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Intercultural contact under uncertainty: The impact of predictability and anxiety on the willingness to interact with a member from an unknown cultural group

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ABSTRACT

Based on the anxiety/uncertainty management theory (Gudykunst, 2005), the authors posit that the willingness to interact with a member of a foreign culture depends on the incidental affective state of an individual and the predictability of the potential interaction partner. It is hypothesized that individuals who experience an incidental affective state of anxiety are less willing to interact with a potential interaction partner they expect to be poorly predictable, than with a potential interaction partner they expect to be easily predictable, while the impact of predictability is reduced when individuals experience a more secure affective state. The hypotheses were tested in an experimental study ($N = 80$) in which the predictability of a potential interaction partner and the incidental anxiety of the participants were varied. The results support the basic assumptions of the authors.

1. Introduction

Contact between individuals from different cultures is related to uncertainty. Individuals are often not sure what certain responses from interaction partners mean and how to respond in an appropriate manner (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). However, research on the consequences of uncertainty has shown that uncertainty is not linked to negative affective responses and avoidance behavior in all individuals and in all contexts (Merkin, 2006; Sorrentino & Roney, 2000; Van der Zee, Van Oudenhoven, & De Grijs, 2004). In intercultural encounters, some individuals might regard uncertainty as interesting and challenging, and they might be curious to have contact with members from different cultures. In contrast, other individuals or the same individuals in other contexts might perceive uncertainty in intercultural interactions as threatening, and might therefore avoid intercultural contact. In the present study, we examined whether an incidental affective state of anxiety moderates the effects of uncertainty on the willingness to interact with an individual from a different culture.

1.1. Uncertainty

Theories on intercultural communications (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Gudykunst, 1985, 2005) as well as more general behavioral theories (e.g., Kagan, 1972; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Sorrentino et al., 2008; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Volz, Schubotz, & von Cramon, 2005) regard uncertainty as a "cognitive phenomenon"

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(Gudykunst, 2005, p. 286) that arises from a lack of predictability. In intercultural encounters, this lack of predictability is related to the inability to predict attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Gudykunst, 2005). Uncertainty in intercultural communications might differ between individuals and between contexts. It is assumed to depend on intercultural experiences, knowledge, and similarity of different cultures (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988).

A basic proposition of major motivational theories is that individuals try to avoid uncertainty. Festinger (1954), for instance, and newer theories on group behavior (e.g., Hogg, 2000) assume that uncertainty reduction is a basic human motivation that drives people to compare and affiliate with others. Also, the motives to search for meaning (Bartlett, 1932) and to simplify views and experiences (James, 1890) are related to uncertainty reduction. In his theory on communication, Berger (1987) argues that people communicate to reduce uncertainty, but that communication requires a certain degree of certainty, as well. In intercultural communication, a high degree of uncertainty is often related to ineffective and aversive communication and behavioral orientations to avoid contact (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990).

However, even if uncertainty is widely regarded as aversive, some researchers argue that the consequences of uncertainty vary considerably between individuals and contexts (e.g., Gudykunst, 2005; Sorrentino & Roney, 2000; Van der Zee et al., 2004). Sorrentino and Roney (2000) argue that individuals differ in how they handle uncertainty. They describe uncertainty-oriented individuals as individuals who respond directly to uncertainty, for example, by obtaining information to resolve the uncertainty. In contrast, they describe certainty-oriented individuals as individuals who respond to uncertainty in an indirect way, for example, by searching contact to others who provide certainty. Van der Zee et al. (2004) proposed that personality dimensions relevant to multicultural effectiveness like cultural empathy and open-mindedness determine individuals' appraisal of uncertainty in intercultural situations as threatening or challenging. Other research distinguishes between individuals who differ in their tolerance for uncertainty (Buhr & Dugas, 2002) or ambiguity (Banning, 2003; Friedland, Keinan, & Tytiun, 1999; Furnham & Ribchester, 1995; Kruglanski, Piero, Mannetti, & de Grada, 2006; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Also, it has been found that individuals differ in their tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity between situations. Kruglanski et al. (2006, p. 85) argue that the "desire for a firm answer to a question, any firm answer as compared to confusion and/or ambiguity" is particularly high in situations that impede information processing, such as ambient noise. In addition, some authors posit that under some conditions, individuals may enjoy uncertainty and that uncertainty may evoke positive feelings. Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, and Gilbert (2005) found that positive feelings evoked by a positive event lasted longer under conditions of uncertainty than under conditions of certainty. Also, it can be expected that uncertainty can make communication and intercultural encounters interesting (Gudykunst, 2005). A lot of people travel to foreign countries and explore different cultures driven by curiosity and the hope of finding something unexpected. As well, the differences between responses to uncertainty can be measured on a physiological level. People respond to uncertainty with distinct physiological patterns that are related to whether the uncertain situation is perceived as interesting or challenging, or whether it is perceived as threatening (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996).

1.2. Anxiety

The affective equivalent of threatening uncertainty in intercultural encounters is intergroup anxiety (Gudykunst, 2005; Plant & Devine, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999). Stephan and Stephan (1985), for instance, term intergroup anxiety an emotion that involves feelings of uneasiness and awkwardness in the presence of outgroup members. Intergroup anxiety may be based on previous experiences or indirectly learned responses (Britt, Boniecki, Vesio, Biernat, & Brown, 1996; Rohmann, Florack, & Piontkowski, 2006; Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000; Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

Importantly for the present studies, anxiety can be integrally related to intercultural interactions (e.g., Florack, Bless, & Piontkowski, 2003), as the term intergroup anxiety implies, but it might also be elicited by unrelated incidents. There is a lot of evidence that not only integral affective states influence judgments and behavior, but also incidental affective states (Bless & Schwarz, 1999; Bodenhausen, 1993; Bodenhausen, Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Moreno, 2001). Bodenhausen et al. (2001) define incidental affective states in intergroup contexts as "affective states that arise for reasons having nothing to do with the intergroup context itself, but which are carried over from other events into an intergroup setting" (p. 319). Directly referring to this definition, we distinguish between integral anxiety and incidental anxiety. Integral anxiety in intercultural encounters is the anxiety associated with the interaction with a member from a different cultural group. In contrast, incidental anxiety is anxiety that arises for reasons not related to the intercultural encounters, but is carried over into the intercultural setting.

Theories on the effects of incidental affective states assume that negative incidental affect like anxiety or negative mood alerts the individual that a problem in the environment exists and leads to enhanced vigilance and careful thinking and behavior (Bless & Schwarz, 1999; Schwarz & Bless, 1991). For example, Keogh and French (1999) induced incidental anxiety and found that participants broadened their focus of attention in an unrelated task. Hertel, Neuhof, Theuer, and Kerr (2000) showed that individuals in cooperation games were more likely to carefully check whether they could trust their interaction partners when a negative incidental affect was induced than when a positive incidental affect was induced.

Integral and incidental anxiety lead to self-regulatory orientations to reduce the aversive state. Indeed, integral and incidental anxiety elicit the motivation to relieve or "repair" the aversive emotional state (Isen, 1984; Rosen & Schulkin, 1998). The attempts to cope with the anxiety may differ between integral and incidental anxiety. For example, it can be expected that