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The Role of the Small Group as an Uncertainty Reduction Tool in a Cross-Cultural Training Environment

John Burk
Carroll College, Helena, MT

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The Role of the Small Group as an Uncertainty Reduction Tool in a Cross-Cultural Training Environment

An honors thesis submitted to the Department of Communication Studies for partial completion of the requirements for graduation with honors

By
John E. Burk

Helena, Montana
April 5, 1991
Signature Page

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Communication Studies.

Director: Dr. Harry Smith, Chair
Department of Communication Studies

Reader: Dr. Robert Swartout, Chair
Department of History

Reader: Dr. Phil Wittman, Chair
Department of Political Science

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Abstract
This paper examines the role of the small group as an uncertainty reduction tool in a cross-cultural training environment. Of the many cultural training techniques used to educate those who go overseas (business people, tourists, students) the one educational tool that is absent is the culturally diverse small group. It is argued that the culturally diverse small group could provide a valuable format for actual cultural interaction. An analysis is given of the uncertainty reduction potential of a small group and how reducing uncertainty through small group interaction could be beneficial to a cross-cultural training program. It is concluded that a foundation has been established for a useful cross-cultural training technique.
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Chapter One

Introduction

Intercultural Communication Importance

The importance of intercultural communication in our rapidly changing world has been noted by many in the discipline. Increased cultural contact has meant that people from different experiential backgrounds have had to communicate with one another to accomplish business, academic, tourist, or everyday tasks. Porter and Samovar (1988) define intercultural communication as “whenever a message producer is a member of one culture and a message receiver is a member of another” (p. 15). Porter and Samovar extend their analysis by defining culture as the “deposit of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving” (p. 19). Kim (1988) views all communication as intercultural to some extent and the degree of “interculturalness” depends on “the degree of heterogeneity between the experiential backgrounds of the individuals involved” (p. 13). These definitions point to the necessity of cultural understanding by demonstrating that intercultural encounters can be frequent, and individuals may not even be aware of the encounter.

Scholars in cultural studies fields point to the phenomena of the “global village” as the primary reason for increased intercultural contact over recent decades. Landis and Brislin (1983) see the world
as “fast becoming a global village where we feel more and more keenly that we are sharing Spaceship Earth. Global pollution, television, and communication are a reality” (p. ix). Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981) indicate that it was during the late 1960’s and the 1970’s when “the global village prophecy was upon us,” because of “[a] combination of increased mobility, modern communication technology, and an awareness of common worldwide problems. . .” (p. 5). Bhawuk (1990) points to world trade, which “has grown from 51.4 billion U.S. dollars in 1948 to more than a trillion in 1980,” as well as a large increase in world tourism, diplomatic missions, multinational companies, and international students, as examples of intercultural contact (p. 325). With complex communication systems linking the world instantaneously, and overseas air travel ever increasing, there is no doubt that the global village concept is technologically feasible and real (Barlund, 1988).

The reality of the global economic marketplace has provided the impetus for business organizations to become multinational and has subsequently increased cultural contact. Main (1989) sees “going global” as a matter of survival for many companies because of the fierce competition among shrinking domestic markets (p. 70). Professor Stephen Korbrin states: “Even the biggest companies in the biggest countries cannot survive on their domestic markets if they are in global industries. They have to be in all major markets [North America, Western Europe, and the Pacific Rim]” (Main, 1989, p. 70). Anthony (1985) argues that multinational corporations (MNCs) “affect the lives of billions of people daily.” “There are 400 MNCs world-wide and . . . they produce 15 percent of the gross world
product” (p. 59). This exponential increase in multicultural contact has made organizations realize the need for cross-cultural training.

Traditionally, multinational corporations did not seem to care what native populations cared about them, especially in Third World nations, and the stereotype of the “Ugly American” became a norm. This lack of training not only hindered relations with indigenous populations, but hurt the chances of success of the employees sent overseas. Armstrong, Sisson, and Page (1988) indicate that corporations literally lose billions of dollars a year as a result of overseas employees and their families being unable to work and live in a foreign environment. They found that American companies have had to recall “10-40 percent of the expatriates as unable to adapt to the foreign posting” (p. 5). Shuter (1989) in a review of research on the international marketplace, cites literature (Tung, 1984) indicating that international human resource planning has been woefully inadequate. Such planning often lacks “(a) adequate cultural training for employees and family members who are relocating abroad, (b) sufficient examination of employee interpersonal skills in international interactions, (c) systematic evaluation of expatriate success overseas, and (d) carefully planned durations of employee assignments. . .” (p. 398). This lack of cross-cultural training, given the dramatic increase of intercultural contact vis’a-vis multinational organizations, is quite astounding. It has only been recently that specific training programs have been implemented to educate overseas employees.

Not only should employees of multinational organizations be culturally trained, but their families also need formal cultural
training. Family members can and do experience “culture shock” and it can have detrimental effects on family members and on the employee. Savich and Rodgers (1988) cite an unfortunate, but not untypical, situation which underscores the need for family member training:

Paul E. Illman [author] describes how a group of American wives who had not received such training fared during their husbands’ overseas assignments. In the absence of organized activities, the wives spent their early afternoons together drinking tea or coffee. Soon, the tea and coffee were replaced by wine and beer, which were replaced by Scotch—and some of the women were suffering from chronic alcoholism by the time they returned home. These spouse’s inability to adapt successfully away from home almost certainly had a negative impact on the manager’s job performance (p. 46).

