

The Role of Affect in Cross-Cultural Competence



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Executive Summary

Today's globalized economy requires leaders and their employees to focus on cultural awareness in order to succeed in this international business environment. Military leaders in some nations must also be highly culturally aware. The term "cultural competence" refers to "a set of cultural behaviors and attitudes integrated into the practice methods of a system, agency or its professionals, that enables them to work effectively in cross cultural situations," (National Center for Cultural Competence, p. 9). Several models of culture competence have been proposed, but a missing component in these models is affect (emotion and emotion regulation), which has received little attention. The present study examined the trainability of the affective component of culture competence.

Emotion regulation is defined as the ability to manage and modify emotional reactions while achieving goal-directed outcomes (Gross, 1998). Affective events theory (AET) and training methods designed to enhance emotional intelligence were used to develop a training intervention to reduce negative affect in response to unpleasant, novel cultural stimuli. The focal emotion was disgust.

Cognitive change (reappraisal) training and emotion regulation (attentional deployment) training were compared in a pre-post control group experimental design. Participants were given cognitive, emotion regulation, or a no-training control experience. Following the disgust and emotion literature, affective responses to unusual foods were employed as the focus of the training.

Individual difference constructs that have been found to affect, moderate, or mediate training effectiveness and culture competence measures, including Five Factor Model personality constructs, emotion regulation skill, and disgust sensitivity were assessed. Affective response to

novel cultural stimuli (food items) was assessed before and after the experimental training manipulation. The dependent variables were affective response and emotion regulation skill. Affective response was assessed using explicit self-report measures and an Implicit Association Test (IAT) measure.

The study was conducted online utilizing undergraduate students and U.S. military members from all Service branches. Undergraduate participants were recruited from Introduction to Psychology classes and several types of online classes. Military participants were invited to participate in the experiment through a personal email that was sent to them by the primary researcher. The majority of military members recruited were from a DOD agency located in Florida. All participation was voluntary.

The author hypothesized that participants who received the attentional deployment training would have more positive affective responses than those that received reappraisal training, and those that received reappraisal training would have more positive affective responses than those in the control group. This pattern was not found for the explicit affect measure; however, results for the IAT affect measure indicated that participants who received the reappraisal training had less negative implicit affective reactions than those participants who received the control training. Disgust sensitivity was hypothesized to have an inverse relationship to positive affective responses across all conditions, and those low in disgust sensitivity were expected to benefit more from attentional deployment training than those high in disgust sensitivity. The results partially supported this hypothesis in that participants high in disgust sensitivity had more positive (less negative) affective responses than participants who

scored lower on disgust sensitivity. Reappraisal training was more effective for implicit affect among participants reporting low or moderate disgust sensitivity than those reporting high disgust sensitivity.

Emotion regulation skill was hypothesized to be related to positive affective response. This relationship was partially supported.

Openness to experience and conscientiousness were expected to moderate the effect of training on affect. Highly conscientious participants were found to respond more to reappraisal training than participants reporting low or moderate conscientiousness. Openness to experience, extraversion, and neuroticism were hypothesized to be related to affective responses across all conditions. This relationship was only found for neuroticism: high neuroticism participants responded with greater negative affect to the food stimuli than low neuroticism participants.

This study found that a short, web-based training manipulation reduced both explicit and implicit negative affect, albeit inconsistently across explicit and implicit measures. Reappraisal training was found to be most effective, although other implementations of emotional regulation training might prove fruitful. The potential for training the affective component of culture competence was demonstrated, suggesting that future research on culture competence, and the design of training programs for overseas work, should attend to affective as well as cognitive and behavioral skills.