Bridging the Gap: Predictors of Willingness to Engage in an Intercultural Interaction

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What influences people’s willingness to interact with someone of a different cultural background from themselves or to avoid this kind of interaction? Recent research has investigated this question by specifically examining two variables: the personality variable Intolerance of Uncertainty and the Predictability of the interaction partner (Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015). Research has indicated that the personality variable Openness, is related to Intolerance of Uncertainty. However, this trait has not yet been examined in previous research exploring people’s willingness to engage in an intercultural interaction. The present study sought to examine the effect of Intolerance of Uncertainty, Openness, and Predictability of the interaction partner on willingness to engage in an intercultural interaction. 30 undergraduate students at Belmont University were told they may or may not interact with someone of a different cultural background on live video chat. Participants were randomly assigned to either a low or high predictability condition and completed questionnaires measuring Intolerance of Uncertainty, Openness, and Willingness to Interact with a fictitious interaction partner. It is expected that Intolerance of Uncertainty will have a negative relationship with willingness to interact, while Openness and Predictability of the interaction partner will both have a positive relationship with willingness to interact.

Our society is experiencing a time of growing cultural diversity in our population which has generated government attention regarding policies, broadened people’s knowledge, and allowed for American culture to become more dynamic in areas such as the arts, cuisine, philosophy and entertainment. This country is the home of many people from all different cultural backgrounds, and all of us are in some way connected with one another. Therefore, the importance of understanding intercultural interactions and communication is of relevance to our society. And yet, a growing body of research has examined factors that contribute to avoidance behavior and lack of willingness to engage in intercultural interactions, as this appears to be a common issue across cultures (Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999).

One way in which this phenomenon has been explained by researchers is with the theoretical framework of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM). AUM theory states that effective interactions and communication require a balance of both uncertainty and anxiety within each person interacting (Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999). The theory suggests that experiencing too much uncertainty or anxiety may result in avoidance of an interaction, and experiencing too little uncertainty or anxiety may result in overconfidence in understanding others’ intentions or lack of motivation to interact (Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015).

Uncertainty has been found to predict levels of anxiety, therefore this construct has been of specific interest to researchers (Duronto, Nishida, & Nakayama, 2005; Samochowiec & Florack, 2010; Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015). According to AUM theory, uncertainty in this context arises...
Research has shown uncertainty to relate to willingness to interact with an intercultural partner, which can be defined as someone who is of a different culture from oneself. Duronto, Nishida, and Nakayama (2005) asked students to report a past interaction with a foreign exchange student at their school, and they found that when students reported that the situation felt more uncertain to them, they were less willing to interact with the other student. In order to determine whether uncertainty has an effect on one’s willingness to interact, researchers have created scenarios in which the predictability of a fictitious intercultural interaction is manipulated, inducing a sense of uncertainty in the participants (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010; Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015).

In a study conducted by Samochowiec and Florack (2010) the researchers asked participants to imagine a man named Yon, who was from another culture than the participant. The researchers then gave the participants 20 scenarios depicting Yon in different situations, and the participants were instructed to guess how they believed Yon would react or behave in the situations or how Yon would expect the participant to react. Each scenario had four multiple choice format responses the participant could choose from. As a manipulation of predictability of Yon, participants in the low predictability condition were told their responses were correct 20% of the time; while those in the high predictability condition were told their responses were correct 80% of the time. Their results indicated that those who were in the low predictability condition reported being less willing to interact with Yon if given the chance.

Logan, Steel, and Hunt (2015) replicated this predictability manipulation, however in their study they told participants they may talk to Yon on live video chat. However, their results did not indicate that predictability had a strong effect on willingness to interact, contrary to past findings. For the present study, I conducted a replication of the methods used in the study conducted by Logan, Steel, and Hunt. Research has indicated that reactions and tolerance of uncertainty vary among individuals (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010). For example, some may find uncertain situations to be interesting and thrilling, while others may find them to be threatening. These individual differences can be explained by the personality variable Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU). This describes the degree to which one finds ambiguity intolerable (Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015; Cargile & Bolkan, 2013). Although there has been little evidence for uncertainty intolerance directly having an effect on willingness interact (Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015), it has been suggested that more research is needed, as this is a fairly new construct to be researched in the area of intercultural interaction.

Additional personality traits have been found to relate to perceptions of uncertainty, such as Openness (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013). Openness is a personality trait measured using the Big Five Factor Model, that can be characterized by the desire to experience novel situations, as well as being imaginative, curious, and adaptable to change (Jordan, Pope, Wallis, & Iyer, 2014). Research has indicated that Openness and IU are related to each other, where both share a negative relationship with one another (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013). However, Openness has not yet
been researched alongside IU and predictability of an intercultural partner in determining what influences willingness to interact with an intercultural partner in previous research.

