

Intercultural Communication Challenges and Its Effect on Students' Interpersonal Relationships at a South African University

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ABSTRACT Intercultural communication has been known to refer to communication, which takes place amongst the individuals from distinctive cultures. However, problems and challenges are evident in cases where people are not able to accommodate one another or communicate effectively across cultures. This paper evaluates intercultural communication challenges and their effect on students' interpersonal relationships at a South African university. Purposive sampling technique was adopted and data was collected through two focus groups and analysed qualitatively. Interestingly, this paper revealed that there is cultural prejudice, stereotyping, ethnocentrism and cultural conflict among the students of this selected university, which negatively affects interpersonal relationships among students. Therefore, responding to this problem, this paper recommends that the university should put more effort in reducing intercultural communication challenges through regular engagement of cultural educational programmes within the university that will gather different students of distinctive cultural groups together.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to evaluate intercultural communication challenges and their impact on the interpersonal relationships among students in a selected South African university. Intercultural communication has been an issue ever since nations started to link together, particularly in trading and the job market. However, people have been looking at ways of fitting in and being able to meet halfway with regards to accommodating one another's culture during the process of intercultural communication. Many scholars have given explicit definitions for intercultural communication, but some are not deep enough to make it clearer and more understandable. Some scholars like Stacks et al. (2019) note that intercultural communication is a communication between persons or groups from a variety of cultures.

Orbe and Harris (2013) also lay emphasis on authors who ignore the goal of communication between these cultures when they are exchanging ideas. They further highlight that a number of scholars are using different terms in referring

to the same term of "intercultural communication" (Stacks et al. 2019: 93) and such terms include 'trans-racial communication' (Samovar et al. 2017), 'inter-racial communication' (Jackson 2020), 'cross-cultural communication' (Peeters et al. 2019: 87), and 'inter-ethnic communication' (Gibson 2016: 282). This, therefore, adds clarity to the definition of intercultural communication as a process of communication between two or more individuals of distinctive cultures for achievement of a specific goal. Moreover, it could also be the process of exchanging ideas between subcultures. It is, therefore, important to note that intercultural communication refers to the communication, which takes place amongst individuals from distinctive cultures.

Chen (2017) notes that intercultural communication is used to describe communication between people from different cultures and focuses on communication. When two or more people from different cultures interact and exchange information amongst them the process is called intercultural communication. Many communication scholars have produced similar work but different topics with different angles on the sub-

ject. Zheng's (2009) research on intercultural communication barriers between Zulu and Chinese students at selected higher education institutions in Durban is one example of such studies. One of the objectives of his study was to identify the intercultural communication problems experienced between Zulu and Chinese students. The findings revealed that culture and language are the main intercultural communication barriers. Racism, cultural stereotyping, non-verbal communication and lack of trust were other obstacles in intercultural communication between the Zulu and the Chinese students. The particular characteristics of participants such as their age, educational level and home language influenced intercultural communication. This paper is therefore focused on finding out about intercultural communication challenges, and at the same time, evaluate intercultural communication by students within the selected university. It aims to look at the views of students on critical issues like barriers to intercultural communication and whether intercultural conflict exists on account of those barriers at the university. The study also hopes to find out how local students manage to reach a common understanding with students from different nationalities and cultures, and it also investigates if there is any ethnocentrism and/or prejudice amongst them when they are sharing or exchanging ideas as means of reaching mutual understanding. Thus, below are more detailed objectives of this paper.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to evaluate the intercultural communication challenges and their effect on students' interpersonal relationships at a South African university. Other objectives include, to understand the extent to which intercultural communication challenges exist among students at a South African university, to track the factors contributing to intercultural communication challenges, and lastly, to recommend measures to be taken to reduce or eliminate challenges to intercultural communication and improve good interpersonal relationships.

Culture in Intercultural Communication

Schein (2016) notes that culture is mainly about key values, that need to be understood

and the rules of behaviour that act as a guidance for that particular group. Furthermore, Schein emphasises that the culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. Culture is one of the broadest terms in academic disciplines, and some scholars have defined it in many ways. O'Rourke and Tuleja (2009: 5) estimate that "over 160 more or less accepted definitions of this term are in common use". This actually shows that culture is very broad and complex.

It must, however, be noted that culture is gradually changing in meaning. Geiser (2013) provides an excellent account of the change in this term. In its prehistoric use in English, culture was a noun of process, especially in crops or animals. This meaning can be commonly found in words like agriculture, horticulture and viticulture. Furthermore, it is noted that in the sixteenth century, culture was used with regards to "cultivating" the human body through training and later on "cultivating" the non-physical aspects of a person. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, the meaning was broadened to include the general state of human intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, giving a rise to the artistic works and practices, meaning which is associated with music, literature, painting, film and theatre" (Geiser 2013).

