

Human Communication. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association. Vol. 12, No. 4, pp.357-370.

American and Asian College Students' Perceptions of Intercultural Effectiveness: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how the level of intercultural effectiveness is affected by ethnocentrism, interpersonal comfort, and self-confidence of American and Asian College student respondents based on simple regression analyses. The sample comprised 253 (132 Americans, 121 Asians) respondents. While hypothesis 2 was supported by the data, hypotheses 1 and 3 were not supported. For the American sample, the results indicated that ethnocentrism and self-confidence were not predictive of intercultural effectiveness, but interpersonal comfort was predictive of perceived intercultural effectiveness. For the Asian sample, the results indicated that ethnocentrism and interpersonal comfort were predictive of intercultural effectiveness, but self-confidence was not predictive of perceived intercultural effectiveness.

A major goal of an intercultural communication class is to develop a content-based course to help students negotiate effective intercultural relationships in a multicultural setting. Even though many conceptual models from theoretical (Varner, 2000) to pragmatic (Targowski & Bowman, 1988) to schemata (Beemer, 1995) have been developed, college students' intercultural effectiveness in a multicultural, multi-ethnic society is not guaranteed. Intercultural communication scholars suggest that the lack of students' intercultural communication competence may have some bearing on their intercultural effectiveness (Beamer, 1992, Hannigan, 1990). With this said, communication scholars have written that "communication is at the core of studies on the internationalization of the world's . . . intercultural experiences . . . , and cross-cultural negotiations that are common in those environments" (Monge & Riley, 1997, p. 325). Monge and Riley go on to say that ". . . globalizations invite diverse theoretical, humanistic, philosophical, interpretative, and empirical examination . . . and that [the] question of self-identity in the context of global connectivity and the tension between global and local cultural enactments center on homogenization and individuation" (p. 326).

While much intercultural communication research has examined intercultural adaptation (Hall & Hall, 1987), intercultural competence (Alptekin, 2002; Byram, 1997; Dinges & Baldwin 1996; Liaw, 2006; Spitzberg, 1994), intercultural communication encounters (Chen, 2002; Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996; Klopf & McCroskey, 2006), intercultural interaction (Chen, 2002; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), and intercultural relations (Burgoon & Hale, 1987; Hubbert, Guerrero, & Gudykunst, 1999), American and Asian college students' intercultural effectiveness has received little attention in the areas of ethnocentrism, interpersonal comfort, and self-confidence.

Since more Asians are attending American universities, the relationship between American and Asian college students' perceptions of their intercultural effectiveness in interpersonal relationships, interactions, and encounters should be studied. Since the American culture is an individualist society and the Asian culture a collectivistic one, research has shown cultural variation in American and Asian students' perceptions of intercultural effectiveness with outgroups. Consequently, collectivistic cultures (Asian cultures) "engage in a sharing/caring approach because of group commitments and group obligations, while [individualist cultures such as the American and other Western cultures] are more concerned with themselves and are more self-centered" (Dodd, 1998, p. 70).

In this paper, I explore the notion that American and Asian students' perceptions of intercultural effectiveness should be studied on an ongoing basis as they adapt to an ever changing multicultural, multiracial, and multi-ethnic academic setting. In doing so, the objective of this study is to expand the intercultural communication literature to study these variables as an ongoing learning experience to improve American and Asian college students' intercultural effectiveness in a multicultural society.

Intercultural Effectiveness

Most research on "intercultural effectiveness derives from the study of sojourners (business personnel, military personnel, foreign students, international development advisors, diplomats, etc.) has been gathered from people who live and work in another culture on a temporary basis but often for an extended period of time" (Kealy, 2002, p. 1). The questions may be asked, "What is intercultural effectiveness," and "what are the determinants of intercultural effectiveness?" A recent definition of intercultural effectiveness explains it

is one's "ability to relate with people from different cultural backgrounds so as to maximize the chance of mutually beneficial outcomes" (Simkhovych, 2009, p. 383), while the determinants of this concept involves but are not limited to the behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive, and personality traits (Mamman, 1995), as well as the emotional, communication style, and perceived appearance (race, ethnicity or language) of individuals (Dodd, 1998).

