An Exploratory Test of the Effects of Computer-assisted Intercultural Training
A Possible Means for Reducing Ethnic Conflict?

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Abstract

In an attempt to find a solution to the problems of ethnic conflict Intercultural Sensitizers, a form of intercultural training, were tested in this research In the first study, an exploratory study of the effects of interactive digital intercultural training showed that the difference between pretest and posttest scores of these seventeen participants was significant (p < .0001), i.e. there was an improved attitude change towards African Americans by Korean Americans. A second study was conducted to increase the sample size. Results again showed that the training was highly effective in changing behavioral intentions of Koreans, with the differences between the pretest and posttest scores showing significant positive change.

Keywords: *ethnic conflict, intercultural training, Intercultural Sensitizer, attributional approach, stereotypes, Korean Americans, African Americans*

Introduction

Racial and ethnic conflict has been in existence since at least the earliest history of humankind. Contemporary history has been marked with endemic racial and ethnic strife in virtually all parts of the globe as well, as evidenced in history books.

Especially after 9/11 threats to ethnic identities seem to have intensified, with acts of violence against Muslims and other ethnic groups rising (Smith, 2002). For example, there were reports of a backlash against Muslims nationwide across the United States, including threatening calls made to an Islamic elementary school in Milwaukee and a Florida preacher who burned the Koran (Tomsho, Carton, Pereira, Calahan, & Dorsey, 2001; Hampson, 2010). Actual lives were also lost in the "Islamophobia", including a Muslim cab driver being stabbed in New York city (Hampson, 2010).

Although the 9/11 incident happened in the U.S., its aftershocks were felt in Europe as well: The European Monitoring Center on Racism and Zenophobia reported that there were increased incidents of harassment of those who "looked Muslim" in Europe, resulting in unprovoked attacks against women wearing headscarves during the year after 9/11. In France, there were also more reported attacks on Jews and Jewish synagogues during this same time period as well. In Paris, the crimes prompted a justice minister to publicly state his concern for the worrisome increase in Anti-Semitic crimes (Smith, 2002). In England, three Muslim men died after a conflict over a mosque looting incident (Hampson, 2010).

Even more recently in 2012 in the United States, ethnic incidents have garnered national attention with such incidents as the notorious killing of Black teen Trayvon Martin by a Hispanic neighborhood watch guard in Sanford, Florida, which made national headlines. This incident provoked strong repercussions, especially among members of the Black community. For example, a Black military group set a bounty of $10,000 for Zimmerman's arrest, and numerous rallies were held in cities across the nation, from Baltimore to San Diego (Bello & Alcindor, 2012). President Obama is cited as stating that if he had a son, he would look like Trayvon, and that the nation should do some soul searching to figure out how something like that happened (O'Brien, 2012).

As ancient and contemporary history shows, these incidents of ethnic resentment and their after-effects are not isolated spontaneous incidents, but rather they are indices of a deeper festering misunderstanding and resentment between cultures. The lurking undercurrents of ethnic antagonism surfaces and manifests itself throughout history. Among these antagonisms, ethnic resentment is especially strong between those of Asian and African descent in the United States.

As recently as in April 2012, D.C. Council member Marion Barry ignited racial tensions once again by disparaging Asian businesses and suggesting that they close their "dirty shops". He stated that the shops should instead be owned by Blacks (Inoue, 2012). This is not the first time that D.C. politicians have made such contentious comments towards Asians: Malike Shabazz, one of 21 candidates to fill the then D.C. Mayor Marion Barry's unexpired term, promised to start an economic boycott of Asian shops in Southeast Washington D.C. in retaliation for alleged racial incidents (Harris, 1995).

The lurking antagonism between immigrants of Asian descent and African Americans have a deep-rooted history (Fulbright, 2007; Wong, 1992). In April 1992, the "most violent urban riot in American history" broke out: fifty-one people died, and property worth $750 million was lost (Miles, 1992). The spark that ignited the riot was the Rodney King verdict, an incident in which an African American was brutally beaten by L.A. police officers, an incident for which they received a not guilty verdict in the courts. However, the riot quickly expanded to become an ethnic fight, with the main targets of African Americans aggression being Korean merchants in L.A.

