

Group procedures and applications for developing sociocultural competencies among Immigrants

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Abstract If immigrants are to get the best results in their social and work worlds, they must possess not only the relevant cultural information, but also the requisite behavioural skills inherent in the novel social roles that people acquire as members of the new country. This paper argues that the preferred training model for developing such competencies is one which utilizes role-based learning in groups and incorporates aspects of group counselling theory and practice. Effective facilitators of these immigrant groups should be skilled group leaders competent in taking participants through the four stages - alliance building, cultural mapping, coaching and practice, and contract-setting - involved in teaching, each of several key sociocultural competencies. Group leaders will need to perform particular types of task and maintenance functions, and facilitate the development of group inclusion, control, and trust. To achieve this, facilitators are recommended to use a range of micro skills for group leading, processing, and counselling.

Introduction

Many recent immigrants coming to countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand are technically competent and professionally trained. These newly arrived immigrants are often from a different linguistic and cultural background and they may lack mastery of the implicit social competencies generally expected of members of the host employment and social settings. Unemployment, self-defeat, frustration and a perception of failure often results when newcomers lack the required sociocultural competency or requisite social knowledge and skills for attaining intercultural competence (Lee & Westwood, 1996; Basavarajappa & Verma, 1985; Mak, 1991; Mak, 1996).

Integrating knowledge and skills in key sociocultural competencies

The training approach discussed in this paper operates from the assumption that effective settlement and employment training programs must go beyond knowledge and awareness to include skills coaching and training (Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992). The acquisition of cultural information and awareness, and, in some cases, language development~ are necessary but not sufficient components of an effective program for immigrants from a culturally different background. Peer pairing programs that link newcomers with members of the local community can be very useful for teaching the norms and customs of the host culture in a friendly, and informal way (Westwood & Barker, 1989), but they lack the rigor and quality control that underpin structured learning programs.

An action-oriented approach which teaches newcomers appropriate ways to negotiate strategic common social situations accessing the new culture must also become a part of the training program (Mak, Westwood & Ishiyama, 1994). It is understood that there are six main competencies for negotiating these situations; they are (1) Participating in a group or team setting, (2) Seeking help or

information, (3) Making social contact and social conversation, (4) Refusing a request, (5) Expressing disagreement and (6) Giving feedback.

Effective immigrant training program should be designed to augment existing competencies of the participants, not to replace them with new ones. The expected orientation of the program is social self-enhancement, rather than cultural assimilation, as the latter results in de-valuing the immigrant participants' culturally competent selves. Immigrants are encouraged to approach intercultural interactions using novel social roles, while at the same time being encouraged to retain customary social skills for interacting with co-ethnics (Mak et al., 1994).

Role-based experiential program for success

A promising option for overcoming the barriers to successful psychological and career adaptation is to teach newcomers the required competencies for success in a structured role-based program. By adopting new social roles which are related to success in the new cultural context, immigrants can be more effective in the mainstream workplace, enhance their feelings of personal competence, and break negative stereotypes frequently held by employers and co-workers.

The authors have developed an 18-hour (six three-hour sessions) skills based, practice-focused training program designed to help newcomers

(a) manage psychosocial needs for successful cultural adaptation, and (b) provide critical cultural information and skills for enhancing employability and career and educational success.

Integrated instructional model for optimising the learning of intercultural skills - EXCELL

A number of potential psychosocial barriers to developing social competence in a different culture have been identified, including the lack of coaching and practice opportunities, cross-cultural interpersonal anxiety, threat to original cultural identity, and various personal factors. The implementation of this program is designed to create optimal conditions for learning sociocultural competencies among newcomers to a culture to counter these psychosocial barriers, which are discussed in Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, and Barker (1999). Mak et al. (1999) propose that integrating instructional implications from established models of classical (Pavlov, 1928), (Watson, 1913) and operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953), and social cognitive learning (Bandura, 1965, 1969, 1977) in a role-based group training program, can address these potential barriers and provide optimal conditions for acquiring sociocultural competencies. These include rewarding successive approximations to the target behaviour (operant conditioning), reducing social anxiety by increasing behavioural self-efficacy and the target behaviour in a supportive and non-threatening environment (classical conditioning), and watching various videotaped and live models perform desired behaviour and thus developing efficacy beliefs (social cognitive learning).

The learning theories discussed above are integrated into the small group process, i.e., members learn these competencies by participating in the group designed to teach what competency is best to use in what situation and why. Action-based learning involves members of the group first observing and practicing specific target behaviours that have been identified and modelled by the facilitators. Within the small working groups, members then practice the competency until mastery is achieved so successful transfer outside of the session in the classroom or workplace is possible. Experiencing and demonstrating these competencies facilitates greater learning due to the reinforcement of successful enactments occurring within the group. Adopting specific role behaviours deemed helpful in a number of situations in the mainstream culture provides learners with ways of behaving which were previously unknown to them.

