



The influence of emotion recognition and emotion regulation on intercultural adjustment

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Abstract

Previous studies have consistently shown emotion regulation to be an important predictor of intercultural adjustment. Emotional intelligence theory suggests that before people can regulate emotions they need to recognize them; thus emotion recognition ability should also predict intercultural adjustment. The present study tested this hypothesis in international students at three times during the school year. Recognition of anger and emotion regulation predicted positive adjustment; recognition of contempt, fear and sadness predicted negative adjustment. Emotion regulation did not mediate the relationship between emotion recognition and adjustment, and recognition and regulation jointly predicted adjustment. These results suggest recognition of specific emotions may have special functions in intercultural adjustment, and that emotion recognition and emotion regulation play independent roles in adjustment.

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1. Introduction

In 2003–2004, 4.3% of the students in higher education institutions in the US were international students (Institute of International Education, 2004). International students usually experienced more problems than average American students (Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Pedersen, 1991), such as unfamiliar culture and

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school systems, language difficulties, communication problems, financial worries, discrimination, trouble making American friends, uncertainty and change in socioeconomic status (Chataway & Berry, 1989; Lewthwaite, 1996; Oropenza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991; Sam, 2001; Stafford, Marion, & Salter, 1980; Surdam & Collins, 1984). Experiencing such problems can lead to poor academic performance or premature return to one's own country (Matsumoto & LeRoux, 2003; Mori 2000). These problems could be a result of international students having to face the challenges of adjusting to a new culture and simultaneously dealing with the academic stress of being a student all while being far away from their family and friends. Therefore it is important to identify the factors that are associated with the positive intercultural adjustment of international students. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether emotion recognition ability was such a factor. Below we define intercultural adjustment and review the factors that influence it, with a focus on emotion regulation. We use the concept of emotional intelligence to highlight the potential importance of emotion recognition, suggesting that it is primary to emotion regulation in predicting adjustment.

1.1. Intercultural adjustment

The term intercultural adjustment has been defined in many different ways (e.g. Black & Gregersen, 1991; Grove & Torbiorn, 1985). Furthermore the terms intercultural adjustment, adaptation and acculturation have all been used interchangeably in many previous studies on cross-cultural contact (Searle & Ward, 1990). It therefore is important to first explain how we define intercultural adjustment in the present study.

We define adaptation as the process of altering one's behaviors or cognitions in relation to a different environment, in order to better interact with the environment to achieve desired end goals. Contrastingly, we define adjustment as the psychological outcomes that are associated with adaptation (Matsumoto, Yoo, & LeRoux, *in press*). Adjustment involves both objective and subjective outcomes. Our definition is similar to Ward and colleagues' definition of psychological adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Subjective aspects would include emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety or sadness. Objective aspects of adjustment include outcomes that are independent of the mind of the individual; these would include salary, job performance ratings, or grades. Successful intercultural adjustment would entail having positive psychological consequences during and after the adaptation process.

1.2. Importance of emotion regulation in intercultural adjustment

Matsumoto and colleagues proposed that how an individual deals with the emotions aroused during adaptation is a major determinant of successful intercultural adjustment (Matsumoto et al., *in press*). They found support for this in their studies using the Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale (ICAPS; Matsumoto et al., 2001), consistently finding that high emotion regulation is the most important predictor of positive intercultural adjustment (Matsumoto et al., 2001, 2003). Emotion regulation refers to the "the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" (Gross, 1998, p. 275). It is important for positive adjustment because controlling one's negative emotions evoked during conflict and stress, which are inevitable in intercultural (and intracultural) life,

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