Intercultural communication effectiveness, cultural intelligence and knowledge sharing: Extending anxiety-uncertainty management theory

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A B S T R A C T

We extend the conceptualization of Anxiety–Uncertainty Management theory to include an intercultural capability in the form of cultural intelligence (CQ) and by linking intercultural communication effectiveness to knowledge sharing. Specifically, we formulate a moderated-mediation model and test the model using survey data collected from employees working in intercultural contexts in Australia ($n = 285$). Results show that anxiety is significantly and negatively related to knowledge sharing. Similarly, results demonstrate that uncertainty is significantly and negatively related to knowledge sharing. Results of the moderated-mediation analysis using the PROCESS approach show that intercultural communication effectiveness mediates the abovementioned relationships and that the first stages of mediation (i.e., anxiety-intercultural communication effectiveness and uncertainty–intercultural communication effectiveness relationships) are moderated by CQ. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Introduction

Anxiety–Uncertainty Management theory (A−UM theory; Gudykunst et al., 1988; Gudykunst, 1995, 1998, 2005) has been widely used as a theoretical anchor for studying interpersonal and intergroup communication effectiveness. The theory primarily asserts that anxiety and uncertainty can influence effectiveness of communication in interpersonal and intergroup encounters. In other words, individuals can communicate effectively if they are able to manage their levels of anxiety and accurately predict the attitudes and behaviors of others. The theory has attracted the attention of many scholars and remains a strong theoretical foundation for many studies. However, there are still some avenues for the theory to be further expanded and elaborated. Given recent advances in the intercultural relations literature, including the relevance of intercultural knowledge development (Czerwionka, Artamonova, & Barbosa, 2015) and the critical role of cultural intelligence (CQ) (e.g., Korzilius, Bucker, & Beerlage, 2017; Presbitero, 2016c), we find it timely to refine and further extend A−UM theory to take into account these recent developments.

This study aims to extend A–UM theory by examining a potential proximate outcome of intercultural communication effectiveness: knowledge sharing or the relational act based on a sender–receiver relationship that incorporates the communication of one's knowledge to others as well as receiving knowledge from others (Van den Hoof & de Leeuw van Weenen, 2004). Drawing from the literature on knowledge sharing(e.g., Michailova & Mustaffa, 2012), we establish how individual-level attributes (i.e., anxiety and

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uncertainty) can relate to knowledge sharing. This study also explores the mediating role of intercultural communication effectiveness in the relationship between anxiety/uncertainty and knowledge sharing. Further, this study extends A–UM theory by investigating CQ and its role in the first stages of mediation. Previous studies on A–UM theory (e.g., Gudykunst, 1995, 2005) assert that the role of mindfulness or the sensitivity to different contexts and perspectives moderate the relationship between anxiety/uncertainty and intercultural communication effectiveness. We extend this line of thinking by examining CQ as a moderator. CQ has been conceptualized in the literature as an individual's set of capabilities composed of knowledge, skills and metacognitive resources enabling them to function effectively in cross-cultural situations (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Kim, Kirkman, & Chen, 2008; Earley & Ang, 2003; Lee & Sukoco, 2010; Presbitero, 2016a, 2016b; Rocksthul & Ng, 2008; Thomas & Inkson, 2008; Thomas, 2010; Thomas et al., 2015). In asserting that CQ would play a critical role in the anxiety/uncertainty–intercultural communication effectiveness relationship, we draw from the Theory of Intelligence (Sternberg & Detterman, 1986; Sternberg, 1999), which highlights that intelligence allows individuals to execute challenging tasks and achieve desired outcomes. We argue that CQ, as a form of intelligence, would serve as a moderator by lessening the negative effects of both anxiety and uncertainty on intercultural communication effectiveness and consequently influencing knowledge sharing.