While that incident was three decades ago, ethnic conflict between Asians and African Americans has continued to fester over the years. More recently, increasing acts of aggression against Asians have been witnessed in the San Francisco area, with more Asians moving into the area. For example, in early 2010 an 83-year old Chinese man died of a beating by black teens in San Francisco. Later that year, two black teenagers allegedly punched and killed a 59-year old Chinese man (Ardalan, 2010).

Significance of the Problem

Inflaming the ethnic antagonism between Asians and Blacks is the increasing numbers of Asians in the United States. Among the immigrant groups Asians figure the largest, with their numbers reaching 18 million in 2010 (Min, 2012). As such, the increase in the number of Chinese is seen as one of the major inflammatory factors for the spike in "Black-on-Asian" violence in San Francisco in 2010 (Nevius, 2010). While Asians have garnered the "Model Minority" label due to their success stories as hard-working immigrants to the United States, African Americans feel that Asians are "invading" their turf and reaping benefits that should rightly go to African Americans (Nevius, 2010; NPR, 2010; Wong, 1992).

The resentment between Blacks and Asians are based on two major reasons: economic and intercultural misunderstandings. In terms of the economic reason, Blacks see Asians as invaders of neighborhood turf, and their economic opportunities along with them (Nevius, 2010; Inoue, 2012; Wong, 1992). They believe that Asians use their business savvy to unfairly exploit the Black community (Won, 1992). Some even see Asians as profiteers, as the equivalent of greedy Wall Street bankers who benefit on behalf of the "other 99%" (Inoue, 2012). In short, they see the "American pie" as a zero-sum game, and that Asians are benefitting wrongly to the detriment of African Americans.

Asians, for their part, see African Americans as wrongly persecuting them due to jealousy over Asians' economic successes, arduously garnered through grueling hard work for the sake of their immigrant families (Inoue, 2012). Asians are also resentful that Blacks seem to gather social service benefits along with Hispanics, rather than undergo the personal hardships that Asians have to experience to get ahead (Wong, 1992). In short, they are tired of being called the "Model Minority" and of being wrongly resented for their successes.

A second main reason for antagonism between these two ethnic groups is lack of cultural understanding (Ardalan, 2010; Mullins, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011). Misunderstandings of nonverbal communication differences such as that arising from Korean merchants not touching the skin of African Americans as they return their change in the Korean shops, is one example of such cultural misunderstandings. Among these two underlying reasons for conflict, economic success of, and equitable, harmonic relations between all ethnic groups is certainly a worthy goal, but one that is beyond the scope of this paper.

On the other hand the second reason, cultural misunderstanding between the two ethnic groups, is one that can be more readily investigated and addressed within the scholarship of intercultural communication. Therefore we may conclude that intercultural training will provide a more precipitous and feasible solution. Intercultural sensitivity can be enhanced through training. The purpose of this paper is to describe the significance of this proposed study to the issue of understanding and resolving violence and, more specifically, to test a method of intercultural sensitivity training designed to increase cultural understanding between two ethnic groups; Koreans and African Americans. Various authors, including the present author through empirical research for dissertation work, have found this training method to be an effective method for reducing stereotypes and increasing "isomorphic attributions" (Albert, 1983, 1995, 1996; Triandis, 1975; Yook, 1996).