Preliminary evaluations of the effectiveness of this program have been conducted with immigrant and international students enrolled in a number of universities and colleges in Canada, Australia and the U.K. A doctoral dissertation conducted by Shergill (1997) found that trained participants were rated by independent "blind" raters, to have higher levels of interaction and clarification skills in a role-play scenario, compared to those from the control group. Moreover, when participants' pre- and post-training self-reports were compared, the experimental group showed a more significant decrease in social avoidance tendency and a greater increase in social interaction skills at post-test.

Present focus on the training process and trainers' competencies

This paper builds on the aforementioned literature to present the stages of a preferred intercultural training model—alliance building, cultural mapping, coaching and practice, and contract setting—for the teaching of each sociocultural competency. This is a model that combines (a) aspects of group counselling theory and practice, and (b) techniques of role-enactment, while fostering the optimal conditions for developing sociocultural competencies in newcomers. The authors believe that a specified set of group leader activities and competencies, in addition to the creation of the optimal learning conditions detailed in Mak et al. (1999), is integral to the successful implementation of programs for developing the behavioural skills and a sense of self-efficacy among the participants. The paper also discusses the activities and competencies required of the group facilitators so that they can effectively perform the necessary task and maintenance functions (Johnson & Johnson, 1991), and facilitate the development of group inclusion, control, and trust (Amundson, Westwood, Borgen & Pollard 1989-, Bates, Johnson & Blaker, 1982; Gladding, 1995).

Throughout this paper, the requisite training tasks and processes are illustrated for training groups of between 12 and 24 immigrants. The immigrant trainees are expected to have already attained an adequate fluency in the English language and have been in the adopted country for at least several weeks, or even months, in order that the initial settlement needs, such as finding accommodation, and learning how to use the local transport system, have been met. This program can be offered as a stand-alone short course, or as a module of an integrated course for job search or career development, or simply a course in personal and social skills development.

Stages in the teaching of each sociocultural competency

As indicated in Figure 1, the sociocultural training program is based on a five stage cycle. The stages are (1) alliance building and assessment; (2) development of a cultural map; (3) demonstration, practice, feedback and coaching; (4) goal setting and contracting; and (5) transfer of learning. Each stage is described in some detail.

Stage 1: Alliance Building and Assessment

The first task for facilitators is to build a sense of inclusion in the group by building an alliance between group members and the facilitators. This step is critical in any group training context, and is even more important when group members are new to the mainstream culture. Facilitators create an environment in which the unique cultural backgrounds of participants are frequently identified and acknowledged with respect throughout the training program providing validation of the trainee's cultural self (Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992).

[Figure 1 goes here]

Stage 2: Development of a Cultural Map

The concept of the 'cultural map' is in this stage. A cultural map is a succinct description of effective and appropriate ways of behaving in specific contexts and provides explanations as to why these behaviours are preferred. The cultural map enhances participant understanding by providing not only suggestions about normative behaviour in the host culture, but the social, cultural and historical reasons why certain behaviours and responses are valued in the culture.

Take for example the competency of refusing a request in an appropriate manner. The facilitators ask group members what they have observed people from the mainstream culture do when they refuse a request. Group members discuss their observations and comment on the extent to which these behaviours differ from what is considered to be appropriate behaviour in the same situation in their home culture. Facilitators explain that there are many different ways of enacting the target behaviour, depending on the context and specific situation. Together with the facilitators, group members develop a 'cultural map' or list of behavioural responses that people in the mainstream culture would generally consider to be appropriate or acceptable when refusing a request. This is followed by a practice demonstration of refusing a request in a specific situation.

It is essential that facilitators impress on group members that cultural maps are not offered as prescriptions that must be followed rigidly, however, in the initial stages, facilitators must select specific identifiable behaviours in order to reduce confusion. Of course, individual differences and the viability of alternate behaviours to achieve the same goals are incorporated into the development of the individual cultural map through the development and practice of the scenarios.

Stage 3: Demonstration, Practice, Feedback and Coaching

After constructing a cultural map for a particular situation, they model application of the cultural map through behavioural enactment while group members observe the simulation. The facilitators then ask for members feedback and reactions to the simulation. After group members' questions have been answered, they are invited to practice the same scenario, preferably in pairs with a third person acting as an observer, or in a small group with one of the facilitators. Alternatively, a pair could enact the situation in front of the whole group which can be a more effective use of time because the facilitator can coach, give feedback and teach additional microskills. This process may involve specifying verbal and non-verbal behaviour that would make the interaction more effective. Again explanations of the cultural significance of words, gestures, and behaviours may need to be provided.