In Chesebro, Kim, and Lee's (2007) article, Chesebro, a past president for the National Communication Association (NCA), implored in his presidential address that the "discipline of communication should employ multiculturalism as a foundation for viewing communication as international" (p. 1). Beyond this, these communication scholars argue for a more cross-cultural perspective for assessing international communication, a perspective that would make the field of communication more conscious "about the pragmatic bias that has so consistently shaped communication, and that ultimately provides a foundation for identifying, characterizing, and distinguishing Western and Eastern strategies employed for dealing with international conflicts" (Chesebro, Kim, & Lee, p. 1). These scholars suggest that our current research programs do not adequately provide a framework for addressing communication conflict or what constitutes intercultural effectiveness and how we as a discipline can contribute to world that is immersed in conflict. If communication is seen as the vehicle to solving every imaginable problem, then it would be academically wise for us to rethink our perspective on the value orientation of intercultural communication theory. In doing so, we would be on our way to understanding the importance of intercultural effectiveness in a multicultural and multiracial world. For communication students, it is important for them to learn intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, and intercultural competence. Simkhovych (2009) writes that intercultural sensitivity is involves individuals' ability to "experience relevant cultural differences," while intercultural intelligence involves individuals' ability to "interpret someone's unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures . . ." (p. 384). If students understand the importance of conceptualizing intercultural sensitivity and intercultural intelligence by converging theory and practice, they could experience intercultural effectiveness and intercultural competence in their intercultural interactions and relationships with international and non international students. When students are interculturally sensitive to members belonging to other cultures, perhaps they would not embrace an ethnocentric attitude, assuming their culture is superior to someone else's.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is "still quite prominent in the world in which many groups and cultures assume superiority and tend to reject and exploit those belonging to other groups and cultures" (Bizumic, Duckitt, Popadic, Dru, & Krauss, 2009, p. 871). Ethnocentrism suggests that people engage in superior cultural attitudes about other cultures. Most scholars share the basic elements of this definition, but few have reconceptualized it. Bizumic et al. have reconceptualized ethnocentrism to include ethnic group self-centeredness, with three intergroup expressions of ingroup preference: superiority, purity, and exploitativeness with two intragroup expressions of group cohesion and devotion to one's own group. In their study, Bizumic et al. go on to inform us that this concept has been traditionally "operationalized as social distance" (p. 872), which adversely affects harmonious intergroup relations. Most college students who engage in cross-cultural relationships and encounters believe that ethnocentrism is a natural phenomenon and a

necessity for building and developing one's own [culture], but should be less practiced (Stull & Von Till, 1994).

Bizumic et al.'s claim that current research indicates that ethnocentrism is differentially related to outgroup negativity and mere ingroup positivity, and that it is not equivalent to them. Intergroup, but not intragroup, ethnocentrism [has been] associated with outgroup negativity" (p. 893). Yet other scholars claim that ethnic prejudice and social segregation underlie ethnocentrism (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). Daniel Bar-Tal (2008), a renowned political psychology scholar, also argues that "attitudes of prejudice . . . often lead to behaviors of exploitation, discrimination, and mass killings and even to ethnic cleansing and genocide" (p. 1), such as what happened to African Americans and other ethnic groups in America, the Jews in Nazi Germany, the Koreans and other Asian groups during World War II, and more recently to the Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats during the Bosnian War. Given his work on coexistence education, Bar-Tal argues for the recognition and legitimate existence of all ethnic groups of people. When relational equality prevails, most outgroup members would feel a sense of world recognition and state legitimacy.

Pratto and Glasford (2008) ask, "How much is human life worth?" For these scholars, the "question is offensive in many ethical systems" (p. 1411), especially in America where the Constitution claims that all Americans are equal. When all ethnic groups in both Western and non-Western societies are recognized for their cultural uniqueness, then we would be in a better position to see and embrace cultural differences as a positive phenomenon. McLaren (1998) stresses the importance of getting to know "unfamiliar people and customs and achieving greater cognitive flexibility through [effective] intercultural interaction" (p. 2). Like McLaren, other scholars claim that the underlying dimensions of culture at "both the societal (cultural) and individual (psychological) levels should prove very useful in addressing cultural and ethnic variations in social support and helping behavior" (Kaniasty & Norris, 2000, p. 547). Accordingly, I propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: Ethnocentrism and intercultural effectiveness will not differ between American and Asian students.

Interpersonal-Social Comfort

If ethnocentrism means one group believes its culture is superior to another, an ethnocentric attitude would likely hinder individuals' ability to experience interpersonal-social comfort from other cultural groups. Considering this circumstance, individuals' inability to experience interpersonal-social comfort could debilitate intercultural effectiveness between cultural groups. Social support resources are useless if individuals cannot use them in an interpersonal or social context (Vaux, Burda, & Stewart, 1986). Interpersonal comfort has been used interchangeably with social comfort. In this paper, I use the construct of social comfort to mean the same as interpersonal comfort. Since interpersonal interaction is usually studied as interaction between two people, social comfort has been studied as interrelational comfort between two individuals.

