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OPTIMISING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCIES FOR SUCCESS

ANITA S. MAK

University of Canberra

MARVIN J. WESTWOOD, F. ISHU ISHIYAMA

University of British Columbia, Vancouver

MICHELLE C. BARKER

Griffith University, Brisbane

ABSTRACT. *Culturally different recent immigrants and sojourners lack familiarity with the social values, roles, and rules governing interpersonal relationships and this may hinder the attainment of their goals for career and educational success in the new country despite their qualifications and dedication. This paper identifies a number of psychosocial barriers to developing social competence in a different culture, including lack of coaching and practice opportunities, cross-cultural interpersonal anxiety, threat to the newcomers' original cultural identity, and various personal factors. The paper further discusses how integrating instructional implications from established models of operant and classical conditioning, and social cognitive learning in a role-based group training program, can address these potential psychosocial barriers and provide optimal conditions for learning intercultural social skills. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.*

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Current trends in increasing world trade, globalisation of skilled labor and internationalisation of education have meant an increasing number

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Please address all correspondence to: Anita S. Mak, the Centre for Applied Psychology, Faculty of Applied Science, University of Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia. Tel.: +612-62012704; fax: +612-62015753; e-mail: mak@science.canberra.edu.au

of people moving between countries as skilled immigrants or sojourners for overseas work or studies. A major challenge for highly qualified expatriate workers and immigrants, and international students is to continue to be successful in their careers and/or studies. This challenge requires discrimination about what constitutes effective communication and learning ways of establishing interpersonal relations in the host society (Hammer, Gudykunst, & Wiseman, 1978; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

Even among immigrants and sojourners with a high level of proficiency in the language spoken in the host country, variations in sociocultural rules are often baffling, the more so for people from a cultural background very different from that of the hosts. Newcomers may operate from a culturally conditioned basis, where behaviors performed would be effective in their original country, but ineffective in the new context. This is because cultures and societies differ in the values, roles, and rules that govern appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior in social situations (Barker, 1993; Hofstede, 1980).

This paper explains the benefits that immigrants and sojourners may reap from learning skills for intercultural competence (that is, developing sociocultural competence), which will improve individuals' opportunities for success in a foreign country. Psychosocial barriers to developing these desirable sociocultural skills are discussed. The optimal conditions for the development of intercultural social competencies are then identified, utilising instructional implications from various theoretical bases of human learning.

The extent to which highly qualified immigrants and expatriate workers are able to transfer their occupational skills and potential for career success often rests largely on whether they can continue to be socially effective in the new country. This is particularly the case for human services professionals, business people, managers, and administrators, because much of their work involves building rapport and communicating with staff and clients and is conducted in the context of work organisations. Similarly, for international students to reap the maximum benefits from an unfamiliar educational system, they will need to establish interpersonal relations and communicate effectively with mainstream students, teachers, and homestay parents (Barker, 1993; McInnis & James, 1995; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991). Newcomers from culturally different backgrounds will benefit greatly from learning appropriate ways of conducting some strategic social exchanges useful for a variety of interpersonal situations, such as seeking information and help, making social contacts and conversation, participation in group discussion, receiving and giving feedback, and refusing a request or expressing disagreement.

Satisfactory social relationships with host cultural members are impor-

tant for general social purposes in daily living and for children of immigrant and expatriate families to integrate successfully in schools and the neighborhood. Being socially competent is vital for meeting the human needs for belonging, love, and esteem as the newcomers seek acceptance in a new work, educational, and social environment dominated by host nationals.

The majority of newcomers tend to have clear goals for continued career and educational success and are often prepared to work very hard to attain these goals in the new country. However, not all immigrants and sojourners recognize the importance of sociocultural competence in their pursuit of these goals. For example, an Asian professional immigrant in Canada may willingly work through most coffee breaks and so miss out on vital informal exchanges of work-related information and opportunities for building social relationships in the lunch room, which could in future jeopardize his chances of career advancement.

Immigrants and sojourners who have been in the new country for some time often notice considerable differences in what constitutes social competencies, and many begin to realize how desirable it is to be interculturally effective. In a study with 111 Hong Kong professional and managerial immigrants in Australia, Mak (1996) found that the most frequently identified barrier (by close to two-thirds of the subjects) in transfer of their occupational skills was unfamiliarity with the Australian culture and society. When her subjects were asked to suggest training programs that could have been useful for facilitating their career development, the most common response spontaneously expressed was that of some form of intercultural communication training. It would seem that some immigrants who are acutely aware of cultural differences in the workplace are nonetheless puzzled as to how to bridge the differences.