The purpose of this study was to investigate predictability of an intercultural partner, Intolerance of Uncertainty and Openness, and their unique relationships with willingness to engage in an intercultural interaction. I hypothesized that IU has a negative relationship with willingness to interact, that Openness has a positive relationship with willingness to interact, and that predictability of an intercultural partner would have a positive effect on willingness to interact.

Method

Participants

A total of 30 undergraduate students were recruited from Belmont University’s introductory psychology classes through an online system. Participants were granted class credit as compensation for their voluntary participation. The participants for this study ranged in age from 18 to 22 (M= 20.30, SD= 1.02). There were a total of 6 men and 24 women.

Materials

The study included a consent form and a demographic information form. The demographic information form collected information including age, gender, year in school, and ethnicity. As a measure of intolerance of uncertainty, I utilized the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (Freeston, Rhéaume, Letarte, Dugas, & Ladouceur, 1994), which consisted of 27 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Not at all characteristic of me, 5= Entirely characteristic of me). Scores ranged from 27-135, and a high score indicated a high level of intolerance of uncertainty. As the predictability manipulation, I utilized ten of the twenty original scenarios of the fictitious intercultural partner named “Yon” that were created by Samochowiec and Florack (2010). For this study, I used the name of “Yon” as the original researchers did, however I also created a fictitious girl intercultural partner named “Avra”. I matched the gender of the participant with the gender of the fictitious partner, as the past researchers suggested a limitation could have been that they only used a man as the fictitious partner (Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2015). Therefore, I utilized ten scenarios using the name “Yon” and ten of the same scenarios using the name “Avra”.

Each scenario consisted of four multiple choice responses to the one to two sentence scenario. I gave participants completely false feedback in regards to how many scenarios they correctly responded to, therefore I did not score this measure. As a measure of openness, I utilized the Openness to Experience Scale (IPIP scales), which consisted of 20 Likert-type items on a 5-point likert scale (1= disagree strongly, 5= agree strongly). Scores ranged from 20-100, and a high score indicated a high level of Openness. As a measure of the participants’ perceived predictability of “Yon” or “Avra”, I utilized a perceived predictability measure (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010). This consisted of two Likert-type items on an 11-point likert scale (0= not at all, 10= very much). Scores ranged from 0-20, and a high score indicated a higher perceived predictability of the fictitious partner. Finally, as a measure of the participants’ willingness to interact with “Yon” or “Avra”, I utilized a willingness to interact measure (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010). This consisted of four Likert-type items on an 11- point likert scale (0= not at
all, 10= very much). Scores ranged from 0-40, and a high score indicated a high willingness to interact. These questions were, “Would you be willing to spend half a day with Yon/Avra?”, “Could you imagine learning more about Yon/Avra?”, “If Yon/Avra sought contact with you, would you respond?”, “How much would you be interested in a dialogue with Yon/Avra?”.

Procedure

Prior to the sessions, I randomly assigned participants to either the low or high predictability condition. There was one participant per thirty minute session in this study. At the beginning of the session, participants gave their informed consent. I informed participants that I was examining personality compatibility across cultures, and that I had partnered with schools in other countries, where their students had volunteered to be intercultural partners for my participants. I then informed the participant that by the end of the session, they may or may not interact with someone of a different cultural background from themselves on live video chat. Participants then completed the demographic information form, which I told them I would use to match them with the intercultural partner. Participants then completed the Intolerance of Uncertainty scale, and following this, I told participants they had either been matched with a man named “Yon” (if the participant was a man) or a woman named “Avra” (if the participant was a woman). I then asked the participant to respond to the hypothetical scenarios of “Yon/Avra” by guessing how they think “Yon/Avra” would react or behave in the different scenarios, or how they would expect the participant to react or behave. After completing the scenarios, participants completed the Openness to Experience Scale. After completing this, I told participants that I scored their responses to the scenarios based on a survey that “Yon/Avra” had completed. As the predictability manipulation, I told participants who were in the low predictability condition that they had responded correctly to only two out of the ten scenarios. I told participants in the high predictability condition that they had responded correctly to eight out of the ten scenarios. Participants then completed the perceived predictability measure and willingness to interact measure. Participants were then fully debriefed, by being informed that they had been deceived. I finally thanked the participant and granted them course credit.

Results

Analysis of the results was conducted using Minitab statistical software program. The significance level for all of the tests was p < .05. After calculating the sum of IU, Openness, and willingness to interact, the descriptive statistics were as follows: IU (M = 60.00, SD = 16.31); Openness (M = 78.43, SD = 9.12); Willingness to interact (M = 28.30, SD = 9.26). In order to ensure that the predictability manipulation worked, a Two-Sample t-test was run on perceived predictability. A significant difference was found between the two predictability conditions on the perceived predictability measure, t(25) = 6.79, p < .001. Participants assigned to the low predictability condition reported their partner to be less predictable (M = 5.00, SD=2.42), while participants assigned to the high predictability condition reported their partner to be more predictable (M = 12.20, SD= 3.32).