The Intercultural Sensitizer

The Intercultural Sensitizer has received the greatest empirical validation for its effectiveness (Albert, 1983, 1995; Brislin, Brandt, & Landis, 1983). Intercultural Sensitizers are especially effective in increasing cultural awareness, increasing cross-cultural understanding, and in inducing more positive attitudinal responses to paper and pencil measures (Albert, 1983, 1995; Albert & Adamopoulos, 1980; Mitchell, Dossett, Fiedler & Triandis, 1971; Yook, 1996). Several studies of the effects of the Intercultural Sensitizer or cultural assimilators, as they were formerly called, showed that they lead to greater knowledge of another culture, more accurate information about the way members of the other culture make attributions, and less stereotyping (Albert, 1983, 1995, 1996; Albert & Adamopolous, 1980; Brislin & Pedersen, 1976; Mitchell, Dossett, Fiedler & Triandis, 1972; Triandis, 1975; Weldon, Carlston, Rissman, Slobodin, & Triandis, 1975). While large numbers of Intercultural Sensitizers were considered necessary to be effective, Yook and Albert (1999) found that just ten episodes administered in less than twenty minutes had the effect of reducing negative reactions to non-native speakers of English to a highly statistically significant degree.

Intercultural Sensitizers are instruments consisting of a large number of episodes or "critical incidents" depicting interactions between persons from two cultures followed by alternative attributions to their behavior. A programmed learning format is used and participants from culture A are asked to select the attribution they believe members of culture B typically would select. After each choice members are given instant feedback on their answers and are asked to continue until they select the answer given by members of culture B (Albert, 1983). Learning takes place as participants in the intercultural training session choose one or more of the alternatives and find the cultural explanations for the correctness or incorrectness of their choices (Brislin, 1986). Research suggests that participants benefit from reading explanations for both correct and incorrect answers (Malpass & Salancik, 1977).

This training format is, therefore, well-suited for learning via an interactive CD rom: The critical incidents and responses are easily programmed into an interactive software format, which is expected to motivate learners to stay on task. There are a number of advantages of the Intercultural Sensitizer mentioned by Albert (1995): (1) it actively engages the learner, (2) it utilizes a programmed learning format, making it possible for individuals to get immediate feedback, (3) it allows individuals to progress at their own pace, (4) it can be used repeatedly, (5) it can be used individually or in groups, and (6) it can be used together with other methods such as role play or discussion.

Intercultural Sensitizers are also known for their versatility in that they can be tailored to various age groups and to deal with both cognitive and experiential learning (Albert, 1995; Brislin, Landis & Brandt, 1983). Studies have been conducted on the Intercultural Sensitizer using the both the combined method of Intercultural Sensitizer along with role playing, vs. the conventional Intercultural Sensitizer alone (Albert, Triandis, Brinberg, Ginorio & Anderson, 1979; Crespo, 1982; Yook & Albert, 1999). While Albert et al. (1979) found that role playing was viewed more favorably than the alternative training method used (self-insight training) and the role playing group learned significantly more of the kind of information asked for in the post-test, Crespo (1982) and Yook and Albert (1999) failed to find any significant advantage to using the role play activity in addition to the conventional Intercultural Sensitizer. Albert (1983) states that "Although some recent studies have employed role playing as well as the ICS [Intercultural Sensitizer] more research is needed to delineate the kinds of problems that are better solved by each approach, as well as by various combinations of techniques" (pp. 210-211).

Furthermore, a novel way of presenting the training session that would reduce staffing needs of the training is also tested in the major study; the training is to be presented in an interactive CD rom format. The CD rom format is intuitively suited for this kind of programmed cultural learning, as the cultural stories, or "episodes" as they are called in the literature, are easily input into a software file, which will branch off into various selections that the trainee can choose as the plausible response for that cultural situation. As the trainees make their selections, learning takes place when the software indicates that they have the correct answer, or the answer that makes sense for the culture they are studying, or that they have to choose again because there is a more plausible answer. For this kind of training, interactive software in CD rom format is the perfect match.

In addition to the fact that the content of the training is easily programmable into a CD rom format, there are two additional reasons to consider. First the younger generation, an important target population for intercultural training, is typically technologically savvy and is accustomed to working with the computer. Therefore, it will be an intuitively suited way for them to learn. Secondly, the CD rom is expected to hold their attention for longer periods. Time on task is important for learning to take place and the CD rom is a well suited format for this intercultural training.