These newcomers are looking for guidance in or at least the critical clues for going about their adventure in the new country. They are like strangers lost in a new city who are in need of a map to help them reach their destinations. They should be able to benefit from cultural learning presented as social skills training in the host country (Bochner, 1986, 1994; Brislin, 1994). Their clear goals for career and educational success should provide the motivation for acquiring and practicing these intercultural social skills.

PSYCHOSOCIAL BARRIERS TO DEVELOPING SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Despite the drive for success among the immigrants and sojourners, a number of potential psychosocial barriers may impede the development

of sociocultural competence in adults and adolescents. They may have limited coaching and practice opportunities for learning these skills, or may be consciously or unconsciously resisting to develop intercultural social competence in the new country for a variety of reasons.

Newcomers may not be ready to learn and practice social behaviors appropriate to the new culture in the initial period of settlement. It is not unusual for recent arrivals to be overwhelmed by the immediate demands and challenges in orienting to living in a new place (Pederson, 1991; Stening, 1979). Some new arrivals could also be preoccupied with multiple losses and grieving (Anderson, 1994). Those who have left behind beloved family members or have given up established and prestigious careers in their original country may be particularly sad and homesick (Mak, 1991). Ishiyama (1989, 1995) suggested that newcomers tend to have heightened initial needs for self-validation, including the validation of the cultural self. Many will want to seek comfort and affirmation of their sense of self through interacting with familiar others, such as co-ethnics, and conducting familiar, rather than novel, activities.

Newcomers who are unfamiliar with the host cultural code may experience considerable interpersonal anxiety as they begin to interact with host nationals (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988). In cases where strangers attempt to cope with their anxiety by opting for minimising contacts with hosts, this may lead to social avoidance. It is well known that while some forms of contact may reduce prejudice and lessen ethnocentrism, contact which is competitive or overly formal could reinforce existing negative stereotypes (Amir, 1969, 1976; Triandis & Vassilou, 1967). The larger the distance between the original and the host culture, the greater is the potential for social anxiety. This tendency may be accentuated where newcomers have access to co-ethnic community "enclaves" and the familiar lifestyle they could provide, and hence a reduced need to interact with host nationals and learn their strange customs.

The motivation to develop sociocultural competence is likely to be compromised when people's original cultural pride or identity is threatened (Bond, 1992; Mak, Westwood & Ishiyama, 1994). New immigrants and sojourners may resist learning the social presentation of host nationals when faced with a perceived pressure to abandon their own customs and replace them with those characteristic of the new country. Individuals forced to assimilate into the new society and to give up their home cultural values and familiar ways of relating to the world often feel devalued and resentful. They may be reluctant to adopt new ways of doing things. However, if these cultural adjustment tasks are presented as additions to their existing repertoire of social skills that are highly advantageous for performing the newly adopted roles acquired through living in a foreign country, most newcomers will probably find

such an augmentational approach to be attractive and certainly more acceptable than a replacement model. The extended range of social competencies enables immigrants, international students, and expatriate workers to continue to be effective within their ethnic community and at the same time increases their chances of success in the new country.

Various dispositional, demographic, and other personal factors may explain individual differences in cross-cultural adjustments (Kealey & Ruben, 1983; Smith & Bond, 1993). For example, those who are introverted, anxiety-prone, authoritarian, hesitant to open up to new experiences, low in self-esteem, and have external locus of control beliefs, may be less motivated or find it harder to develop intercultural social competencies. Furthermore, minority group members at the resistance and immersion stage of cultural identity development (Sue & Sue, 1990) may strongly resist an identification with the mainstream society and indicate a clear preference for completely belonging to the original racial group.

In summary, potential psychosocial barriers to developing socio-cultural competence include lack of coaching and practice opportunities, a sense of being overwhelmed by the number of adjustments required, heightened needs for self-validation, interpersonal anxiety about how to relate to host nationals, threat to the newcomers' original cultural identity, and various personal factors. These barriers will need to be addressed in an effective intercultural social skills training program.

THEORETICAL BASES OF LEARNING SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

Previous works (e.g., Brislin, Landis, & Brandt, 1983; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1983) have delineated different approaches to intercultural training, but have not presented a theoretical discussion of what makes cultural learning effective despite various potential psychosocial barriers. While Taylor (1994) has argued for a significant link between becoming intercultural competent and Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective transformative learning, he has not provided a specific explanation of how sociocultural competence skills can be acquired or trained.