In order to test the first hypothesis regarding the relationship between IU and willingness to interact, a Pearson’s r correlation coefficient was computed,
r= -0.37, p= .04. These results were therefore significant. In order to test the second hypothesis regarding the relationship between Openness and willingness to interact, a Pearson’s r correlation coefficient was computed, r= .50, p= .005. These results were also significant. As a test of the third and final hypothesis regarding the effect of predictability on willingness to interact, a Two-Sample t-test was run on willingness to interact. A difference was found between the two predictability conditions, however it was not significant, t(21) = 1.64, p= .115. Those assigned to the low predictability condition reported being less willing to interact (M= 25.6, SD= 11.2), while those assigned to the high predictability condition reported being more willing to interact (M= 31.0, SD= 6.08). Lastly, out of curiosity to examine whether IU and Openness are related, a Pearson’s r correlation coefficient was computed, r= -0.43, p= .018. These results were significant.

**Discussion**

As previously stated, I hypothesized that Intolerance of Uncertainty has a negative relationship with willingness to interact, that Openness has a positive relationship with willingness to interact, and that predictability of an intercultural partner would have a positive effect on willingness to interact. The results indicated partial support for my hypotheses. I found support for my first hypothesis regarding the relationship between Intolerance of Uncertainty and willingness to interact, which was exhibited by the negative correlation between IU and willingness to interact. I also found support for my second hypothesis regarding the relationship between Openness and willingness to interact, which was exhibited by the positive correlation between Openness and willingness to interact. The results did not support my hypothesis regarding the effect of predictability of the intercultural partner on willingness to interact, although I did find that the mean differences between the predictability conditions on willingness to interact were in the direction I predicted.

Contrary to the findings of Logan, Steel, and Hunt (2015), the results of this study indicated that those who experience higher levels of IU appear to be less willing to engage in an intercultural interaction. Since this personality variable is still fairly novel in being investigated in this context, more research is needed in order to gain a better understanding of what influenced these contradictory findings. It also appears that those who exhibit higher levels of Openness are more willing to engage in an intercultural interaction. This is also a fairly novel finding, therefore more research investigating the influence of this personality trait on willingness to interact would be beneficial. Additionally, the results provided evidence in support of previous findings (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013) regarding the negative relationship between IU and Openness; meaning, that those who experience higher levels of IU exhibit lower Openness. Lastly, the results indicated that predictability of the intercultural partner does not appear to be a strong indicator of willingness to interact, although with a larger sample size I may have found an effect.

There were some limitations of the study, that could be improved upon for future research. This study consisted of a small sample size, in which there were only fifteen participants in each of the predictability conditions. Therefore, this may have contributed to the lack of significance found for the effect of predictability on willingness to interact. This study also faced a lack of ethnic diversity in the sample, as the majority of participants reported being “Non-Hispanic white” on their demographic information form. This presents issues regarding generalizability of
this phenomenon to other ethnicities and cultures. A limitation regarding the method in which I measured the participants’ willingness to interact may have been the presence of social desirability effect. Participants were aware that I would see their responses to the willingness to interact measure, therefore they may have answered in a way that made them appear more socially desirable, regardless of whether they would exhibit the same behavior in everyday instances.

If this study is ever continued or extended in the future, there are some improvements and additions that could be made in order to gain a more comprehensive and solid understanding of this phenomenon. As IU and Openness were found to relate to willingness to interact, it could be interesting to investigate additional personality variables, such as sensation-seeking or extraversion/introversion and their possible relationships. Political orientation and willingness to interact with an intercultural partner would be of relevance to examine, as many current controversial governmental debates are centered on policies such as immigration and refugee status in the U.S. Lastly, in an attempt to make the study more ecologically valid, it may be beneficial to utilize a real confederate as the intercultural partner, rather than utilizing an abstract and completely fictitious partner. This could be created by using a picture of someone, or even an acting confederate.

In conclusion, it is evident that individual personality differences plays an important role in influencing people’s willingness to engage in an intercultural interaction. More research is needed to determine whether predictability of another person has an effect on this kind of interaction, as people’s reactions to and perceptions of uncertain situations appear to influence their willingness to interact. Findings such as the ones in this study can influence future research aiming to enhance certain personality traits such as Openness, and softening others such as Intolerance of Uncertainty. Perhaps if we are able to find correct interventions of doing so, we will finally be able to bridge the gap between different cultures, that has narrowed our worldview.

References


Samochowiec, J., & Florack, A. (2010). Intercultural contact under uncertainty: The impact of predictability and anxiety on the willingness to interact with a member from an unknown