Social Intelligence, Self-esteem, and Intercultural Communication Sensitivity

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Advances of communication technology have provided more opportunities for social interaction than ever before in human history. Intercultural communication sensitivity may reduce cultural barriers, allowing people to better utilize this tremendous potential. Research indicates that intercultural communication sensitivity can be shaped by many factors. This study focuses on two of these factors: social intelligence and self-esteem. A sample of 419 undergraduates at two universities in the western United States was used to examine the relationship between social intelligence and intercultural communication sensitivity. Additionally, the relationship between self-esteem and intercultural communication sensitivity was examined. Results support hypothesized relationships and indicate a statistically significant relationship between social intelligence (SI) and intercultural communication sensitivity (ICS), with SI accounting for more than 10% of the variance in ICS. In addition, both dimensions of self-esteem—self worth and self efficacy—were significantly related to ICS, accounting for an additional 4% of the variance in ICS. Implication and limitations of this study will be provided.

Humans are cultural beings and, as they interact, so do their cultures—in workplaces, in neighborhoods, and in schools. To be successful and live harmoniously, individuals need to become effective intercultural communicators in order to overcome cultural barriers that they encounter in their lives. However, before people are able to become effective intercultural communicators, they need to be interested in other cultures, be sensitive to cultural differences, and show respect for others' cultures (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992).

In 2004, Bennett and Bennett proposed an intercultural communication model in which individuals develop intercultural sensitivity through six steps: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. According to this developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, people start in an ethnocentric stage, believing "one's own culture is experienced as a center" (Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 152); they end in an ethno-relative stage, believing that "one's own culture is experienced in the context of others cultures" (p. 152). Intercultural sensitivity is the affective aspect of intercultural communication competence, which indicates the "development of a readiness to understand and appreciate cultural differences in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 2003, p. 344). Recently a reliable intercultural sensitivity scale which strongly predicts intercultural effectiveness was developed (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Several definitions of social intelligence have been offered by theorists, but all share two common components: a) the awareness of others and b) their response and adaptation to others and the social situations (Goleman, 2006; Kobe, Reiter-Palmon, & Rickers, 2001). Marlowe (1986) suggested that individuals who are socially intelligent appear to experience a rich, meaningful life, as opposed to truncated affective experiences. Furthermore, aspects of

social intelligence have been found to be associated with enhanced social problem-solving abilities (Jones & Day, 1997), experienced leadership (Kobe et al., 2001), and positive interpersonal experience (Cheng, Chiu, Hong & Cheung, 2001).

Self-esteem is an aspect of self-concept, which is assumed to mediate all behavioral choices. When individuals view themselves positively, they tend to feel confident and worthy. Thus, positive self-evaluation tends to motivate individuals to do well in dealing with others, including those who have different cultural backgrounds.

A review of literature shows that there is very limited understanding of social intelligence and the relationship between social intelligence, self-esteem, and intercultural communication sensitivity. This study fills the gap to provide a better understanding of the theoretical concept of social intelligence and the relationship between social intelligence, self-esteem, and intercultural communication sensitivity. Specifically, this study has two purposes. First, it examines the interrelationship between social intelligence and intercultural communication sensitivity. Second, it investigates the interrelationship between intercultural communication sensitivity and self-esteem, and its subset self-concepts, including self-efficacy and self-worth.

Literature Review

Social Intelligence

Social intelligence has been studied by social scientists for the past three decades but recently has garnered increasing attention. Daniel Goleman, who has written extensively on *emotional* intelligence, published *Social Intelligence* in late 2006. According to Goleman (2006), psychologist Edward Thorndike developed the original conceptualization of social intelligence in 1920 as a mental ability distinct from abstract and mechanical intelligence. Thorndike (1920) defined social intelligence as "the ability to act wisely in human relations" (p. 228).