As the Intercultural Sensitizer has been empirically tested and found to be effective, the creation and implementation of intercultural training, with the Intercultural sensitizer in CD rom format will be conducted and tested for its effectiveness in this study. In other words, this study will answer the following research question: "How effective is the use of the interactive CD rom training based in the Intercultural Sensitizer format in reducing stereotypes and promoting intercultural understanding?"

Method

Intercultural Sensitizer Preparation

Some preliminary work has already been conducted to create the Intercultural Sensitizer scenarios. Korean and African ethnic groups were interviewed, and based on the information gathered through the interviews the scenarios and plausible responses for the Intercultural Sensitizers were created. After the Intercultural Sensitizers were created, they were checked for validity by testing them on another set of respondents, from both cultures, assessing how valid and plausible the responses were (Yook, Albert & Ha, 2000). The following procedures were conducted in creating the Intercultural Sensitizers.

In order to create the episodes for the Intercultural Sensitizer, the real life stories about interactions that were particularly striking or problematic were gathered through interviews with persons from both ethnic groups. Since the ethnic background of an interviewer may bias the responses of respondents, interviews were only conducted by interviewers from the same culture as the interviewees. That is, Korean interviewees were interviewed by Korean interviewers in Korean, and African Americans were interviewed by an African American interviewer in English.

First the investigators located a phone directory of nonprofit organizations in a large, midwestern metropolitan area. This directory contained the contact persons, telephone numbers, and addresses for both Korean and African American churches, campus groups, and community associations. Interviewees were selected randomly from the non-profit directory and were asked for their consent to participate in this study.

The consent procedure and questions were written first in English, then back-translated into Korean by two Korean/English bilinguals. The procedure for asking questions was kept as equivalent across cultures as possible. A total of sixteen interviews were conducted, eight with African Americans, and eight with Koreans. Seven of the African American and six of the Korean interviews were conducted by phone. The remaining interviews were conducted face to face. The interviews lasted approximately twenty to forty minutes.

Random selection from the non-profit organization directory resulted in a wide range of respondents in terms of age and occupation. The Korean interviewees ranged in age from twenty five to sixty, while the African American interviewees ranged from twenty two to fifty five. In terms of occupation, the Korean sample included, among others, a social worker, a pastor, and a car mechanic; the African American sample included an accountant, a school administrator, a nurse, and a homemaker.

After stories of interaction with persons from the other culture were collected, attributions about the person from the other culture were obtained. The two attributions which were most commonly mentioned during the interviews by persons from each of the ethnic groups, or which had been mentioned in the research literature, were selected for the Intercultural Sensitizer. Therefore each story was followed by four alternatives, two reflecting the responses most commonly mentioned by Koreans, and two reflecting the responses most commonly mentioned by African Americans. The attributions reflected the stereotypes that members of each cultures held about the other, such as for example, viewing the other as lacking in intelligence, or as getting special treatment from the government.

A total of fifteen episodes were constructed, as research by Yook and Albert (1999) indicated that merely ten episodes were sufficient to make a highly significant difference in the perceptions of members of another culture, albeit in a different setting, and for a different purpose. The fifteen episodes were first written in the language of the interviewee who supplied the story (either English or Korean), and were then back-translated by two Korean bilinguals and compared. Only minor inconsistencies arose, which were then resolved through mutual discussion and agreement.

Validation of attributions.

The four alternative attributions created for each Intercultural Sensitizer episode were used to check for validity by presenting them in English for the African American participants, and in Korean for the Korean participants. Sixteen members of each culture participated in this phase.

Participants were given the fifteen episodes, each containing the critical incident, a question, and four alternative attributions to the behavior of the stimulus character, who was either Korean (in approximately half of the episodes), or African American (in the other half). Participants were asked to select the attribution which they felt best explained the behavior, thoughts, or feelings of the stimulus person.

To ensure completeness the participant in the validation procedure could write in their own alternative as a fifth alternative to the episode if the four alternatives provided to the participants by the researchers did not sufficiently explain the episodes. The alternatives provided by the respondents were coded independently by two coders and any discrepancies were discussed. The two coders only differed on one item out of the nine total items coded, resulting in 89% agreement between the two coders.