After this term originated from agriculture, the same term emerged from other disciplines like anthropology, sociology and others. O'Rourke and Tuleja (2009) provide different meanings in different disciplines. Anthropological definition defines culture as the way in which one exchanges ideas and thoughts, and that it is ruled by hidden rules (the silent language and hidden dimension of meanings), which are reflected in both languages, behaviour and attitudes (O'Rourke and Tuleja 2009). Furthermore, Kunju (2013: 8) argues that "culture is so similar to an iceberg, that is, the deeper layers (such as traditions, beliefs, values) are hidden from the way of viewing things, and one is only able to see and hear the uppermost layers of cultural artefacts (such as fashion, trends, pop music) and of verbal and nonverbal symbols".

Samovar et al. (2017) argue that culture is often perceived as the core idea in intercultural

communication. This therefore, does not mean it has to be taken lightly, as there are a lot of elements underpinned under a single culture. This view is elaborated in a classical iceberg analogy on cultural hidden elements. Thus, Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2019) point out that on a common level, culture refers to a patterned way of living by a group of interacting individuals who share similar sets of traditions, beliefs, values and norms. In the iceberg analogy, there is a depiction of the visible and the hidden layers of culture towards individuals and groups of certain culture. This iceberg analogy is therefore applicable in multicultural environments like in this selected university and to any tertiary institution that holds a variety of cultures. For instance, students always meet one another or people they do not know around the university campus. They can only identify their cultures by noticing the visible cultural signs (visible culture) such as dress code, language, behaviours, body language, gestures, and probably, the environment they are in. It is, however, necessary to note that the hidden culture is mostly the one that brings barriers to intercultural communication forward, as one cannot notice it. It causes people to have prejudices, stereotypes and ethnocentrism, and because they are not aware of the hidden side of the culture, they end up having assumptions (stereotypes) and generalise these to the masses.

The people students bump into in places and around a university campus with regard to this paper carry hidden culture (beliefs, prejudice, biases, values, norms, fear, dreams, experiences, cultural traditions, rules and perceptions) that make students not to fully identify them according to what is called individual cultures. This paper fully concurs with what the iceberg model depicts, as there are cultures that can be seen and the ones that cannot be seen. In this case, any student at this selected university has a visible culture that can be noted through their appearance, their words, accent, body language and gestures. However, deep down there is a culture that one cannot see, and these can be students' belief, values, biases, prejudices and so forth, as depicted by the iceberg. This entire hidden and unhidden culture phenomenon has an impact on the challenges that occur among students of this selected university when they

communicate to one another in the sense that, one, for instance, could just prejudge someone by assuming that he/she belongs to a certain culture judging from the visible behaviour, whereas that person is not from that particular culture.

The Role of Communication Adaptation Theory in Intercultural Communication

According to Roest and Uphoff (2016: 191), "language is pivotal to the identity formation process". It can help solidify cultural identity, whereas linguistic distinctiveness can be used to differentiate the in-group and out-group members. On the other hand, Bouchet et al. (2013) note that language is of crucial importance when it comes to differentiating cultures. For example, there are cultures and sub-cultures, and at this selected university, there are students from the Xhosa culture, which happens to have many sub-cultures under it. For instance, there are students from Amampondo as one of Xhosa sub-cultures, and through IsiXhosa language, one student could be identified with the sub-culture they belong to. It is quite noticeable that African languages are totally different from European languages in the way they are spoken. African languages have clicks in them when spoken, whereas European languages do not have clicks.

Giles (2016) discusses the notion of communication accommodation theory (CAT), which posits that individuals are motivated to use language in different ways to achieve a desired level of social distance between themselves and their listener. This is evident in the fact that each individual often interacts verbally and nonverbally with others. This can also be brought to the students at this selected university. As much as they have differences in terms of their cultures, each student is forced to use a universal and common language so as to accommodate other students, more especially in classrooms. As noted by Giles (2016), the critical concepts of CAT include convergence, divergence, and maintenance, which are also called "approximation strategies" (Giles 2016: 211).