Ford and Tisak (1983) defined social intelligence in terms of behavioral outcomes and were successful in supporting a distinct domain of social intelligence. They defined social intelligence as "one's ability to accomplish relevant objectives in specific social settings" (1983, p.197). Marlowe (1986) equated social intelligence to social competence. He defined social intelligence as "the ability to understand the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of persons, including oneself, in interpersonal situations and to act appropriately upon that understanding" (1986, p. 52). More recently, Goleman's (2006) definition divides social intelligence into two broad categories: social awareness and social facility. He defined social awareness as "what we sense about others" and defined social facility as "what we then do with that awareness" (2006, p. 84).

Several studies have shown that social intelligence is multidimensional and distinguishable from general intelligence domains (Jones & Day, 1997; Marlowe, 1986; Weis & Süb, 2007; Wong, Day, Maxwell & Meara, 1995). These concepts of social intelligence are incorporating internal and external perceptions, social skills, and other psychosocial variables (Taylor, 1990). Instruments used in these studies range from self-reports, peer or other ratings, use of behavioral criterion, and performance measures. Marlowe's (1986) model of social intelligence comprised five domains: pro-social attitude, social performance skills, empathetic ability, emotional expressiveness, and confidence. Pro-social attitudes were indicated by

having an interest and concern for others; social performance skills were demonstrated in appropriate interaction with others; empathetic ability refers to one's ability to identify with others; emotion expressiveness describes one's "emotionality" toward others; and confidence in social situations is based on one's comfort level in social situations.

One study focused on both cognitive and behavioral aspects of social intelligence (Wong, Day, Maxwell & Meara, 1995). Results from the first experiment of the study showed that social perception and heterosexual interaction are separable from each other and from academic intelligence. The second experiment evaluated the relationships between academic intelligence and three aspects of cognitive social intelligence: social knowledge, social perception, and social insight. Social knowledge was defined as knowing the rules of etiquette. Social perception was defined as the ability to understand or decode others' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Social insight was defined as the ability to comprehend and interpret observed behaviors in the social context. They found that these dimensions of social intelligence were distinguishable from academic intelligence and that social perception and social insight were not distinguishable from one another; however, social perception-social insight construct was separable from social knowledge.

Jones and Day (1997) found some evidence that social intelligence can be divided into knowledge of the social world and the ability to perceive and adapt to ambiguous social situations. Their results extend previous findings on the multidimensionality of SI and indicate that flexible application of knowledge may be an important cognitive aspect of social intelligence. Weis and Süb (2007) showed that social understanding and social knowledge were separate constructs of social intelligence. Additionally, their model showed support for existence of an underlying general social intelligence and possibly a hierarchical model of social intelligence.

Goleman has argued that to fully understand social intelligence requires us to include "non-cognitive" aptitudes—"the talent, for instance, that lets a sensitive nurse calm a crying toddler with just the right reassuring touch, without having to think for a moment about what to do" (2006, p. 83). His model emphasizes an affective interactive state where both social awareness and social facility domains range from basic capabilities to more complex high-end articulation. Social awareness is comprised of four dimensions: primal empathy, attunement, empathic accuracy, and social cognition. Primal empathy is being able to sense others' nonverbal emotional signals. Attunement refers to active listening and giving someone our full attention. Empathic accuracy is a cognitive ability and builds on primal empathy, i.e., the individual is able to not only feel, but understand, what the other person is experiencing. Social cognition describes knowledge about how the social world works, e.g., the rules of etiquette, finding solutions to social dilemmas, or decoding social signals (Goleman, 2006). Social facility expands on this awareness to allow smooth, effective interactions, and its four dimensions include: synchrony, self-presentation, influence, and concern. Synchrony was defined as gliding gracefully through a nonverbal dance with another person. Just as music invokes a rhythm and beat—engaging us—so does our nonverbal dance create a flow and ease with another individual. Self-presentation describes the ability to present oneself favorably, such as. leaving a good impression. Influence is the ability to constructively shape the outcome from the interaction with another, and concern is not only caring about another's needs, but acting accordingly. Although considered *soft skills*, these ingredients are the basic elements of nourishing and sustaining interpersonal relationships (Goleman, 2006).