This example illustrates the need for formal training in multinational organizations. There are many cross-cultural training programs designed for expatriate employees and their families, but organizations have been slow to use them. Culture is usually not an issue weighed in a corporation’s decision to become a global organization. It is now becoming an issue that can no longer be ignored.

With the reality that intercultural contact is increasing, and that little formal training exists to those outside a formal organization, it becomes imperative that an awareness of cultural biases, or ethnocentrism is developed. Triandis (1990) views people reacting to cultural differences “ethnocentrically” when “they use
their own ethnic group (an in-group) as the standard and judge others favorably if they are like in-group members and unfavorably if they are not” (p. 34). Ethnocentrism is a root cause of intercultural communication difficulty. Most people do not realize that the way they view the world influences how they communicate with those from different cultures. Not having an awareness of cultural biases can severely hamper communication attempts and lead to the dissatisfaction of overseas employees and their families, as described earlier, or to anyone who has an intercultural encounter. An ethnocentric awareness can heighten the perception of subjectivity in viewing those from another culture, (Samovar, et al., 1981) and help in recognizing culturally held values. Gudykunst and Kim (1984) view decreasing ethnocentrism as crucial “if we are to become more functional and effective in our intercultural environment” (p. 224). Cultural biases can be made aware of within a cross-cultural training environment.

Ultimately, cultural world-views affect the communication between members of cultures. Intercultural contact has increased dramatically and is becoming more broad based. “Big countries like the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and India are infested with ethnic problems that demand a cross-cultural understanding of every citizen of these countries” (Bhawuk, 1990, p. 325). Cultural awareness/sensitivity becomes essential in a world where “[m]illions of people today live and work in a culture other than their own” (Pedersen, 1988, p. 3). Kennedy (1983) views cultural sensitivity as necessary to “become effective and productive citizens in a continually shrinking world” (p. 290). Cross-cultural training is
essential at all levels of society and, consequently, should be pursued as a viable and necessary component of intercultural communication.

Foci of Research

This paper will demonstrate how small groups are a useful, underused, cross-cultural training tool, in light of intercultural uncertainty reduction theory. Small groups have traditionally been used as a setting for role-playing exercises in cross-cultural training programs. Small groups are not used as a setting for cultural interaction. A small group made up of culturally diverse members, given specific tasks that will heighten cultural awareness, could be an excellent cross-cultural training tool that could augment virtually any specific training program.

The majority of intercultural communication literature has examined the interpersonal/intercultural encounter. The basis of this body of literature is interpersonal uncertainty reduction theory, which has been extrapolated to and empirically tested in an intercultural environment. Much of the research focuses on initial interactions and has shown, at least in that context, that uncertainty reduction theory can be applied across cultures. This paper will attempt to demonstrate that a small group could be a useful uncertainty reduction tool in a cross-cultural training environment. Links will be drawn from interpersonal/intercultural uncertainty reduction theory to small groups and their utility in reducing uncertainty. The small group literature, albeit limited, will show that there is viability in looking to a small group as a forum to reduce uncertainty.
Chapter Two will be a review of cross-cultural training literature. Specific cross-cultural training techniques will be discussed to show similarities, differences, and the amount of small group usage. Most of the techniques reviewed are designed to train organizational employees for overseas assignments. Given that, the focus of this paper will stay within those parameters to clarify the potential utility of the small group as a cross-cultural training technique.

In Chapter Three, cultural small group literature will be reviewed to (1) show the lack of research in the area, and (2) to establish the links to other intercultural communication research that is more prevalent. Finally, uncertainty reduction theory will be reviewed, specifically its intercultural implications, to demonstrate its use beyond the interpersonal/dyadic communication situation.

Chapter Four will be a synthesis of the literature review. Specific arguments will be made in light of the research presented that will show how a small group can reduce cultural uncertainty and how the small group process can be a useful cross-cultural training technique. The form of the argument that is employed to support the thesis of this paper will be modus ponens. The form of the argument is, "if claim x and claim y are true, then conclusion z is true." Since it will not be empirically proven that claim x (uncertainty reduction theory could be applied a small group setting) and claim y (a culturally diverse small group could be useful for trainees in a cross-cultural orientation program) are true, it will be deductively demonstrated that the conclusion z (the small group could reduce cultural uncertainty in a cross-cultural training
environment and be useful to trainees of the program) would validly follow from the premises. The empirical testing of claims x and y will have to await further research. The reason for clarifying the formal structure of the argument presented is that the area being studied in this paper is a new research area, and at present empirical tests are not available.

Chapter Five will be conclusionary statements. It will be demonstrated how the thesis of this paper was met and how future research is needed in the critically important area of cross-cultural communication training.
Chapter Two
Cross-Cultural Training Literature Review

The review of cross-cultural training (CCT) will be divided into two sections. The first segment will be a review of very specific programs along with the approaches and goals of each. The second section will address more general training techniques that may not be in a specific format per se, but are nonetheless valuable training tools.