It is important to note that, as described by Giles (2012), communication convergence is a strategy or tactic where individuals adapt their

communicative behaviour to become more alike compared to their interlocutor's behaviour. Therefore, the convergence can be done through a changing accent, modifying word choice, using similar expressions, or adjusting non-verbal behaviours to create a sense of similarity between two people. Hence, "the convergence behaviour includes modifying language and dialects, speech rate, pauses, utterance length, phonological variations, smiling, gazing, and any other kinds of nonverbal gestures" (Fong and Chuang 2003: 56). All these play a vital role in the communication process.

This paper, therefore, is in congruence with Giles' views, which also emphasises that in communication divergence, the speakers accentuate the speech and nonverbal differences between them and others. Moreover, Fong and Chuang (2003: 56) describe the tendency to enlarge linguistic differences as a speech divergence. They both assert that declaimers move and shift through their linguistic collection to converge and gain social approval and identity or diverge to show distinctiveness. Thus, convergence or divergence motives are adopted to maintain a clear and smoother communication. This is also common in this paper, as it is evident from this paper that most students of this selected university are maintaining a huge gap of cultural difference from other students. In most cases, most students exaggerate the communication divergence in that it results to poor intercultural communication.

Another aspect to note is that people are different, unique and grow up in families with different cultural values and norms and with desires to seek greener pastures or go around the globe looking for better educational experiences. It must, therefore, be noted that once people relocate to a different country or province, it means that they have left the environment where their cultural values and norms are rooted and will have to learn to adjust to those values and norms of the area they are currently in. In light of this view, as Ni (2018) also agrees, it important to note that people use tactics and strategies to adapt to communicative behaviours of the people from different cultures in order to fit to their environment. Therefore, communication convergence might be a good practice in multicultural and intercultural areas like at this

university. It would not only bring unity, but also uplift and encourage positive personal relations and friendships amongst students of this university. This does not mean that students should forget and forfeit their cultural values and norms, but it means that students should, at least, learn the cultural values and norms of other students. This might help to improve intercultural communication and reduce stereotypes, ethnocentrism and prejudice.

Relationship between Culture, Communication and Conflicts

There is a huge relationship among culture and communication in the sense that for instance, one can note from the definition of the two terms without going deep to find the relationship between them. Schirato and Yell (2000: 1) provided a clearer relationship between the two terms by firstly defining them within the argument that their relationship can be seen in their definitions. They defined communication as the 'practice of producing means, and the way in which systems of meanings are negotiated by participants in a culture that can be understood as the totality of communication practices and systems of meaning'.

Geertz (2017) noted that culture involves uniform norms, ethics, values and attitudes performed by certain group, and these are learned by communicating and are passed on from one generation to the next through communication. Moreover, each culture has its different and unique language. This particular language is used for learning a culture and is passed from one generation to the next, which means that language is used as a means of communication by members of cultural groups. It is also used to communicate amongst different cultures (intercultural communication). Therefore, language is one important and strong variable that connects culture and communication. There are also signs, which are used as means of communication, and they can tell a lot about culture. They are also an important variable that reflects and connects culture with communication. For example, one's cultural clothes can send a message about the cultural groups. The language spoken and the accent say a lot about where one comes from

and one's culture. Culture and communication are, therefore, linked in many ways.

When learning about communication, it is important to note that the biggest and most powerful barrier of effective communication is "noise", whether physical noise, psychological noise or semantic noise. There are some scholars who dwell much on the barrier of effective communication. Such scholars like Hurn and Tomalin (2013: 10) cite a Southeast Asian proverb that says, "misunderstanding don't exist, only the failure to communicate exists", and they argue that the intrinsic nature of effective cross-cultural communication has more to do with giving the 'right' response than sending the 'right' messages. Most people think this applies the other way round, whereas Hurn and Tomalin (2013) think not. They also believe that Hall perceives communication as the centre of all cross-cultural interaction but in their view, they emphasise that culture is communication and that it might be seen as an on-going process of communication and emphasises group norms.

It is also important to note that there are some variables, with empirical evidence, which contribute towards making intercultural communication poor and distorted (Hurn and Tomalin 2013). As discussed earlier in this paper, these are variables or factors that cause conflict between cultures and they include ethnocentrism, stereotype, prejudice, cultural value system and racism. This therefore means that in any environment like a higher institution for example, students as major stakeholders need to be watchful not to engage in any of the above to avoid intercultural issues.

Theoretical Underpinnings

A number of theorists and authors have attempted bringing out theories that explain intercultural communication. Some of them are far removed from the gist of this paper and some are reasonably relevant to this paper. Amongst the list of theories that can be used in this paper, the following have been chosen by this paper with the assumption that they are relevant to the study and can help to bring more explanations or discussion to the study. Such theories are cultural-level, that is, the individualism-collectivism theory. The second theory

that also supports this paper is the identity or face negotiation theory.