The facilitators need to be skilled in coaching and informing group members about general principles for performing the target behaviours and offer to stand or sit behind the group member who is practicing the steps in the cultural map. This helps to create a safe environment for group members to take risks. Other group members may choose to invite a peer to stand with them when they rehearse behaviour. This represents a form of "doubling" used in psychodrama method (Blatner, 1984). For example, if trainees want to practice refusing an inappropriate request from a supervisor, they may choose to ask a friend in the group to accompany them during the rehearsal to offer moral support. Modelling by peers offers a number of variations in style that acknowledges individual differences within the group, while remaining true to the cultural map (Borgen & Koenig, 1983).

Stage 4: Goal Setting, Action Planning and Contracting

This stage of the model, shown in Figure 1, helps develop action plans for transferring the skills from the training group context to the social and organizational environment in which group members live, study, and/or work. To achieve transferences of learning, the facilitator helps each group member to develop a

realistic contract or action plan to apply the learning in a specific situation in the next week (Wilson, 1989). At the conclusion of each session, members present and review their "contract for success" to the whole group in order to maximize commitment and goal clarification.

Stage 5: Transference of Learning

Following the commitment to "act" at the previous stage, learners now apply their cultural maps and recently acquired behavioural competencies to their own particular educational, work or social setting. It is at this juncture that participants begin to experience feelings of success and self-confidence by doing. This phase is the basis for evaluating the effectiveness of the previous training experiences, and allows group members to check their own progress.

If some group members were not as successful in applying the competencies as they had hoped, the facilitators may need to provide further feedback, encouragement and coaching. In the planning and initial stages of group development it is essential that the facilitators decide how group follow-up will be arranged. Whether follow-up is offered on a group or individual basis, it is important for the facilitators to acknowledge the level of success that has been achieved, and to determine if further assistance is needed.

Contributions from group theory to enhancing participant learning

As can be seen, the small group format provides an ideal and safe environment in which support and understanding are generated for meeting the psychosocial needs of the learner, as well as providing an interactive and practice-based laboratory for skill acquisition.

However, in order to facilitate this type of group training, facilitators must have the following: (a) solid foundation in group processes and theory of group development, which spells out the task and maintenance functions of the leader and identifies the stages of group development, (b) well developed communication and counselling micro skills, and (c) group processing and leading skills.

Task and maintenance functions of the facilitator

Understanding "task" and "maintenance" functions in group work is essential to effective group facilitation (Capuzzi & Cross, 1992; Gladding, 1995). The "task" function refers to *what* has to be learned, while the "maintenance" function refers to *how* they are learned. The former refers to the behavioural objective, the latter includes issue of psychosocial and emotional needs of the learner. Both must be attended to equally by the leaders if productive outcomes are to occur.

The **task** focus is addressed as leaders review the objectives, describe the six steps that participants will need to move through to achieve a reasonable level of key sociocultural competencies, review the research and anecdotal evidence of positive gains to be expected, and provide members with the required reading material. In understanding the tasks/goals to be achieved and why, contributes to reduction of initial confusion and anxiety of the unknown among the learners. Once members are clear as to the task to be accomplished, their attention shifts to their feelings and emotions about being a member in the group which now becomes the maintenance focus of the leader.

Maintenance actions on the part of the leader include interacting with the members, encouraging people to speak up, asking questions, clarifying, using empathy, and in general helping to facilitate an effective interpersonal climate. The modes of communicating, the guidelines for participating and the way the leader conveys and shows understanding all relate to building a strong *maintenance climate in the group.

Examples of member concerns related to group maintenance are: "Do I belong here? Will I be accepted and understood? Do others have similar needs and concerns as me?" Meeting the psychosocial needs of the group members in the beginning helps contribute to a feeling of belonging, reduced levels of social anxiety and a greater readiness to become an active learner in acquiring role-based behaviours.

Stages of group development

In addition to understanding the two main functions in the group described above, knowing about stage theory of group development is required by the leader. According to Shutz (1958), the primary needs which exist across the stages of group development include the following: **inclusion, control** and **trust**. Inclusion refers to a group member's needs to have a sense of belonging to the group. Failure to satisfy this need may give rise to one or more of the following feelings: insecurity~ feelings of rejection, anxiety and hesitation. The second stage, control, is defined as a group member's need to maintain a sense of being able to influence what happens to him/her and (sometimes) others, in a group. Trust, the third and most advanced of the stages, refers to a group member's need and ability to feel close, connected, understood and secure with his/her fellow learners.

Stage theory of group development enables leaders to anticipate and predict the type and quality of group interaction to be expected and how the various stages in the group influence learning among the participants (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Yalom, 1985). To illustrate, members are only able to risk trying out new behaviours in front of others when some certain levels of interpersonal trust exist in the group.