One such program developed specifically for multinational organizations is Johnson and Pettit's (1985) International-Supervisory Training and Education Program (I-STEP). The program emphasizes business communication skills while simultaneously teaching supervisory skills (Johnson & Pettit, 1985). The twenty-five week course contains two essential components, explained by Johnson and Pettit (1985):

The first was on a grammar and linguistic component. Only after a period of twelve weeks of intensive grammar/linguistic training were the first business components introduced. The second curriculum area of the I-STEP program was intercultural communication. This curriculum component was also introduced at the start of the program. The topics in this segment ranged from nonverbal communication patterns to comparison of East/West logic patterns and thought. This component allowed the trainees to evaluate their total educational experience within a multinational environment (p. 34).
The business components used in the curriculum were case studies and typical business mediums of communication (report and letter writing). The intercultural communication component emphasized that cultural "differences do not indicate that any one is superior to another. It is also the program philosophy that by cultivating an awareness of cultural differences people of one culture can better relate to the wants and needs of another culture" (Johnson & Pettit, 1985, p. 35).

Within the intercultural communication component, the program focused on four specific areas: "(1) development of the trainee's interpersonal skills; (2) development of an awareness of intercultural differences in work and social habits; (3) explanation of traditional, business, social, and work habits; and (4) enhancement of oral communication skills and patterns" (Johnson & Pettit, 1985, p.35). The thrust of this component is to get the trainees to focus on how they operate on a daily basis, and then encourage them to think of themselves in a multicultural environment.

Business components are not introduced until three months into the program, allowing trainees more practical topics for discussion. While the business topics become increasingly more prevalent for the duration of the course, communication skills within the business context remain the primary focus.

There are implications to the communication/supervisory training. First, some of the training must be individualized so that problems or concerns of the multinational trainees which arise can be subsequently dealt with. Second, there is a definite need for repetition, particularly in the reading and writing skills that are
strongly emphasized. Speaking and listening skills are developed much more quickly and did not need as much repetition, but the difficult concepts needed consistent repetition to be fully internalized. Third, the business concepts that permeate the course must be internalized. One of the primary goals of the course was to break from the traditional Western logic pattern, through writing assignments, which were focused on a different set of logic patterns. For these different logic patterns to remain with the multinational trainees, special efforts must be made to internalize them. Fourth, business communication must be emphasized. Communication exists from the smallest business to multinational corporations (Johnson & Pettit, 1985) and it plays a vital role in the function of an organization which cannot be underemphasized.

A broader approach to cross-cultural training is Armstrong, Sisson, and Page’s (1988) cultural sensitizing module. Their aim is to have a program that is “purposefully broad based or etic in nature in an effort to alert participants to their own concept of culture and to engend awareness of and appreciation for cultural diversity” (p. 13).

The module consists of five phases which are grounded in theoretical concepts that are applied in both dyadic and small group situations during the training period. Phase one consists of introducing the basic concepts of culture, subculture, and subgroups and engaging in subsequent discussions. Phase two probes participant memberships (subcultures/groups) and discusses the role of interpersonal communication in gaining entre into a membership. Phase three utilizes a small group setting to discuss the dyadic scenarios that took place in phases one and two. The disagreements
and barriers that arose from the dyadic situations are examined to determine how to work through such difficulties. Phase four is a cross-cultural simulation in which two larger groups are created. Both are given a specific culture to adopt and one is designated to be a more developed country than the other. Interactions between members of both groups take place to see how well the participants can handle themselves. Phase five consists of debriefing the module participants and returning to the initial concepts introduced so that the instruction is retained. This program is considered an introductory course which should be followed by country specific training (Armstrong et al., 1988).

It was the experience of Armstrong et al. (1988) that this module heightened cultural awareness and created an understanding and appreciation of basic communication skills (e.g., listening, empathy, attendance to nonverbal signals). Host country training must augment the introductory nature of this module, but it is a solid basis for intercultural understanding.

Baird and Stull (1981) offer a more culture-general training program that focuses on universal cultural skills as opposed to just culture/country-specific skills. Their program was developed for Hewlett-Packard (HP) and is aimed at helping supervisors handle cultural differences. They use a three-tiered approach to increase cultural awareness. Level one is general and includes specific cultural awareness information. Level two involves practicing cultural awareness skills, and level three applies those skills to specific cultural situations. Their premise is based on increasing
cultural sensitivity and applying what is learned to real-life situations.

Level one begins with a discussion of what constitutes culture. Baird and Stull (1981) use Terpstra’s (1978) model as a basis for general cultural components that exist in an international business setting. The components (language, religion, attitudes and values, education, social organization, technology and material culture, politics and law) are viewed as factors within a multinational environment which an organization must be cognizant of in order to effectively interact.

After the participants have a good understanding of what culture is in general, then cultural-specific information is introduced to begin to focus the instruction. Country specific facts sheets are given out, showing how to communicate and relate to some of the cultural nuances that a particular culture may have. Level one consists of “mini-lectures and structured exercises” that rely upon an “intellectual or cognitive perspective” to create understanding among the participants of the training (Baird & Stull, 1981, p. 9).