Interpersonal-social comfort has been studied in relation to mentoring, and a considerable amount of research has focused its attention on the role that effective formal or informal mentorship plays in an interpersonal context (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Ragins, 1999). Beyond this, interpersonal-social comfort has been "cited as an important component to the bonding process in business relationships" (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005,

p. 157). Research on the bonding process between American and Asian students in an academic setting has focused little to no attention on the interpersonal comfort they might share with each other. Conventional wisdom tells us that diversified cultural relationships are “less likely to be marked by interpersonal comfort than are homogeneous relationships because of restricted shared social identities” (Allen, Day, & Lentz, p. 157).

At the heart of restricted shared identities are Hofstede’s (1980, 1991) and Hofstede and Bond’s (1984) dimensions of cultural variability: individualism (power of the individual) and collectivism (power of the group). In individualistic cultures, interpersonal relationships begin and end quickly, which offers little time for individuals to experience interpersonal-social comfort. That is, many people can be in one social circle, but the circle boundary is not clear and the social structure is decentralized. Individuals’ identity is rooted in oneself and the person’s accomplishments. On the other hand, interpersonal-social comfort in collectivistic cultures is rooted in relationships which depend on trust. They build up slowly, but are stable, which provides opportunities for individuals to receive interpersonal-social comfort. Unlike individualistic cultures, things in collectivistic cultures get done based on relationships with people, where individuals’ identity is rooted in family, culture, and work.

Empirical findings would suggest that interpersonal-social comfort would be lower in diversified relationships. Accordingly, interpersonal-social comfort should relate positively to measured intercultural effectiveness with reference to “in-group pride, ethnic identification, and intragroup contact. . .” (Rollock & Vrana, 2005, p. 391), which lend themselves to one’s self-confidence in an intercultural context. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posed:

H₂: Interpersonal-social comfort and intercultural effectiveness will not differ by between American and Asian students?

Self-confidence

Over the past five decades, much research has been produced on self-confidence in the field of psychology (Kleitman, 2003; Mais, 1951; Stankov & Crawford, 1997; Wrenn, 1948) and has been linked to individuals’ performance (Stankov & Crawford, 1997) and their ability to interact with others. Self-confidence is a necessary skill for successful intercultural effectiveness. Self-confidence is also linked to one’s self-construal, that is, how individuals define themselves or regard themselves in relations to others in cultural and intercultural contexts (Gao, 1996; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1991, 1999; Kashima & Hardie, 2000; Walker, Deng, & Dieser, 2001; Walker, Jackson, & Deng, 2008). Self confidence can also be linked to individuals’ cognitive and emotional state, involving one’s assertive ability to handle criticism. Interculturally effective people have strong self-confidence and have learned that this construct is crucial to effective interpersonal interaction and intercultural encounters with others from different cultures in this multiethnic society. With this said, confidence is a learned behavior. In individualistic societies, self-confidence is an individual attribute, and it is up to the individuals to acquire it. If the individuals do not acquire it, they would have to accept sole responsibility for not acquiring it. On the other hand, self confidence in collectivistic societies is a group attribute, and it is left up to the group to bestow confidence upon individual members. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: Self-confidence and intercultural effectiveness will differ between American and Asian students.

Method

Respondents and Procedure

Respondents in this study were 253 students enrolled in six intercultural communication classes. Of the 253 participants attending a PWI located in the Midwest, 132 respondents were American students and 121 respondents were Asian students. Respondents were asked to complete four self-report assessment questionnaires (Scale with E-MODEL, for Intercultural Effectiveness, Ethnocentrism, Interpersonal Comfort, and Self-Confidence). One of the department's top undergraduate students, registered for an independent study research course with the researcher, entered the data in an SPSS file. The researcher tested the variables for reliability and factor analysis to determine significant predictive validity of all four scales.

Measures

Scale with E-MODEL, for Intercultural Effectiveness. Intercultural effectiveness was measured using Walter, Choonjaroen, Bartosh, and Dodd (1995) 22-item instrument, which appears in Dodd's (1998) *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication* textbook and asks, "Being around foreign people makes me nervous" and "Friendships with people from countries other than mine are important to me." Each item was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In this present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability for the Walter, Choonjaroen, Bartosh, and Dodd's instrument was $\alpha = .84$.