The present paper argues that combining instructional implications from established paradigms of operant and classical conditioning and social cognitive learning in a group setting can provide intercultural communication trainers with an integrated framework for enhancing the development of sociocultural competence among new immigrants and sojourners, while simultaneously addressing the potential psychosocial barriers. The learning paradigms are not presented as being fundamentally adversarial, but have evolved over decades of observation and research to account for different aspects of the complex processes

of human learning. The theoretical discussion will be helpful for understanding why some intercultural competence training is likely to be more effective than others.

Operant Conditioning

The principles of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953, 1972) in shaping new behaviors and changing the likelihood of behaviors are well-established and widely applied in educational and therapeutic settings (e.g., Masters, Burish, Hollon, & Rimm, 1987). Following these principles, recent immigrants and sojourners can be trained to develop new micro social skills for career and educational success appropriate to the new culture if the following conditions are met: (1) their correct responses to specific social cues are repeatedly rewarded by praises and successes, (2) their appropriate social behaviors are further reinforced by the reduction of embarrassment and anxiety about unfamiliar social interactions, and (3) provision of coaching and opportunities for practice to facilitate corrective feedback and perfection of new skills. Effective social behaviors for specific goals may later be generalized to other appropriate situations. Training can proceed according to a graded sequence of difficulties—progressing from dealing with direct and obvious social cues to the more subtle and intricate.

Classical Conditioning

The established paradigm of classical conditioning that can be traced back to the work of Pavlov (1927) is useful for understanding some foreigners' conditioned social anxiety in interacting with hosts. Initially neutral stimuli (e.g., a foreign accent, visibly different facial features, and unfamiliar gestures) may come to acquire a capacity to provoke anxiety.

Fortunately, extensive research has established the effectiveness of the counter-conditioning procedure (Masters, Burish, Hollon, & Rimm, 1987; Wolpe, 1958, 1973) in helping individuals extinguish conditioned anxiety through repeatedly pairing the anxiety-provoking stimuli with the relaxation response. A critical component of the procedure is that the individual will need to be exposed to the anxiety-provoking cues, either in imagination or in real life situations, and in increasing amounts of exposure, instead of being allowed to avoid them.

Applied to dealing with anxiety in cross-cultural encounters, this would mean the importance of opportunities for strangers to interact with hosts in a supportive and relaxed atmosphere with potentially rewarding outcomes. The acquisition of a few simple but effective micro social skills (e.g., introducing oneself, and making a request appropriate

to the new culture) through the operant conditioning procedures described above is likely to increase considerably the chances of having a rewarding social interaction.

Social Cognitive Learning

Bandura's (1977a) theory of social learning, refined in 1986 as the theory of social cognitive learning, has greatly broadened the understanding of the processes of human acquisition and maintenance of complex social behaviors. According to the theory, individuals have a tendency to model upon others' behaviors when the role models are similar to themselves and/or are respected and are observed to be obtaining rewards for their behaviors. Through observations alone, trainees develop expectations that specific behaviors in certain social situations will lead to rewarding consequences, a process known as vicarious learning. After being shown what to do in strategic situations by credible role models and given an explanation of the underlying rationale, trainees are likely to learn to perform similar behaviors when opportunities arise.

Observing successful social performances by others similar to oneself (e.g., a visibly different co-ethnic who also speaks with an accent) enhances the trainees' perceived self-efficacy, or belief in ability to carry out a particular behavior. Increased self-efficacy in a strategic action in turn increases the chance of attempting and mastering that task as well as the likelihood of appropriate goal-setting (Berry & West, 1993). Bandura (1977b, 1989) argued that the way that individuals think affects their performance and that efficacy beliefs can regulate human functioning through integrated cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection (of activities and environment) processes. Hence, there are adaptive benefits of optimistic efficacy beliefs. Culturally, different newcomers who are not shown ways of being socially effective by role models from a similar background may become discouraged and believe that they will never be socially effective in the new country given their minority group member and newcomer status.

Another relevant concept within the social cognitive theory is reciprocal determinism, which means person variables, situation variables, and behavior continuously interact with one another (Bandura, 1986). This is an important augmentation to classical and operant conditioning theories that are focused on the effect of the environment on the individual's behavior. While the concept of reciprocal determinism recognizes the importance of the environment and specific situations, it is also believed that individuals' behavior can have an impact on the situation as well as feed back into personal variables. It follows that changes to more effective social behavior interculturally will lead to a

more congenial social environment as well as a more socially efficacious person. Bandura's idea of a self-generated environment is consistent with Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation, which views the individual as an active agent in choosing how to respond in a foreign environment and in so doing creating his or her own adjustment. For instance, when a previously quiet Asian student began to participate enthusiastically in discussion in a class, she actually helped to create a more interesting and lively classroom environment and she also started to feel that she belonged to the group.