Level two takes the cognitive information gained in level one, one step further by getting into the behavioral considerations (Baird & Stull, 1981). It is Baird and Stull’s (1981) position that “it isn’t enough to just be aware. To be totally culturally sensitive, one must be able to demonstrate the appropriate skills” (p. 9). Therefore, at this level, six cultural awareness skills are introduced: (1) showing personal respect (e.g., reacting positively to cultural differences without an ethnocentric attitude); (2) being nonjudgmental (e.g., seeing reality for what it is, not as it “should be”); (3) being flexible
(e.g., tolerating unfamiliar situations in a culturally sensitive way); (4) being spontaneous (e.g., dropping expectations and dealing contextually with individual situations); (5) using problem-orientation (e.g., eliciting input and participation from others to solve problems within cultural norms); and (6) being empathic (e.g., attempting to perceive others’ “world view” while realizing one’s own cultural biases). Empathy is particularly emphasized by Baird and Stull (1981) because “[o]f all the skills, it is our feeling that the demonstration of empathy is at the core of developing a universal perspective for cultural sensitivity skill” (p. 9). Level two’s goal, in general, is to force participants to achieve a greater objective understanding of themselves (Baird & Stull, 1981).

Level three constitutes “applying skills to specific cultural situations” (Baird & Stull, 1981, p. 11). Baird and Stull (1981) see level three as “the major goal for achieving true cultural sensitivity” (p. 11). Role playing exercises are used to give participants a chance to react to given behaviors. Role playing is used heavily in level three to reinforce levels one and two and to give the participants a forum for practical application of their skills. The following is a scenario for a supervisor to act out or role play:

You are having some problems with Noblesa, one of your Filipino employees. Lately, you’ve noticed a real change in her work behavior. She started with you about 4 months ago and her work behavior was excellent. Lately, she has been missing a lot of work and when she is at work, she doesn’t seem to be as concerned about the quality of her work. You’ve noticed that her work area has been particularly “messy.” You haven’t
had many conversations with her, but feel that you must talk to her at this time. How would you handle this situation (Baird & Stull, 1981, p. 12)?

Level three is the culmination of the training in cultural sensitivity. Baird and Stull (1981) view this cultural-general approach as a necessary foundation for further cultural training (e.g., language training and actual host country experience). Universal skills training is an approach that many in the field of cultural training ascribe to.

Bhawuk (1990), in a review of cross-cultural orientation programs, points to three goals which should be achieved within a training environment: (1) teaching the trainees how to learn; (2) teaching them how to make isomorphic attributions; (i.e., making the same judgment about something as somebody from another culture) and (3) teaching them how to handle "disconfirmed expectancies" (i.e., turning an unmet expectation into a negative stereotype) (Bhawuk, 1990, p. 327). Each goal will be explored.

Bhawuk (1990) sees the objective of cross-cultural training programs as attempting to "enable the trainees to actively use their knowledge and understanding in new situations and learn for themselves" (p. 327-8). Bhawuk (1990) cites Kolb’s (1987) model of "learning how to learn" which “consists of four processes: experiencing something concrete (background), reflecting over the experience (knowledge), conceptualizing abstract concepts learned from the experience (understanding), and actively experimenting with the new concepts learned (behavior)” (p. 328). The idea of a concrete cultural experience is the essence of this model. Nothing
can simulate or have the lasting effect of a cultural experience, which allows for the other three processes to occur and heightens awareness of self in a cultural context.

If one could achieve the goal of isomorphic attributions, the fundamental attribution error could be eliminated (Triandis, 1975). The fundamental attribution error assumes that one ascribes attributes to one's own behavior and also ascribes attributes to the behavior of others. This attribution process can be faulty. An example would be if person x did something well, the situation in which the event occurred contributed to the success, not the individual. Diametrically, if person x did something bad, it would be perceived as an individual fault, and not situational. The reverse is true in self-perception. If something good happens, it is because I made it happen; but if I fail, the situation caused the problem. With an isomorphic attribution, one attempts to get beyond one's own viewpoint and attempts to think like others with a different world view. Making an isomorphic attribution is a key ingredient in getting outside the confines of ethnocentrism.

Disconfirmed expectancies, similar to the fundamental attribution error, should be constantly evaluated. Cross-cultural trainees need to become aware of the fact that if a situational expectation is not met in a cultural interaction, a negative stereotype should not be developed. A cognitive understanding of disconfirmed expectancies is particularly necessary because they "remain hidden behind many concepts such as time, space, work ethics, roles, learning styles, and so on, and cause problems during cross-cultural interaction" (Bhawuk, 1990, p. 330). Bhawuk views the goals of
learning how to learn, making isomorphic attributions, and mitigating disconfirmed expectancies as central to any cross-cultural orientation program.

Bhawuk (1990) critiques both the university method which emphasizes cognitive learning through lecture in the classroom, and the experiential model which de-emphasizes cognition and stresses learning by doing. Bhawuk (1990) sees the university method as the most economical but also the most shallow. The method is economical because an organization can approach a university to develop a lecture-based program for its employees. The fatal flaw of the university method is that it only appeals to the cognitive part of cultural understanding. There is virtually no cultural interaction, as a typical lecture is essentially a monologue.