Study I

Instruments

The author created a CD rom using Macromedia Director to include each scenario with an image and clickable buttons for each alternative that lead the trainees to the responses indicating whether their choices were correct or not. Sometimes, a brief explanation accompanied the responses. The trainees could click on any button as many times as they needed in order to arrive at the correct response. Clicking the correct response indicated completion of a scenario. Once the trainees were done with one scenario, they moved to the next scenario by clicking the "next" button until they had completed all the scenarios.

These scenarios were sandwiched between a pre and posttest of the trainees' attitudes towards the target ethnic group. The tests were comprised of Cooke's Semantic Differential and Behavioral Intention Scale items, each randomly divided into two parts for the pre and post-tests. Cooke's Semantic Differential and Behavioral Intention Scales were chosen for this study as they were found to be valid tests of intercultural sensitivity in research conducted by Crespo (1982).

Data Collection

The CD rom was created so that during the training session a floppy disc could be inserted and the pre and post test scores would automatically recorded onto the floppy disc while the training and testing took place. Two student assistants recruited sixteen Korean students and administered the Intercultural Sensitizer training in a university computer lab. Although individual differences exist, the training sessions took an average of twenty minutes to complete. Based on the data collection on the floppy discs, a t-test of the difference between pre and post test scores was conducted.

Results and Discussion

The Intercultural Sensitizer as a training and sensitizing device in interactive CD rom format for Koreans was tested on seventeen participants. This experimental study shows that the difference between pretest and posttest scores of these seventeen participants, which translates into an improved attitude changes towards African Americans by Korean Americans, was significant (t[17] = 24.9 p<.0001); the posttest mean was 4.52 (sd = .77) and the pretest mean was 5.02 (sd = .83). Lower scores reflect more positive attitudes towards the other ethnic group.

Although it is certainly encouraging that approximately twenty minutes of intercultural training with a CD rom interactive software containing fifteen scenarios was adequate for changing attitudes held by Korean Americans toward African Americans to a statistically significant degree, there are some limitations to this experimental study. Seventeen can be considered an adequate sample size by some, but certainly testing on larger numbers of participants will be necessary for these results to be generalizable to the greater population.

Study II

To test the effects on a larger sample, a file of the intercultural sensitizers were sent electronically to 202 Korean subjects. Among them, 98 students responded, resulting in a response rate of 48.5%. The subjects were male and female Korean students, ages 19 – 22. They were contacted via e-mail and requested to first complete the pretest of behavioral intentions for interacting with African Americans, then to complete the same intercultural sensitizers as was the procedure for Study I, with the only difference being that this time the intercultural sensitizers were in the format of a Word file. The Word file format was selected rather than the Macromedia Director format, as logistically it is possible to send the file via e-mail, whereas the Macromedia Director file was too large to send via e-mail. It was also difficult to get a sufficiently large number of volunteer subjects physically into the computer lab to complete the training in interactive software format; therefore the Word file was deemed the most logical method of collecting larger numbers.

Subjects could move back and forth within the pages of the file as often as necessary, but had to input a response for the intercultural sensitizer to show that they had completed it successfully. Subjects then had to complete the post test of behavioral intentions.

Results

A one-tailed t-test of pre and posttest scores shows that the attitude changes towards African Americans by Korean Americans, was positive and significant (p< .0001). The pretest mean was 3.48 (sd = 1.35) and the posttest mean was 3.22 (sd = 1.29). Lower scores reflect more positive attitudes towards the other ethnic group.

Discussion

Study II extended the results of Study I and addressed one of the limitations by increasing the number of subjects. Although the results of the study on a larger sample are encouraging and show a high level of significance in improvement in behavioral intentions, there still exist limitations to the present study.