Ethnocentrism Scale. Ethnocentrism was measured using Gregg Hood's (1995) 17-item instrument, which appears in Dodd's (1998) textbook and asks, "Visitors to America will naturally want to adopt [American] customs as soon as possible" and "In reality members of other cultures cannot adequately copy the characteristics of American culture." Each item was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In this present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability for Hood's ethnocentrism instrument was $\alpha = .87$.

Interpersonal-social Comfort Scale. Interpersonal comfort was measured using Laurie Norton Diles' 14-item instrument, which appears in Dodd's (1998) textbook and asks, "When I meet someone for the first time, I would judge my interpersonal effectiveness to be pretty good" and "In my conversations with people, I feel many people judge my communication effectiveness to be less than adequate." Each item was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In this present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability for Dile's instrument was $\alpha = .91$.

Self-Confidence Scale. Self-confidence was measured using Joe Cardot's 10-item instrument, which appears in Dodd's (1998) textbook and asks, "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others" and "I am able to do things at least as well as most other people." Each item was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In this present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability for Cardot's instrument was $\alpha = .84$.

To isolate acceptable factors, the scales for interpersonal comfort, ethnocentrism, and self-confidence were subjected to a factor analysis with a minimum primary loading of .50. For these scales, a three-factor, maximum likelihood analysis produced the most

interpretable results. The maximum likelihood procedure is a method of obtaining the initial solution that seeks to identify the population parameters with a maximum likelihood of generating the observed sample distribution (Kim & Mueller, 1978). For the interpersonal comfort scale, 6 items loaded most highly; for the ethnocentrism scale, 6 items loaded most highly; and for the self-confidence scale only 4 items loaded most highly. With a combined total of 16 items loading most highly, the analysis indicates a fair measure for all three scales. The factor had an eigenvalue of 5.18 and explained 28.8% of the variance. The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 1.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Okin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was used to evaluate the factor solution. A .60 KMO measure ranging in value from 0 to 1 is considered acceptable (Norusis, 1985). The KMO measure for the factor analysis (KMO = .65) was adequate.

Table 1
Factor Analysis for Interpersonal Comfort, Ethnocentrism, and Self-Confidence

<i>Scale Item</i>	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>
Interpersonal Comfort			
With businesspeople, we speak the same language, but I leave conversation feeling ineffective.	.85		
When I express my ideas with a group of people, I often have the feeling that my words fall on deaf ears.	.84		
I feel many people judge my communication effectiveness to be less than adequate.	.83		
My interpersonal communication skills seem fairly ineffective when talking with higher class people.	.80		
I often walk away with a feeling I have said the wrong thing or done something the wrong way and was ineffective in my interpersonal communication.	.76		
My interpersonal communication is ineffective, but only in a limited sense.	.74		
Ethnocentrism			
No country has done more for the advancement of civilization than the USA		.80	
It is unwise to trust a foreigner until you know him better.		.79	
Visitors to America will naturally want to adopt our customs as soon as possible.		.78	
Most people in the world really wish they could become American citizens.		.73	
It would be better if English were spoken as a universal language.		.70	
Western cultures are more civilized than African Cultures.		.66	
Self-Confidence			
I take a positive attitude toward myself.			.74
I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.			.73
I feel that I do not have much to be proud of			

Table 1 cont. . . .

All in all, I am inclined to feel that am a failure	.66
I am able to do things at least as well as most other people.	.65

*Note: Eigenvalue = 5.18, Variance = 28.8%

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that ethnocentrism and intercultural effectiveness will not differ between American and Asian students. The hypothesis was not supported. *Hypothesis 2* predicted that interpersonal-social comfort and intercultural effectiveness will not differ between American and Asian students. The hypothesis was supported. *Hypothesis 3* predicted that self-confidence and intercultural effectiveness will differ between American and Asian students. The hypothesis was not supported.

To explore the relative influence of ethnocentrism, interpersonal-social comfort, and self-confidence on intercultural effectiveness within the American and Asian samples, multiple regression analyses were conducted. In these analyses, ethnocentrism, interpersonal-social comfort, and self-confidence are the explanatory (independent) variables, and intercultural effectiveness is the response (dependent) variable. The results of these regression analyses for the American sample are presented in Table 2, and the results for the Asian sample are presented in Table 3.

For the American sample, the results indicated that ethnocentrism (standardized $b = -.073$, $t = -.326$, $p > .05$) and self-confidence (standard $b = -.254$, $t = -1.078$, $p > .05$) were not predictive of intercultural effectiveness, but interpersonal comfort (standardized $b = .718$, $t = 2.973$, $p < .05$) was predictive of perceived intercultural effectiveness.