The other extreme is the experiential model, for which there are many variations. An experiential model, such as the Area Simulation Model, stresses affective learning and presupposes cognitive learning. Thus, intellectualizing is de-emphasized and cultural interaction becomes the focus. The Area Simulation Model creates a foreign environment in which the trainees must function. Autonomy is taught to the trainees so independence and confidence are gained. During the course of the simulation a trainee who cannot function in the simulated foreign environment can drop out and not go on an overseas assignment. This model is very beneficial to the trainee in regards to self-awareness. The trainee will have a basis of experience to draw upon once the target culture is entered.

Another alternative to cross-cultural training is the cultural assimilator approach. This method is characterized by 100 critical
incidents which “are arranged according to what typically happens during extensive cross-cultural experiences” (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrrie, & Yong, 1986, p. 18). This training approach is considered better than the experiential or university method and is grounded in a great deal of research (Bhawuk, 1990). These 100 incidents are assumed to best simulate long-term cross-cultural experience and the incidents stimulate people’s curiosity (Brislin et al., 1986). An example of how this method works comes from Brislin et al. (1986):

A Kiss Away

James, an American student, met Zhiang, a recently arrived visitor from the People’s Republic of China, and they decided to lunch together at the university cafeteria. On their way they encountered James’s girlfriend Carol, who was on her way to a dance class. James and Carol carried on a lively, intimate conversation, virtually ignoring Zhiang, who followed behind them. When they reached the cafeteria Carol said she had to go and James embraced her and gave her a long and passionate kiss. Zhiang turned away and then walked off toward the cafeteria. James looked up, saw that Zhiang had left, and looked puzzled. “Hey,” he called, “wait for me!” Zhiang stopped looked down, and said nothing and then continued on by himself. James shrugged his shoulders and went off to eat by himself.

How would you explain Zhiang’s behavior to James?

(1) Zhiang was shocked by the display of physical affection between James and Carol.
Zhiang was offended by the manner in which James and Carol excluded him from their conversation.

Zhiang was annoyed by having to wait around while James chatted to his girlfriend.

Zhiang felt it appropriate to give James and Carol some privacy so he went ahead to wait for James in the cafeteria (p. 86).

At this point an individual or group can attempt to answer the questions in an effort to heighten cultural awareness. Explanations to each answer are given to deepen the understanding of the participants. The cultural assimilator approach is situationally specific and the 100 incidents span the spectrum of contexts in which they could occur. After the training, trainees are encouraged to write about their own critical incidents from their experience, which adds an ongoing dimension to the training.

Gudykunst, Hammer, and Wiseman (1977) propose an integrated approach to cross-cultural training. The stages Gudykunst et al. (1977) demarcate are: “(1) Perspective training, (2) Interaction training, and (3) Context specific training” (p. 107), or PIC. The first stage would work on developing an intercultural psychological perspective which would aid trainees in “better understanding the unfamiliar situations that are encountered in a foreign culture” (Gudykunst et al, 1977, p. 107).

The second stage would allow cultural interaction to take place between trainees and members from the host culture. This would allow the trainees to apply what was learned in stage one and to practice communication skills in an intercultural environment.
The final phase “focuses on the particular situation the trainees will find themselves within the host culture. This part of the training then is culture-contextual specific” (Gudykunst et al., 1977, p. 108). Host country training is the capstone of this integrated approach because it allows the trainees to utilize experiences gained in the training in situations they will confront. Gudykunst et al., (1977) see the integration of all three stages, in a training environment, as yielding the highest chance for success in a foreign culture.

This has been a broad literature review of cross-cultural training techniques. This is not a complete review of literature, but it does demonstrate the variety of techniques that are used and available. There are many similarities between the techniques and most only differ in the approach to training, as opposed to the content. The only glaring exception is the university method versus the experiential method. This review is meant is show what specific methods are used in training people to interact within various cultures. The focus of this paper is to add to the possible alternatives of cross-cultural training by advocating that a culturally diverse small group could be a very useful tool. A literature review of cultural small group, and its uncertainty reduction potential, research will illustrate the point.
Chapter Three  
Cultural Small Group and Intercultural Uncertainty Reduction Literature Review

Small group research has traditionally focused on group development, group climate, task orientation, conflict management, decision-making techniques, leadership styles, power, coalition formation, and majority and minority influence, among other issues. Absent from small group research is the effect of culture on the small group. The importance of culture in a small group has been stated only in general terms. Levine and Moreland (1990), agree that "[a]ll groups are embedded within a culture. Some of the variability among groups may thus reflect cultural differences, and some of the changes that groups may reflect cultural trends" (p. 590). Napier and Gershenfeld (1987) indicate that cultural factors have a great effect on how we think and behave in groups. They also indicate that questions are raised as a result of culture. "Will we be able to understand the differing opinions and views of people from other backgrounds? Will we value and understand the group interactions as a whole, separate from our experience in the culture we grew up in" (Napier & Gershenfeld, 1987, p. 10)?

Levine and Moreland (1990) in a review of small group research in the 1980's point to two sources who have addressed cultural issues within the small group scenario. One author is Mann (1980) who discusses the universality of natural groupings, the group as an agent of socialization, culture and conformity, adherence to group norms, group structure, cooperation and competition, and
groups and collective behavior in a cross-cultural study. The study compares different cultural groups in reference to the issues stated above, and does not address a culturally diverse group that engages in intragroup communication.