Social intelligence is a function of culture. In other words, the behaviors and characteristics one culture considers *socially intelligent* are not necessarily deemed *socially intelligent* by another. Willmann, Fedlt and Amelang (1997) said that native Chinese subjects viewed *supporting harmony* and *restoring equilibrium* between individuals as acts of being socially intelligent, whereas German subjects identified *obtaining one's goals*, *supporting values defined by society as a whole*, *and being able to influence others*. The Chinese subjects had also interpreted social desirability (behaving or reacting according to the expectations of others) and social engagement (involvement with others) to be more socially intelligent; the German subjects did not. These findings argue that "social intelligence and the manifestations of social intelligence in specific aspects of human interaction appear to be dependent upon culture" (Willmann et al., 1997, p. 337).

Self-esteem

Bandura, known for his social cognitive theory (1986) as well as for his self-efficacy theory (1999), argued that individuals' beliefs regulate human functioning through four major processes, including cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes. He pointed out that self evaluation plays a key role in motivation:

> Most human motivation is cognitively generated. People motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily by the exercise of forethought. They form beliefs about what they can do. They anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions. They set goals for themselves and plan courses of action designed to realize valued futures. They mobilize the resources at their command and the level of effort needed to succeed. (Bandura, 1999, p. 6)

According to Bandura, individuals can motivate themselves by thinking they are powerful, strong, and good. The exercise of forethought of positive evaluation of themselves can drive individuals to do well at work, at school, and at other places.

For instance, the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility reports that self-esteem empowers individuals to live responsibly and prevent the individuals from numerous social ills, including crimes, substance abuse, child abuse, welfare dependency, and educational failure (1999).

Self-esteem is conceptualized as having two dimensions: self-efficacy and self-worth (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). The efficacy dimension describes the perception of one's own social competence. The worth dimension refers to the degree that individuals feel they are a person of value. Rosenberg (1981) suggested that maintaining and enhancing self-esteem may be accomplished in several ways. When individuals have a low self-esteem, they may act in ways that increase it so that they feel better and more satisfied. Another way is for individuals to redefine situations, generating a new, more positive impression of themselves. Still another way to enhance self-esteem is through association with individuals that validate and confirm one's positive identity (Swann, 1990).

In developing a new approach to building self-esteem for elementary and middle school students, Bean (1992) suggested that there are four conditions which make up children's self-esteem: the sense of connectivity, the sense of uniqueness, the sense of power, and the sense

of models. Bean pointed out that children with high self-esteem tend to be "proud of their accomplishments, act independently, assume responsibility easily, tolerate frustration, and approach new challenges with enthusiasm and feel capable of influencing others" (p. 9). Children with low self-esteem "tend to avoid situations that stimulate fear or anxiety, demean their own talents, feel disliked and unwanted, blame others for their failures, are overly influenced by others, become easily frustrated and feel powerless" (p. 9-10).

Research suggests that a positive self-evaluation leads to successful interpersonal relationships (Sternberg & Vroom, 2002). When individuals value themselves, they tend to contribute more to their interpersonal relationships. When individuals have a low self-esteem, they tend to be more defensive and contribute less to their relationships (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000).

Acceptance in social relations also differs between high self-esteem and low self-esteem individuals. When individuals feel confident in themselves, they feel accepted by others, regardless of success or failure; whereas, when individuals have a low self-esteem, their feeling of belonging is conditional based upon their success or failure (Baldwin, Baccus, & Fitzsimons, 2004). Furthermore, individuals with a low self-esteem appear to be more sensitive to rejection and sometimes perceive rejection where it does not exist (Koch, 2002).

Intercultural Communication Sensitivity

Although intercultural communication sensitivity may be related to many cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of our interactions with others, it focuses primarily on individuals' affective abilities, such as managing and regulating emotions. Cultural awareness provides the foundation for intercultural communication sensitivity which, in turn, leads to intercultural communication competence (Chen, 1997). In other words, intercultural communication awareness and intercultural communication sensitivity are prerequisites for intercultural communication competence (Chen, 1997).