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analyses with American Sample

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	t	p
Intercultural Effectiveness					
Ethnocentrism	-.136	.416	-.073	-.326	.750
Interpersonal Comfort	.723	.243	.718	2.973	.011
Self-Confidence	-.234	.217	-.254	-1.078	.301
Model Statistics: $R = .65$, $R^2 = .42$, $F(2,130) = 3.099$, $p > .05$					

For the Asian sample, the results indicated that ethnocentrism (standardized $b = .496$, $t = 3.116$, $p < .05$) and interpersonal comfort (standard $b = .739$, $t = 3.284$, $p < .05$) were predictive of intercultural effectiveness, while self-confidence (standardized $b = -.194$, $t = -.855$, $p > .05$) was not predictive of perceived intercultural effectiveness.

Table 3
Multiple Regression Analyses with Asian Sample

Variable	B	SE B	Beta	t	p
Intercultural Effectiveness					
Ethnocentrism	.502	.161	.496	3.116	.005
Interpersonal Comfort	.810	.247	.739	3.284	.003
Self-Confidence	-.199	.233	-.194	-.855	.402

Table 3 cont. . . .

Model Statistics: $R = .70$, $R^2 = .49$, $F(2,119) = 6.958$, $p < .05$

Discussion

This study examined how the level of intercultural effectiveness is influenced by ethnocentrism, interpersonal comfort, and self-confidence for American and Asian College student based on simple regression analyses. The importance of intercultural effectiveness is evidenced by the findings of this study.

To test the *first hypothesis*, regression analyses indicated that ethnocentrism does not influence intercultural effectiveness for this sample of students. Specifically, ethnocentrism did not predict American and Asian students' intercultural effectiveness, even though a moderate amount of variance in intercultural effectiveness was accounted for by ethnocentrism (70 percent for the American student sample, and 65 percent for the Asian student sample). Perhaps ethnocentrism did not predict either group's intercultural effectiveness because ethnocentrism is an intrinsic value that both groups possess but choose where and when to use it. That is, there is no need for either group to feel superior over the other group if they experience feelings of cultural pride. In this technological age, American and Asian college students play a major role in shaping change in global activities. When individuals graduate from college and are hired into professional positions that may take them abroad, they have the opportunity to engage in meaningful encounters and interaction with other cultural groups. Instead of feeling superior to those in the host culture, individuals try to learn something about the other culture. We find more college-educated Americans working in Asian countries and more college-educated Asians shaping the face of race-relations in America.

To test the *second hypothesis*, regression analyses indicated that interpersonal-social comfort was predictive of both groups' intercultural effectiveness. The hypothesis was supported. We can assume that interpersonal comfort influences both groups' intercultural effectiveness because of the changing face of classrooms. Conventional wisdom tells us that diversified cultural relationships are "less likely to be marked by interpersonal comfort than are homogeneous relationships because of restricted shared social identities" (Allen, Day, & Lentz, p. 157). However, in a classroom setting, American and Asian students work closely with one another on group projects, thus deriving some social comfort from each other. Given the nature of assigned group projects, students have opportunities to bond with members of culturally diverse groups, thus changing the way these individuals have traditionally viewed one another. Since this sample of students has studied intercultural communication and learned about perceived cultural differences, they have learned that cultural differences is not a negative factor to achieving interpersonal-social comfort from outgroup members. Second, they have learned that cultural diversity even exists within their own culture. Said differently, American and Asian students have been made aware that they still have choices as to what groups with whom they choose to associate while preferring to maintain a robust social or personal identification with their own national group.

To test the *third hypothesis*, regression analyses indicated that self-confidence was not predictive of perceived intercultural effectiveness for both groups. The hypothesis

was not supported by the data. We can assume that the two groups did not differ on these two variables because Americans learn early in life that self-confidence is integral to success. Since pride in country is embedded in the cultural infrastructure of America, American students are socialized to acquire self-confidence. For the Asian sample, we can assume that self-confidence comes from their ability to compete with any other cultural group. Asian Americans have been considered a model minority of educational achievement, overrepresentation at prestigious universities, and a high percentage of Asian Americans work in white collar professions such as law, medicine, finance, and investment banking.

In sum, these findings add to our understanding of intercultural communication associated with developing instructional excellence in the classroom. For effective teaching to take place, intercultural communication teachers-researchers should promote higher levels of learning in culturally diverse classroom settings through activities where interpersonal-social comfort, self-confidence, and intercultural effectiveness can blossom and where an ethnocentric attitude has no place. Future research should investigate the perceptions of American and Asian students in different geographical location where interpersonal contact is at its highest peak. These results should be interpreted with caution.

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