The other source referenced by Levine and Moreland (1990) is Nagao and Davis, (1980) who discuss implications of temporal drift in social parameters. They hypothesize that social and political events may have an effect on the way particular happenings are perceived. They studied jurors who viewed a video of a mock rape trial and the subsequent conviction rates, from 1973 to 1976. The trend reflected harsher judgments and more convictions, which may have been attributable to social factors rather than sampling error or methodological imprecision. Clearly, this study does not fall within the cultural small group parameters established in this paper. In their literature review, Levine and Moreland (1990) conclude that "[c]ultural influences on small groups clearly deserve more research attention" (p. 590).

Weeks, Pedersen, and Brislin (1985) come the closest to directly addressing a culturally diverse small group. In their manual for structured cross-cultural experiences, they give examples of exercises that culturally diverse groups can engage in to learn about one another. An objective of one exercise is to "determine how persons in the role of cross-culture group leader perceive matters of importance on four different levels" (p. 59). Weeks et al., (1985) continues discussing other objectives, which include attempting to evaluate individual "feelings about what is happening in the group through some non-verbal pantomime" (p. 73), demonstrating
commonalities and differences in non-verbal behaviors and "the meanings and feelings they usually communicate" (p. 74), specifying how cross-cultural group members perceive themselves functioning, and other insightful objectives.

Dinges and Maynard (1983) have done research on intercultural work-group interactions. The focus of the research was to identify "problematic situations and the competencies used in resolving these situations" (p. 71). Lists of problematic situations were generated in an attempt to discuss them in groups a priori a problem situation. Ultimately, the research on small groups and culture is limited and is not a focused area of small group research like conflict management, or group development. Essentially, the same is true for research on uncertainty reduction and the small group.

Uncertainty reduction theory is grounded in interpersonal communication research, but it has been referred to in the small group realm. At the very least, the importance of interpersonal relations in small group development has been addressed. Levine and Moreland (1990) point out that "in order to achieve their common goals, the members of a small group must establish and maintain productive interpersonal relationships. The structure of a group is the pattern of relationships that emerges among its members" (p. 598). Barker, Wahlers, Watson, and Kibler (1987) suggest that intrapersonal and dyadic communication skills may combine or precede small group communication skills. "In essence, small group communication may be viewed as a level of interpersonal communication that incorporates intrapersonal and
dyadic (verbal and nonverbal) elements, but that differs as a function of the increased number of potential interactions possible” (p. 4-5).

Beebe and Masterson (1986) see uncertainty reduction potential in small groups, but there is a higher degree of uncertainty because the greater number of interlocutors. They see the increased complexity of a small group setting as creating more uncertainty, thus “getting to know” someone will be harder in a small group than in a dyadic situation. With interpersonal relations at the root of small groups, the potential to reduce uncertainty is viable. There is precedence (Keyton, 1986) for extrapolating a dyadic model to small group methodology, but no extrapolation has been made from interpersonal uncertainty reduction theory to the small group setting, let alone intercultural uncertainty reduction theory. There has not been enough small group research in this direction to make a viable extrapolation, but it is hoped that this paper may provide the impetus to do so.

**Intercultural Uncertainty Reduction Theory**

Uncertainty reduction theory is generally reserved for interpersonal communication. Berger and Calabrese (1975) developed the theory to explore initial interactions. They take the view “that we strive to make our own behavior and the behavior of others predictable, and we try to develop causal structures which provide explanation for our own behavior as well as others” (Berger & Calabrese, 1975, p. 101). Berger and Calabrese (1975) posit seven axioms and 21 theorems “specifying the interrelations among uncertainty, amount of communication, nonverbal affiliative
expressiveness, information seeking, intimacy level of communication content, reciprocity, similarity, and liking” (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988, p. 106). Gudykunst (1988) indicates that “[u]ncertainty reduction involves the creation of proactive predictions about others’ attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behavior, as well as retroactive explanations about others’ behavior” (p. 123). He further indicates that the theory “is one of the few communication theories systematically extended to explain cross-cultural variations in communication, as well as intercultural and intergroup communication” (p. 123).

Gudykunst (1988) views the theory as applicable to a variety of cultural contexts. The theory has been used to describe initial interactions in low-and high-context cultures, (Gudykunst, 1983; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984; Gudykunst, Nishida, Koike, & Shiino, 1986) acquaintance, friend, and dating relationships in Japan, Korea, and the United States, (Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1985) ethnic differences between blacks and whites in the United States, (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987) communication between members of different cultures, (Gudykunst, 1985a, 1985b; Gudykunst, Chua, & Gray, 1987; Gudykunst, Nishida, & Chua, 1986) and interethnic communication (Gudykunst, 1986) (as reviewed by Gudykunst, 1988, p. 124).

Gudykunst (1985a) proposes a model of uncertainty reduction in intercultural encounters which is an extension of Gudykunst, Yang & Nishida’s (1985) research on acquaintance, friend, and dating relationships. The premise of the model is that an increase in the predictability of a communication situation will decrease uncertainty
and increase attributional confidence. "[I]f uncertainty is zero (0), attributional confidence is 100%" (Gudykunst, 1985a, p. 80).