Recent conceptualisations of social learning and behavior changes by Bandura have continued to emphasize human agency and self-regulation (Bandura, 1989, 1992). The acquisition and maintenance of the social skills are facilitated by self-regulation, including self-reinforcement. Trainees can motivate themselves by setting their own standards of behaviors and responding to their own actions in self-rewarding or self-punishing ways.

Role-Based Training in Groups: An Integrated Instructional Model

Implications for developing sociocultural competence from the three models of learning reviewed above can be integrated in an instructional model for role-based intercultural training in a group setting. A role-based approach to experiential learning in groups is action-oriented, while simultaneously providing a safe and supportive group setting. It focuses on having trainees model and repeatedly practice behaviors as an opportunity for skills acquisition and receiving feedback on the extent of skill mastery in the context of a group of individuals with similar needs (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

Corey & Corey (1988) summarized three advantages of using role-plays in developing competencies in a group situation. The first advantage in applying role-based learning in developing sociocultural competencies is that it serves as a method of diagnosis, wherein the facilitator has ample opportunities to observe the trainees' performance and assess where competencies are already present and where additional skills acquisition is required. Second, role-play in group situations provides opportunities for observing a variety of ways to deal with problems or approach challenges. This facilitates the modelling of an approach to deal with intercultural situations, in a way that enables an individual trainee to feel most comfortable. Third, role-plays enable trainees to gain new insights important for cultural and self-understanding as well as into new interpersonal presentation styles.

There are a number of reasons why group-based sociocultural com-

petence training is not only economical and efficient but also likely to be effective. Group development involves setting in place a safe and inclusive situation that helps members to relax, reducing social anxiety and defensiveness. The psychosocial needs of the trainees are best met when members have a sense of belonging or feel included and when the guidelines for participation are clearly outlined.

The group setting provides newcomers with opportunities for mutual validation. Individuals can affirm their cultural uniqueness and appreciate common struggles and frustrations due to their minority status and language and other cultural handicaps, while at the same time sharing a common desire for career and educational success in the host country.

A climate of trust can then form and the willingness to undertake “risk-taking”, inherent in adopting different social behaviors, increases. With increased risk-taking, trainees will try out more roles and feel comfortable experimenting with new behaviors; the group will also tend to be supportive and trust formation is further enhanced.

An additional advantage of group-based learning lies in the multiple opportunities for feedback from other group members. They can help one another by providing either role models or role enactments of significant others when needed. The group is also effective in reinforcing goal-setting and contracting for action outside the individual sessions. Accountability to peers is often very motivating for learners.

A useful by-product to the preceding advantages comes about when group members begin practicing with others. Learning to speak up or presenting one’s ideas or opinions to a group are key sociocultural competencies needed in most social or work-related situations.

Mak, Westwood, & Ishiyama (1994) have further argued that role-based learning in intercultural training groups represents an augmentational approach in acquiring cultural competencies rather than an assimilationist, replacement approach. The challenges facing newcomers can be conceived as novel social roles. Recent immigrants and sojourners are, therefore, encouraged to find out what those new roles entail and then to practice the new role behaviors required for successful encounters with host nationals, while choosing to retain customary social skills for interacting with co-ethnics. This way, the training is unlikely to threaten the newcomers’ original cultural identity.

Experiential learning through practicing novel social roles has a behavioral focus in the sense that cognition and affect are of secondary importance in the early learning stages (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). However, once acquired, the new behavior contributes to a heightened perceived self-efficacy in sociocultural competence, which may enhance self-esteem generally. Integration of the newly learned skills facilitates changes in how individuals feel and think about themselves. The affective and cognitive aspects are not ignored, but focused upon secondarily in

terms of intervention. For instance, an individual can directly benefit from behavioral training on dating in the new culture.