Intercultural communication sensitivity is a process by which one develops cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities which contribute to successful intercultural communication (Peng, 2006). This developmental process is supported and elaborated by Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which suggests that individuals with intercultural sensitivity tend to transform themselves from the ethnocentric stage to the ethno-relative stage.

DMIS is comprised of six development stages (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). The first three stages—denial, defense, and minimization—are deemed as *ethnocentric*. Individuals view their own culture as central to reality, and act by "avoiding cultural differences through denying its existence, raising defense against the differences and minimizing its importance" (Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 153). The next three stages—accepatance, adaptation and –integration—are deemed as *ethno-relative*, as individuals now experiences their culture in the context of other cultures, and can be construed as "seeking cultural difference through accepting its importance, adapting a perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of identity" (Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 153).

This model suggests that as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more sophisticated, one's competence in intercultural situations increases (Greenholtz, 2000). Olsen and Kroeger (2001) found that staff and faculty who were highly proficient in a

language other than English and had experience abroad would have greater likelihood of more developed intercultural communication skills and achieve further advancement on the DMIS scale. Williams (2005) found that students who studied abroad developed a much higher average increase in ethno-relativism than students on campus. He indicated that the experience of studying abroad is not enough and that in order to receive the gains of increased intercultural communication skills, individuals must interact in the culture. Mahoney and Schamber (2004) found that employing analysis and evaluation of cultural difference in general education curriculum is more effective in improving students' levels of intercultural communication sensitivity.

Scholars suggest that intercultural communication sensitivity describes an intention to understand and respect others. Knutson and Posirisuk (2006) proposed that through continued rhetorical reflection and avoidance of egoistic behavior, individuals can develop and maintain sensitivity towards other cultures. Sizoo, Iskat, Plank and Serrie (2003) found that employees who were *culture sensitive* provided their foreign customers with better service and their managers with better results. These individuals have a desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, and accept differences, and to produce positive outcomes from intercultural interactions (Chen, 1997).

Chen (1997) conceptualized intercultural communication sensitivity (ICS) as "an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (p. 5). Individuals high in ICS enjoy interacting with others from different cultures (Sizoo et al., 2003). They are able to regulate their behavior, see others' points of view, sincerely and actively listen, and are responsive, perceptive, and attentive (Chen, 1997). These individuals are more satisfied with life (Sizoo et al., 2003). According to Chen, it is this positive emotion towards learning, understanding, recognizing, and respecting the cultural similarities and differences that facilitate intercultural awareness.

In short, intercultural communication sensitivity is crucial for individuals to posses when dealing with people who are from different cultural backgrounds. This sensitivity leads individuals to better understand and respect others and themselves. Studies indicate that intercultural communication sensitivity may help people accomplish goals and prevent misunderstandings. The literature review suggests that many factors play a role in shaping intercultural communication sensitivity. This study is planning to propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Social intelligence is positively related to intercultural communication sensitivity.

H2: Self-esteem is positively related to intercultural communication sensitivity.

Research question: Do self-worth and self-efficacy differ in their relationship to intercultural communication sensitivity?

Method

Sample

Participants were 419 undergraduate college students from two universities located in the western United States. The sample for the study included 248 (59%) undergraduates from a small, private university and 171 (41%) from a large, state university. The participants ranged

in age from 17 to 51, with an average of 20.6 years. The sample included 138 (33%) male participants and 276 (66%) female subjects. The sample was 209 (50%) Caucasian, 137 (33%) Asian American, (5.5%) African American, (7.2%) Hispanic, and (2.4%) others. Ten participants (2.4%) did not identify their ethnicity.

Procedures

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to subjects during class sessions. The five-page questionnaire contained seven sections, including instruments to measure social intelligence, self-esteem, and intercultural communication sensitivity. The participants were told that the purpose for conducting the study was to investigate communication behaviors. Every participant was told that the survey was voluntary and that the information was completely confidential and anonymous. The survey took 10-15 minutes for the participants to complete.