While the Gudykunst, Yang & Nishida (1985) research indicates that "uncertainty reduction theory can be applied to different types of relationships, the data also indicates that there are variations across relationships (i.e., coefficients vary somewhat by relationship)" (Gudykunst, 1985a, p. 80-81). There has been no attempt in intercultural uncertainty reduction theory to see if it applies to a culturally diverse group. There are indications within the theory literature that would suggest that it would be a fruitful research effort. The plethora of interpersonal intercultural uncertainty reduction research suggests that it can be applied across a wide range of contexts and situations, and the small group setting could viably be another situation to which the theory would apply.

This chapter has reviewed cross-cultural training techniques, cultural small group and uncertainty reduction small group research, and intercultural uncertainty reduction theory. The next chapter will demonstrate how these cognate areas fit together, suggesting another potentially successful cross-cultural training tool.
Chapter Four
Synthesis

This chapter will focus on drawing the small group literature and the intercultural uncertainty reduction literature together and demonstrating how that produces a viable cross-cultural training technique. For the sake of clarity, only the basic premises of uncertainty reduction theory will be related to the small group setting.

There are many factors that influence intercultural communication and the uncertainty reduction strategies used therein (see Gudykunst, 1985a). In the particularized setting of a cross-cultural training environment, the factors that influence the intercultural experience occur in the specified context of a learning environment. The interactants are present because they want to or are required to learn cross-cultural skills. To present all factors that influence intercultural communication would complicate the argument presented in this paper. It also may not be appropriate to generalize about the influencing factors that are indicated in the research, given the limited context in which the communication event is occurring (the small group, cross-cultural training setting). A specific research design would demonstrate the applicability of the empirical findings.

The argument of this paper is that a small group, made up of culturally diverse members, would be a useful way to reduce uncertainty, through interaction, in a cross-cultural training environment. The underlying premise of uncertainty reduction
theory is that knowledge of a person is gained by asking questions of that person in an effort to increase attributional confidence. Attributional confidence means that person x is confident in predicting how person y will behave given the attributes demonstrated by person y. The initial and subsequent research on uncertainty reduction falls within the context of initial interactions (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1979). In the intercultural environment, the research also explored initial interactions, but has been broadened to include acquaintance, friend, and dating relationships, (Gudykunst et al., 1985) among other areas.

The small group has a higher degree of communicative complexity (Beebe & Masterson, 1986) than the dyadic situation, but nonetheless can reduce uncertainty among the members of the group. To the extent that small groups rely upon interpersonal relationships (Levine & Moreland, 1990; Barker et al., 1987), there is an avenue for possible application, and further broadening of uncertainty reduction theory. The axioms and theorems of Berger and Calabrese (1975) could be tested in a small group environment to see if uncertainty reduction strategies used in the initial interactions of group members at the interpersonal level are extended into small group interaction (i.e., are similar questions asked to reduce uncertainty). Gudykunst’s (1985a) model of intercultural uncertainty reduction could also be tested to see if the cultural factors that influence an interpersonal encounter occur in a small group encounter. The cultural small group would be a rich environment to test a further extension of intercultural uncertainty reduction theory.
There must be a distinction drawn between the mundane settings in which the uncertainty reduction research and small group research occurs and the particular setting of the cross-cultural training environment. The uncertainty reduction and small group research is mundane in terms of the context of the research. The scenarios tested assume everyday occurrences (e.g., initial interactions, friend and dating relationships, conflict management.). The culturally diverse small group in a cross-cultural training environment is clearly not a mundane setting. The participants are cognitively aware of the purpose of the group and the goal they are attempting to achieve.

The purposes of creating a culturally diverse group in a cross-cultural training environment would be twofold. First, it would allow participants a chance to interact culturally and gain practical experience in doing so. Second, knowledge could be gained about members of the group from other cultures (i.e., uncertainty could be reduced). The group could be given exercises like those proposed by Weeks et al., (1985) which would elicit cultural responses and enlighten group members about how and why different decisions were made in lieu of the exercises. Of course, the eliciting of cultural response is dependent upon interaction that provides practical benefits.

The premise of uncertainty reduction theory is designed to increase attributional confidence by making successful predictions. The knowledge gained through the cultural interaction and the uncertainty reduction exercises in a culturally diverse group could increase attributional confidence. The interaction and exercises
would provide chances for prediction by the group members and allow them to take valuable experience with them beyond the cross-cultural training environment into a particular country.

In the setting of cross-cultural training, uncertainty reduction theory may be applicable, especially in light of its broadening scope in intercultural encounters. The theory may not be applicable to a small group in an ordinary setting, because of the aforementioned factors that go into an interpersonal, intercultural situation.

A pre/post-test research method could be used to illuminate the usefulness of the culturally diverse small group. In this type of research method, the “respondents serve as their own comparison group in that their performance prior to treatment is compared with their performance after the manipulation” (Anderson, 1987, p. 101).

A cultural orientation program such as the I-STEPProgram could be used as the testing ground. A culturally diverse small group could be introduced as another step in the overall training program. Pre-test questions could ask group members to determine the level of interest, level of intercultural communication confidence, and degree of utility perceived in the culturally diverse small group, among other relevant questions. Post-test responses would then be collected, with the same questions being used, after the completion of the program to determine variances between these and the pre-test answers. If variances were found, then the usefulness of a culturally diverse small group would be validated, at least for the sake of training.