Group leading and processing skills

Further, in order to enhance group development in sociocultural competency training, the facilitators need to know how to direct and manage group behaviour and promote and guide interaction (Amundson et al., 1989; Corey, 1990; Gladding, 1995; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989). The leader skills most needed to do this are directing, linking, moderating, blocking, supporting, limiting process observing, consensus taking, goal setting and contracting (Amundson et al., 1989; Corey, Corey, Callanan & Russell, 1992; Kottler, 1994; Vander Kolk, 1985).

Additional group counselling microskills required include: summarizing, attending, listening, clarifying, specifying, reinforcing, motivating, challenging, and strength confrontation and giving and receiving feedback (Gladding, 1994; Gladding, 1995; Pearson, 1981). In summary, they must be able to model, demonstrate, coach and supervise using all of these skills.

Linking **group theory with the sociocultural competencies learning** process

Leaders begin the group by creating a feeling of *inclusion*. This may be done in several ways. First, leaders review the learning objectives of the training program, and involve participants in identifying individual learning outcomes that are directly related to their own needs for career, education, and social success. Next, members engage in a series of interactive activities in pairs, triads, or small groups of four for the purpose of building group cohesion and developing a sense of *belonging*. Beginning activities typically include inviting people to introduce each other by name and culture of origin, stating what they hope to learn, sharing some competencies which they have brought with them and have direct value in this culture, and recount what have been some of their most challenging barriers experienced to date. This type of interpersonal activity helps members to begin to know each other, and discover what they have in common.

Leaders also ensure that all participants have the opportunity to express and be supported in their reactions, which may include frustrations, fears, feelings of cultural loss or homesickness and the effects of having to cope in a different world. Recent immigrants may still be grieving over the significant losses resulting from leaving their original countries and familiar lifestyles (Mak, 1991).

The learning task focus

Once a climate of inclusion is established, the leader shifts the focus to skill acquisition. Showing members the exact process or task (understanding, observing, modelling, and practicing) for learning each of the competencies will instill in them a sense of control over what they learn and how they are going to learn it.

In a positive learning climate, members experience increasing feelings of trust, safety and personal competence, which contributes to successful task trust, safety and completion. A positive relationship is reinforced between *doing* the activities and *feeling* good about the activities. It is our premise that members who feel safe, supported and in control of the learning process are likely to achieve more positive results, knowing they will not be judged, criticized, or forced to do anything they are not prepared to do.

Extending sociocultural competencies from the group to the world outside

With acquisition of the critical skills in the group, the program is designed in order that members practice in session then apply learning outside. This is made possible in that there is time for completion of prescribed activities and practice between the six training sessions. Moreover, key competencies are taught in order of least complex and anxiety-provoking (e.g., giving one's opinion in a group, and asking for information) to more complex and most challenging (e.g., expressing a different opinion, and giving negative feedback). In order to do this, participants need to make commitments in the small group, and then target an area of application to the time between sessions.

The synergy of co-facilitation

Finally, a word about co-leading. The intercultural training program model is most successful when delivered by two facilitators coming from different cultural backgrounds. Ideally, one facilitator is from the mainstream culture and another comes from a distinctly different ethnic background (i.e., the 'coethnic' facilitator). Where possible, it is desirable that training be offered by a male and a female facilitator so that gender balance is achieved. Together, the co-facilitators can demonstrate alternate ways of performing the same competency. This extends the potential repertoire of behaviours and responses for the trainees.

The advantages of co-facilitation include ease of handling the group, especially in difficult situations; more than one source of feedback, and exposure to two models

of behaviour (Alfred, 1991; Corey & Corey, 1992; Gladding, 1995; Jacobs, Harvill, and Masson, 1994). For example, two facilitators can notice and react to individual needs more quickly than a single facilitator. Further, the use of two facilitators allows a larger and more diverse group to be accommodated. The personal and professional benefits of co-leading are enormous and contribute significantly to leader satisfaction and learning.

Conclusion

Immigrants and other newcomers to a culture can greatly benefit from acquiring basic sociocultural competencies requisite for strategic generic work and social situations. Role-based competencies training that begins with suggestions for cultural maps for strategic social interactions is a priority for newcomers to achieve social, career, and educational success. Group-based training programs with skilled group leaders is a highly effective and efficient way to acquire sociocultural competencies through understanding, observation, modelling, and practice. This paper has reviewed both the rationale and methodology of this group training program along with the requisite facilitator tasks and skills. Specific guidelines for implementing each of the four stages involved in the teaching of a key sociocultural competency utilizing a co-facilitator approach committed to experiential learning within a group context.

The program described in this paper offered more effective ways of helping people develop behavioural competencies and self-confidence in the new culture compared to previous orientation programs that have emphasized primarily awareness raising and knowledge building. In the future, the program may be extended for use with business people, and expatriates who need to learn the sociocultural competencies for success in other countries. Further outcome and process research, as well as innovative applications of this program are recommended.

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