffejee^b, David L. Corsun^{a,*}^a University of Denver, 2044 E. Evans Avenue, Denver, CO 80208, United States^b Elizabethtown College, Department of Social Work, 215 Nicarry Hall, Elizabethtown, PA 17022, United States

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ABSTRACT

The business world is becoming more diverse and complex with the increase of legally-admitted refugees and immigrants in countries across the globe. The need for culturally-intelligent managers may be more pressing than ever. At the same time, ethnocentrism corresponding to the refugee crisis and mass migration appears to be on the rise. Yet, little is known about the effect of ethnocentrism on diversified working relationships and effective means of reducing ethnocentrism such that it does not impede the successful management of an emerging diverse workforce. Can one be ethnocentric and yet culturally intelligent at the same time? This study examined the relationship between these two constructs in general and the role of cultural intelligence (CQ) as a predictor of ethnocentrism, specifically. The data used to examine the CQ–ethnocentrism relationship was part of an ongoing study examining the efficacy of an experiential training program involving diversified mentoring relationships. In these relationships, primarily white, affluent, university students studying business were assigned to mentor refugees from diverse backgrounds being resettled in the U.S. Using a quasi-experimental design, we found that while ethnocentrism increased for the treatment group, it did not rise as much as it did in the control group, indicating a buffering effect for the diversified mentoring training intervention. Additionally, a negative relationship was found between CQ and ethnocentrism, with CQ predicting ethnocentrism. Discussion focuses on effectiveness of training interventions for increasing CQ and lowering ethnocentrism, and the need for consensus in conceptualization and operationalization of ethnocentrism.

Introduction

Increasingly businesses are expanding internationally and cultural diversity within domestic businesses is growing (Shannon & Begley, 2008). Additionally, businesses are reliant on expatriate managers who can quickly adjust to a new culture and demonstrate leadership effectiveness (Engle & Crowne, 2014). In short, the business world is becoming culturally complex (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Due to the multicultural, diverse, global world of commerce, businesses are increasingly focusing on selecting and developing employees with the ability to function effectively across and within different cultures (Engle & Nehrt, 2012). Managers and employees are being called upon to have knowledge of specific cultures as well as “generalizable psychological skills that allow them to interact fluidly with many cultural groups and multiethnic workers” (Reichard, Dollwet, & Louw-Potgieter, 2014, p. 152). These generalizable psychological skills are known as cultural intelligence (CQ). CQ is a higher-order construct capturing people’s knowledge about other cultures, their behavioral skills to act and respond in a culturally-appropriate manner across cultures, and their motivation and self-efficacy to interact and learn about other cultures.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: cheri.young@du.edu (C.A. Young), david.corsun@du.edu (D.L. Corsun).

Since CQ has been found to be associated with expatriate manager performance (Lee & Sukoco, 2010), cross-cultural adaptation and adjustment (Ang et al., 2007; Templer, Tay, & Chandrasekar, 2006; Ward & Fischer, 2008), and global leadership skills (Gunkel, Schlager, and Engle, 2014; Ng, Van Dyne, and Ang, 2009), researchers and practitioners alike have been searching for its antecedents (Engle & Nehrt, 2012), particularly those that may be increased by training. While CQ enables one to effectively interact in novel cultural settings, one's attitude regarding other cultures may be a precursor to whether or not one thinks and behaves in a culturally-appropriate way (Kraus, 1995). One such "cultural attitude" is ethnocentrism, which can be described as people's preference for their own cultural group over individuals of other groups. Ethnocentrism has been found to be related to individuals' success in interacting with those from other cultures (Harrison, 2012; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Stewart Black, & Ferzandi, 2006; Thomas, 1996). Ang et al. (2007) recommended that future research examine individual difference characteristics such as ethnocentrism as a potential predictor of CQ.