Measurement

Standard measurement scales were utilized to quantify the three key variables. The Intercultural Communication Sensitivity items were adapted from Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale. This scale, which contains 24 Likert items, is intended to measure individuals' feelings about interacting with people who have different cultural backgrounds. The scale includes five sub-scales: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.

The Self-Esteem Scale (Gecas, 1971) was comprised of 11 semantic differential items which assess both self efficacy and self worth dimensions. The Social Intelligence Scale (Dong et al., 2005) consisted of eight Likert items, including: "I can identify with others," "I am a good listener," "I try to relate to what other people say," "I am able to see others point of view," "I am good at leading a group task," "I discuss my thoughts with others," "I am good at persuading others," and "I often influence others in situations." This social intelligence scale is comprised of two sub-scales: empathy and social skills.

Results

Measurement Model

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's *alpha* reliability coefficients for the three scales are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary statistics for measurement scales

	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's *alpha*
Social Intelligence	3.92	.51	.90
Self-Esteem	2.42	.81	.91
ICS	3.85	.44	.88

Hypotheses

Hypothesis One predicted a positive relationship between social intelligence and intercultural communication sensitivity. Based on the sample statistics—r(407) = .32, $p<.001$—unqualified support for hypothesis one was obtained. The resulting correlation indicates a substantial relationship, with social intelligence accounting for 10% of variance in ICS.

Hypothesis Two predicted a positive relationship between self-esteem and intercultural communication sensitivity. The present data support the hypothesized relationship—r(393)=.18, $p<.001$—with 4% of variance in ICS accounted for by self-esteem.

Research Question

The research question asked whether self-worth and self-efficacy—the two sub-dimensions of self-esteem—differ in their relationship to intercultural communication sensitivity. Initial correlation analyses indicate relationships of approximately equal magnitudes for the two dimensions of self-esteem, i.e., self-worth—r(397) = .19, p<.001, and self-efficacy—r(397) = .13, p<.05. However, high multicollinearity between the two dimensions—r(397) = .55, p<.001—would recommend caution in interpreting the relative magnitude of these correlations.

Discussion

Ineffective intercultural communication can be caused in part by ambiguity and the inability to make accurate interpersonal predictions—which is exacerbated by the presence of someone from a different culture. Our perceived cultural differences—the fear and uncertainty—motivate us to act. These emotions are powerful. We can react to these emotions by denying, casting stereotypes, withdrawing, and/or even becoming hostile (e.g., remaining in the ethnocentric stage) towards other cultures; or we can become sensitive and suspend our judgment and bias, which can lead us towards a third culture (Dodd, 1998).

This study suggests that social intelligence can serve as a foundation for, and help facilitate in the development of, ICS. Components of social intelligence, such as having an interest and concern for others and demonstrating empathy, can lead towards acceptance and adaptation. Developing social knowledge in cultural values provides us with the fundamental basis to engage in effective intercultural communications. We will be able to achieve shared meanings and meet our specific needs.

Furthermore, this study suggests that developing a high self-esteem can lead to more effective and satisfied intercultural relations. Confident individuals will be less defensive and be accepting of others. Individuals having a positive self-evaluation will tend to participate more in their intercultural encounters. As an agent, high self-esteem can motivate us to learn about cultural differences and similarities (e.g., studying, working and traveling abroad), and as a product, learn more about ourselves and the world around us.

Understanding the key elements that subsume intercultural communication sensitivity is important as diversity training programs can be developed and improved to increase individuals' ICS awareness, which facilitates intercultural communication competence.

Whether individuals are at work, at home, or "going about their business" in other places, they can all benefit in being more sensitive, understanding, and respectful to each other. Additionally, these results are expected to contribute to existing literature in communications, education, and diversity.

This study is the first to establish a relationship between social intelligence and ICS; although, it is not without some limitations. One limitation was that the measures were based on self-reports. Incorporating observed behavior criterion, or peer and other reports, would help validate these findings. A second limitation was the nature of the sample—undergraduate college students located in the western United States. As such, generalization is limited. Future researchers may want to explore ICS studies in other countries and expand their studies to examine the relationships and impact that emotional intelligence and other self constructs may have on ICS.

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