Longitudinally, the utility of the culturally diverse small group could be measured with a comparison of orientation programs with
and without the cultural small group as a training technique. The trainees of orientation programs could be asked questions in terms of level of confidence on initial intercultural communication encounters, the rate at which they assimilated or at least felt comfortable in the host country, and the level of preparedness they felt prior to arrival in the country and after having been in country for six months. More specific communication questions could be asked to show the effect of the cultural interaction that occurred in the small group in the cross-cultural training environment. If, in the comparison between orientation programs, there was a positive correlation found between the amount of cultural interaction experience prior to arrival in a country and the degree to which the trainees were able to assimilate, or at least comfortably function, then the culturally diverse small group would be a useful addition to cross-cultural training programs.

The culturally diverse small group could augment many cross-cultural training programs, particularly those that stress experiential methods and view communication as central to the process of cultural understanding. A strict university method would not have much utility for such a training technique, as it is clearly one-sided in its approach. Broad based approaches, such as the I-STEPProgram, would clearly benefit from culturally diverse small groups. Not only would the small group be a forum for cultural interaction and uncertainty reduction, but it would allow for the necessary repetition of concepts to occur (Johnson & Pettit, 1985) and an integration of the cross-cultural training in general.
Role playing is used by many cross-cultural training programs and it serves a very useful purpose in a unicultural environment. The culturally diverse small group takes role-playing to the next level: true cultural interaction. Ultimately, valuable experience could be gained through a small group that can be taken to an overseas assignment. Uncertainty could be reduced and attributional confidence increased through the cultural interaction in the small group.

This potential cross-cultural training technique is clearly not a method that can be used by itself, but is intended to augment a broader program where cultural-general and cultural-specific skills are taught. The small group provides a forum for applying those skills. The culturally diverse small group is meant to have a narrow purpose, to learn about group members from other cultures and feel confident in interaction (i.e., have a high degree of attributional confidence). An extension of intercultural uncertainty reduction theory to the culturally diverse small group could prove useful. The groundwork for such an extrapolation has been promulgated in this paper. The research design offered would go further in supporting the hypothesis.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

Cross-cultural understanding is crucial in the multiplicity of cultures moving around the world. The boundaries between nations are transgressed by millions of people daily, and with those persons travel their shared norms, beliefs, and values: their culture. When people of different cultures come in contact with one another they must communicate. How effectively communication occurs depends on the amount of knowledge about cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. Scholars in the field of intercultural communication have realized that there are ways to train people of different cultures to interact competently. Multinational corporations have also realized that there is a direct correlation between culturally trained overseas employees and their productivity during an overseas assignment.

In an effort to augment current cross-cultural training tools, this paper offered a culturally diverse small group as a way to heighten cultural awareness through interaction. Current cross-cultural training approaches were reviewed to show the different means to cultural awareness. The study of literature concluded that few training techniques used small groups. Role playing exercises were the primary format when small groups were used.

The small group literature identified the lack of cultural small group research, also indicating that there were avenues for applying intercultural uncertainty reduction literature through the interpersonal relationships which make up small groups.
A review of intercultural uncertainty reduction literature demonstrated the potential for the extension of uncertainty reduction theory beyond initial interactions into other cultural contexts. It is argued that uncertainty reduction theory could be applied to a culturally diverse small group, since the aim of the group, in a cross-cultural training environment, is to increase knowledge about group members from other cultures. The premise of uncertainty reduction theory, to increase the ability to predict behavior by decreasing the unknown attributes of a person through asking questions, fits the goal of a culturally diverse small group in a cross-cultural training environment (as described in this paper).

The cultural small group interactants can increase knowledge about one another through structured exercises, which are designed to increase cultural knowledge. Exercises can come in the form of critical incidents (Brislin et al., 1986) which offer questions and answers to specific cultural events, or goal orientated exercises (Weeks et al., 1985) which offer specific objectives to be obtained by a culturally diverse small group. Whatever form the exercises use, the ultimate goal is to foster cultural interaction so that the trainees can take useful experiences with them to their overseas assignment. The culturally diverse small group can also be a tool to reinforce the other cultural training that is taking place.

Future research is essential in this critical area of cross-cultural training. With the shrinking global village phenomena occurring, intercultural communication is virtually an everyday occurrence. Becoming interculturally competent is the future. As noted by Gudykunst and Kim, (1984) it is a “[p]rocess of liberating ourselves
from a limited perspective on life—of becoming more fully human, with a greater awareness of and sensitivity to self, others, and the relationships between them” (p. 232). The key to this process is reducing uncertainty about self and others. “Knowing the norms and rules guiding strangers’ behavior, as well as those guiding our own behavior, can help us to communicate more effectively with them” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, p. 59).

Cross-cultural training will be essential if effective intercultural communication is to occur. Culture is not something that can be learned intuitively. Culture must be experienced, and the more realistic cross-cultural training can be, the more beneficial it will become for the employee immersed in an overseas assignment. A culturally diverse small group, utilized in a cross-culturally training environment, could provide the format to reduce cultural uncertainty and induce cultural interaction. The practical applications assimilated by the human element could prove to be an invaluable training tool. The research presented in this thesis is a step in the direction of increasing cultural understanding and contributing to the betterment of cross-cultural orientation programs.


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