While a literature base and scattered research findings are beginning to accrue regarding the importance of CQ, with specific CQ training interventions being developed (MacNab, Brislin, & Worthley, 2012), less is known about ethnocentrism and effective means of reducing it. With the current refugee crisis and mass migration of people fleeing violence in their home countries (Collett, 2013; Phillips, 2013; UNHCR, 2016), we have seen increasing evidence of rising ethnocentrism (Bachman, 2016; Benton & Nielsen, 2013; Varkiani, 2016). Given the negative nature of ethnocentrism and its potential for thwarting the successful management of a culturally-diverse workforce and/or customer base, ethnocentrism appears in need of scholarly attention to the degree afforded CQ. While an initial research study found a negative correlation between CQ and ethnocentrism (Harrison, 2012), the study's author raised the question as to the "exact nature of the relationship between [the] two constructs [with it being an] issue which no research appears to have investigated in any depth previously" (p. 234). The lack of knowledge around this interrelationship begs the question: Can one be culturally intelligent yet ethnocentric?

Although cultural attitudes, such as ethnocentrism, have been pointed to as potential precursors to CQ (Kraus, 1995), work on CQ provides theoretical justification for the relationship operating in the reverse direction (Triandis, 2006). Hence, the main focus of this study was to explore the relationship between ethnocentrism and CQ as well as the role of CQ as a predictor of ethnocentrism. Using data from a larger study investigating the effectiveness of an experiential training intervention for increasing CQ, we examine the CQ–ethnocentrism relationship. The experiential training method involved diversified mentoring relationships (DMRs) between primarily white, affluent, university students studying business as mentors and newly resettled refugees in the U.S. as protégés. Using a quasi-experimental design, we examine the training's effectiveness in reducing ethnocentrism in the treatment compared to a control group. Additionally, examination of the relationship between CQ and ethnocentrism is presented. We begin first by mapping out the CQ and ethnocentrism domains, training methods proposed for reducing ethnocentrism, and the hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of the training program.

Literature review

CQ defined

The ability to function effectively in cross-cultural interactions at home or in overseas assignments – known as intercultural competence – is generally an attribute that is increasingly called upon in today's multicultural work environments (Earley & Gibson, 2002; Rosenblatt, Worthley, & MacNab, 2013; Tsui & Gutek, 1999; Van Dyne & Ang, 2006). More than 30 models of intercultural competence (IC) have been developed with over 300-related constructs across a variety of contexts including business, education, communications, and counseling (Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014). The majority of these models and constructs involve individual differences and conceptualize IC as a set of personal characteristics falling into three categories: traits, attitudes and worldviews, and capabilities. Intercultural traits refer to "enduring personal characteristics that determine an individual's typical behaviors in intercultural situations" (Leung et al., 2014, p. 490). Intercultural attitudes and worldviews refer to individuals' perceptions of and attitudes toward other cultures, or how they perceive information from outside their own cultures. Finally, intercultural capabilities refer to what a person can do to function appropriately and effectively in intercultural interactions (Earley & Ang, 2003), and includes the most widely researched examples of cultural intelligence (CQ) (Ang et al., 2007) and intercultural communication competence (ICC) (Arasaratnam, Banerjee, & Dembek, 2010; Gudykunst, 1993). While CQ and ICC models have developed at different times and in different contexts, with ICC's roots established in the 1980s primarily in the communications literature and CQ's roots established in the 2000s primarily in the business management literature, both conceptualize intercultural capabilities using cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. However, CQ also includes a metacognitive dimension.

Cognition involves knowing in a specific context, such as being able to add up four numbers read aloud. In the CQ context, cognitive CQ refers to one's knowledge of specific norms and practices within a particular culture (e.g., the rituals involved in wedding practices in Nepal). Metacognitive CQ refers to how individuals think about, reflect on, and understand the processes they use to generate and comprehend cultural knowledge in general (Ang et al., 2007). Metacognition involves a critical awareness of how one comes to know something in a specific context (thinking and learning), thus enabling one to learn about how he or she learns (awareness of oneself as a thinker and learner). In the addition example above, one using metacognition will know that he or she is able to do something best when the task is written down or when completing it twice to check for mistakes (an awareness of the processes used for thinking and doing). Thus, in the context of CQ, if using meta CQ, one can transfer or adapt one's learning to new contexts and tasks, such as learning about childbearing practices in Peru, by observation or interacting with locals, as he or she is aware that these learning strategies work best for him or her.

Behavioral CQ refers to the ability to consciously adjust one's behaviors for interacting in a new cultural environment. Someone

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