Creative Resolutions to Intercultural Conflicts: The Joint Effects of International Experience and Cultural Intelligence

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Abstract : Intercultural interactions are often challenging and fraught with conflicts. To shed light on how to interact effectively across cultures, academics and practitioners alike have advanced a plethora of intercultural competence models. However, the majority of this work has emphasized distal outcomes, such as job performance and cultural adjustment, rather than proximal outcomes, such as how individuals resolve inevitable intercultural conflicts. As a consequence, the processes by which individuals negotiate challenging intercultural conflicts are not well understood. The current study advances theorizing on intercultural conflict resolution by exploring antecedents of how people resolve intercultural conflicts. To this end, we examine creativity – the generation of novel and useful ideas – in the context of resolving cultural conflicts in intercultural interactions. Based on the dual-identity theory of creativity, we propose that individuals with greater international experience will display greater creativity and that the relationship is accentuated by individual's cultural intelligence. Two studies test these hypotheses. The first study comprises 84 senior university students, drawn from an international organizational behavior course. The second study replicates findings from the first study in a sample of 89 executives from eleven countries. Participants in both studies provided protocols of their strategies for resolving two intercultural conflicts, as depicted in two multimedia-vignettes of challenging intercultural work-related interactions. Two research assistants, trained in intercultural management but blind to the study hypotheses, coded all strategies for their novelty and usefulness following scoring procedures for creativity tasks. Participants also completed online surveys of demographic background information, including their international experience, and cultural intelligence. Hierarchical linear modeling showed that surprisingly, while international experience is positively associated with usefulness, it is unrelated to novelty. Further, a person's cultural intelligence strengthens the positive effect of international experience on usefulness and mitigates the effect of international experience on novelty. Theoretically, our findings offer an important theoretical extension to the dual-identity theory of creativity by identifying cultural intelligence as an important individual difference moderator that qualifies the relationship between international experience and creative conflict resolution. In terms of novelty, individuals higher in cultural intelligence seem less susceptible to rigidity effects of international experiences. Perhaps they are more capable of assessing which aspects of culture are relevant and apply relevant experiences when they brainstorm novel ideas. For utility, individuals high in cultural intelligence are better able to leverage on their international experience to assess the viability of their ideas because their richer and more organized cultural knowledge structure allows them to assess possible options more efficiently and accurately. In sum, our findings suggest that cultural intelligence is an important and promising intercultural competence that fosters creative resolutions to intercultural conflicts. We hope that our findings stimulate future research on creativity and conflict resolution in intercultural contexts.

Keywords : cultural Intelligence, intercultural conflict, intercultural creativity, international experience