By testing the abovementioned relationships, this study aims to contribute to both theory and practice. First, the study extends A–UM theory to include knowledge sharing as a proximate outcome of intercultural communication effectiveness. Doing so offers novel insights into how the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural contexts can lead to an individual's likelihood of effective knowledge sharing in intercultural settings. Second, this study makes theoretical refinements of A–UM theory by incorporating how a recently emerged intercultural capability such as CQ can be a condition minimizing the negative effects of both anxiety and uncertainty on intercultural communication effectiveness and further influencing knowledge sharing. Finally, this study informs practice particularly on interventions to manage intercultural communications in multicultural teams or organizations. For example, the study suggests the importance of having organizational strategies related to developing and harnessing CQ. Doing so could minimize the negative effects of anxiety and uncertainty in achieving higher levels of intercultural communication effectiveness and, in the process, influence knowledge sharing for cross-cultural teams and organizations.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Anxiety–uncertainty management theory

A–UM theory (Gudykunst et al., 1988; Gudykunst, 1995, 1998) explains the relationship between anxiety/uncertainty and intercultural communication effectiveness. A−UM theory primarily explains the mechanisms involving effective interpersonal and intergroup communications, such as situational processes (i.e., in-group power, respect for one another) and social and personal identities (Gudykunst, 2005). Moreover, A−UM theory highlights the role of anxiety and uncertainty and their effects on interpersonal and intergroup communication effectiveness (Gudykunst, 1995). A−UM theory was derived from Berger and Calabrese (1975) Uncertainty Reduction (UR) theory, which focused on interpersonal or one-on-one communication. The features distinguishing A−UM theory from UR theory are that A−UM theory further elaborates the role of the individual and incorporates cultural variability in communication effectiveness (Gudykunst, 1995).

Anxiety is viewed as an affective phenomenon (Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999) that is characterized by feelings of uneasiness, worry and apprehension (Stephan & Stephan, 1985) occurring within an individual. It is a sign that one's self-confidence or self-respect is endangered (Sullivan, 2013). Anxiety, therefore, can bring about a generalized sense of disequilibrium (Turner, 1988), preventing individuals from fully benefitting from interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Gudykunst, 1995). Anxiety is viewed as a basic human tendency (Lazarus, 1991) that, if it remains unmanaged, can have negative consequences such as avoidance or withdrawal (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Such avoidance or withdrawal from interaction stalls any form of communication and prevents any further human interaction from taking place (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001).

However, uncertainty is also viewed as a cognitive phenomenon that can affect the way people perceive and think about others (Stephan et al., 1999). Berger and Calabrese (1975) assert that uncertainty prevents individuals from predicting and explaining other people's behaviors. Gudykunst (1995) argues that uncertainty makes people uneasy and uncomfortable, making them ineffective when communicating with others. In situations of uncertainty, there are often mismatches between 'what one intends' (intention), 'what one can put into practice' (implementation), and 'what emerges and how one perceives' (realization), which block and hinder effective cross-cultural interaction. According to the degree of fear and confusion, uncertainty may be screened through selective inattention (Sullivan, 2013); repressed as undiscussable, as a taboo; or simplified through or by the making of myths (Strenski, 1992). Alternatively, attempts may be made to convert it into an activity that can be carried out with minimal disrupting effects (Douglas, 2003). From a psychological perspective, in all such cases, one usually seeks to avoid greater anxiety and selects activity that impose lesser anxiety.

Anxiety, uncertainty, and knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is defined in the literature as the propensity to impart and distribute information and knowledge to others (Gagne, 2009). Knowledge sharing is also viewed as a relational act that incorporates communicating one's knowledge to others with receiving knowledge from others (Van den Hoof & de Leeuw van Weenen, 2004). Knowledge sharing is demonstrated in the literature to be influenced by organizational factors such as job design, performance appraisal and managerial style (Ajzen, 1991; Gagne, 2009). Recently, De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, and Oostenveld, (2017) emphasized that knowledge sharing, particularly in multinational