Conditions for Effective Learning of Intercultural Social Skills

What then are the likely elements of effective sociocultural competence training for career and academic success? To begin with, trainers and funding sources should recognize that most culturally different newcomers are fairly overwhelmed in the first weeks of arrival by the unfamiliarity and novelty of the host physical and sociocultural environment. They may need to first of all orient themselves to the foreign surroundings, and many will take some extra time to grieve over the loss of a familiar lifestyle (Ishiyama, 1989), before they are ready to contemplate setting realistic goals for career and academic success and to figure out the culturally appropriate path to success. Psychosocial needs at this early stage of “shock” tend to be geared towards validation of the familiar cultural self. Some social awkwardness in relating to host nationals can be expected. It may, in some cases, turn into social avoidance.

Later, when the newcomers have set goals for success and realize that effectiveness in social encounters is an integral part of the path to success, they will be more interested in observing cultural differences in social interactions in dyads and groups and be intrigued by both the obvious and subtle differences. It is at this contemplative and preparatory stage that new immigrants and sojourners are likely to be ready for an introduction to sociocultural competence training presented as a course in intercultural social presentation and communication. For immigrant and sojourner workers, such a program can be offered as an educational course for job search and career advancement rather than one of remedial group counselling. For international students, the course can be described as pertaining to social and presentation skills for academic success. Expatriate workers who have already participated in pre-departure intercultural communication training can benefit from follow-up sociocultural competence training after the initial period of settling in, when they have had a real taste of the novel culture and society.

For individuals to reap the maximum benefits from a sociocultural training program, it is most effective if the group is led jointly by a minority group member (as a credible role model for the enhancement of trainees’ perceived self-efficacy) and a member of the dominant culture (for authentic explanation of the host cultural code). Trainees will be encouraged to witness how someone with visibly different features and speaking with a foreign accent can successfully assume a leadership position and demonstrate effective intercultural social skills.

The social skills taught should be discrete in order to facilitate learning

and mostly generic for wider applications to a range of social situations. Examples of relevant micro social skills are making a request, interrupting, giving a different opinion, and expressing a wish to be included in a group. Depending on the needs and circumstances of group members, context-specific social skills such as those required for job interview and negotiating an extension to the due date of an academic assignment may also be taught.

It will be helpful to explain to trainees that social anxiety in intercultural interactions among newcomers is normal, and a goal of the program is to replace the anxiety with efficacy beliefs reinforced by mastery of basic social skills, including those useful for accessing the new culture (e.g., introducing oneself, asking questions, starting a conversation in the lunch room, and inviting host nationals to coffee).

There should be opportunities for observing live and videotaped role-plays of social situations, followed by coaching of appropriate social responses, which are refined through repeated practice and corrective feedback. Trainees are encouraged to discuss variations in appropriate social responses and to adopt a presentation style that they feel most comfortable identifying (e.g., appearing energetic and engaging in frequent use of gestures, or relatively reserved and formal). This increases participants' chances of visualising themselves as being socially effective despite their individual differences in levels of extroversion, anxiety, and openness.

The training program should be delivered in several sessions to allow for practice in real life social situations and completion of relevant prescribed activities between sessions. This provides repeated opportunities for corrective feedback and consolidation of learning. Trainees are requested to identify the relevance of the course to their individual goals for career and educational success in the first session. Then, towards the end of each session, trainees are encouraged to set their individual short-term goals for practicing in real life the strategic social skills learned in the session, and to visualize how the attainment of these specific short-term goals will contribute to the broader and longer-term goals for career and/or educational success. The goal-setting should encourage self-regulation processes, as participants motivate themselves by setting their own standards and responding to their own actions using self-reinforcement.

CONCLUSIONS

To undertake training for the development of sociocultural competence does not guarantee career or educational success. Nor does it replace the actual hard work necessary for attaining such success. Nevertheless, being socially effective in a new country will significantly

enhance interpersonal communication, inclusion in networks, social presentation of self, and the individual's well-being. These personal qualities are often favored by teachers and prospective employers. After the initial period of settling in, culturally different immigrants and sojourners often come to the realisation that unfamiliarity with the host culture and society is a major obstacle to their goals for success.

However, various psychosocial barriers may undermine the motivation of acquiring and practicing sociocultural competencies, hence reducing the effectiveness and efficiency of any intercultural training effort. These barriers include lack of coaching, practice, and correction opportunities, a sense of being overwhelmed by the number of adjustments required in the initial period, heightened needs for validation, cross-cultural social anxiety, threat to the individuals' original cultural identity, and various personal factors. Combining the instructional implications from models of conditioning and social cognitive learning in a role-based group training program, can provide insight into how these potential barriers may be addressed, and provide optimal conditions for the acquisition and extension of social competencies instrumental to success in the new culture.

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