Limitations of the Study

Study II investigated immediate results of intercultural training. However, due to lack of resources and logistical barriers, long-term effects could not be tested in the current study. Future studies examining whether the same positive change will remain constant over time is one that should be conducted. A study following the same procedures for the intercultural training testing for short and long term effects of the Intercultural Sensitizer would be useful. For example, a follow up study could test the effects of intercultural training at one, six, and twelve months after the initial training session to test for time effects. A test of the Cooke's Semantic Differential and Behavioral Intention Scale response at the first, second, and third testings should be conducted to measure any statistically significant effects over time.

Further, future development of a computer assisted instruction module that can be sent electronically to subjects and easily completed by them will be useful in assessing the full effects of the training module. Currently, the respondents have to either physically come into a computer lab to complete the intercultural training, or complete the training in a relatively tedious manner via a linearly-designed training module, moving forward or backwards to relevant pages to select responses before moving onto the next critical incident item. A computer –assisted instructional module using Powerpoint or Prezi software, for example, may be one way to move through the pages through interactive hyperlinks that automatically take the respondent to specific pages, then back to respond to the questions as needed until the correct response is selected. This less tedious format may be conducive to gathering larger numbers of subjects due to the increased facility of completion.

Another limitation of the current study is that it was conducted via e-mail to Korean students, due to the relative ease of access of this "digital native" generation. Some older generation Koreans are not technology-savvy and some do not use e-mail. However, expanding the subjects of this study to Korean Americans would be more relevant to the topic of ethnic strife in the U.S. Access to large numbers of Korean Americans would remain a challenge worth exploring for future studies.

Finally, although reduction of stereotypes held by Korean Americans about African Americans was examined in this study there is a need to create other Intercultural Sensitizer training sessions involving different cultures that also have the potential of misunderstandings and negative stereotypes.

Conclusion

Ethnic strife has been part of the human experience since at least the beginning of recorded history. Especially in the United States, where different cultures coexist, ethnic strife has been latent, surfacing from time to time and resulting in aftershocks of further waves of antagonisms, as we have seen with the recent Trayvon Martin incident and other incidents of ethnic conflict.

Two problems have been cited as the reasons for ethnic strife in the U.S.: economic and cultural. While economic equity and social justice are important issues, they are not the purview of this research. Intercultural scholarship, on the other hand, can promote understanding of how to reduce cultural misunderstandings.

These studies tested a method of intercultural training to reduce cultural misunderstandings between African Americans and immigrants of Korean descent. A computer-assisted instruction was first tested on seventeen subjects in a computer lab and results showed that the behavioral intentions of

Korean s to interact with African Americans were improved. The differences between pre and post tests showed a significance level of .0001.

Due to the difficulty of sending the large digital Macromedia Media interactive file electronically to students, they were tested in a computer lab, and the number of participants was low due to the difficulty of the logistics of gathering students in a lab on a volunteer basis. The second study attempted to access larger numbers of subjects by e-mailing the pretest, intercultural training module, and posttest, then collecting their responses electronically. Again, results showed a significant difference in pre and posttest of behavioral intentions to develop interpersonal relationships with African Americans. The significance level was found to be significant to the .0001 level (p= .00000187).

These studies will hopefully help to illuminate one source of ethnic conflict that can be ameliorated. Although reduction in the size of the "American pie" and ethnic stereotypes have been cited as the two major sources of the conflict, there is little anyone can do to change the economy overnight. However, by conducting intercultural training to promote cultural understanding, we may have our hands on one practically applicable means to get closer to solving the problem of ethnic conflict and aggression between Koreans and African Americans. The L.A. riots were a "wake-up call" of sorts. Attempts of the nature of this proposed study, as well as another multi- pronged efforts by scholars in other areas such as politics, sociology, and economics, will be necessary to subdue current ethnic conflicts and prevent others from occurring in other regions of the U.S. Ethnic violence is a dire problem we need to begin finding viable and applicable solutions for. This research is important as it purports to shed some insight by testing a training method for reducing stereotypes between ethnic groups, as one practically applicable solution with which we may begin deal with this complex issue. Further attempts in this direction will be useful to reducing ethnic conflict for humankind.

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