Cultural-level: Individualism-collectivism Theory

The theory of cultural-level is very relevant and applicable in understanding intercultural communication challenges and their impact on students' interpersonal relationships. This theory covers individualistic or personal and collectivistic or group aspects of culture. In individualistic cultures, people pay more attention to personal goals unlike in the collectivistic cultures where people pay more attention to the group's goals. Nestorovi  (2016: 96) argue that "in individualistic cultures, people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only, whilst in collectivistic cultures, people belong to groups or collectivistic environments, which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty". This is very applicable to the case of students in this selected university, as it consists of students who are from one culture and sharing all the values, norms and attitudes, and one can say they belong to one collectivistic culture, for example, Xhosas, Shonas, and Ibu culture. On the other hand, there are students who are from their respective cultures, but they have their individual values, norms and attitudes.

The cultural level theory does explain and give a hint on why there are some intercultural communication challenges, which impact students' interpersonal relationships eventually. Most students are influenced by the collectivistic cultural level theory through siding with the students that they share the same cultures with even if the situation calls for mingling as a group in classrooms. As Nestorovi  (2016: 96) argues that in collectivistic cultures, people belong to groups or collectivistic environments, which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty. This is evident from the research as one of the respondents mentioned that he cannot form a study group with other students who are not from his culture because he has to stay loyal to his cultural group by being part of them anytime they have to form a study group.

This means that, to some extent, collectivism cultures can bring intercultural communica-

tion challenges among students, which in return, negatively impact their interpersonal relationships. This also gives a clue on why in most cases students tend to stick with the people of their culture when they have to work in groups or teams. This theory makes it clearer that the main reason for students to be with students of their cultural group is that most of them believe that they will stay loyal to their cultural groups. Some students believe that if they mingle with other cultural groups, they will never be accepted again in their respective cultural groups. Marieke (2010) notes that people tend to not mingle with different cultures mainly because they do not want to lose face or identity to the people of their culture. This intensifies the above discussion and explains the reason for the present challenges to intercultural communication by the students of Fort Hare.

This finding supports this paper's assumption that students do not want to work with other cultural groups because they are afraid of losing identity in their cultures. It is as if once they mingle with different cultures, they have lost their identity and self-belonging. One's personal beliefs and perceptions about other cultures play a big role in intercultural conflict. For instance, Donelson (2009) makes an analogy of how people let their personal beliefs and perceptions interfere or impact intercultural conflict. A similar example is if one meets Rajesh Khabir Malik on the street, one would quickly and automatically place him in a social grouping as a man, middle-aged and Pakistani because of his name. Once categorised, one's perceptions of Malik would be influenced by one's beliefs about the characteristics of the people of Pakistan, which is called a "stereotype". Many people would associate Malik with a suicide bomb of terrorism. All in all, this emphasises that in collectivistic cultures, there are stereotypes towards different cultural groups, which also contributes to intercultural conflict.

Identity/Face-negotiation Theory

Identity negotiation theory and face-negotiation theory are two theories that are relative and have almost the same explanation. They are also relevant to this paper, as they focus on the reactions of individuals' identity when they are

interacting inter-culturally. Gudykunst (2005:71) argues, "Face-negotiation is a well-designed theory that provides a system of explanations for why certain cognitions, emotions, and/or behaviour occur in some intercultural encounters and under what conditions". On other hand, Gudykunst (2005) in the identity negotiation theory argues that any kind of a person in any culture, longs for identity respect in the process of exchanging and sharing ideas or communication. Anything that has to do with paying respect for one's identity differs from one culture to the next. He also emphasises that the identity negotiation perspective highlights certain identity domains in influencing one's day-to-day interactions. Identities that people tend to bring into interactions include, social class, age, sexual orientation and disability.

These theories are relevant to this paper, as they aim to prove whether stereotypes, prejudice and ethnocentrism exist amongst students of higher learning in international or multicultural universities. Those theories clearly reflect that in multicultural geographical areas, there are always factors like stereotype, ethnocentrism and judgments. For example, Bennett (2015) points out that cultural identity negotiation theory refers to communication amongst people of distinctive cultural identities. It is also a process of intercultural communication where people make contact with others. People tend to shape, make comparison, adjudicate, attribute, settle or agree on, verify, and challenge their cultural identity. They agree that according to this theory, when communicating and interacting with people of different cultures, people negotiate stereotypes towards other cultural groups and pose opinions, norms and significances, for example, concepts of feelings, time or activities which vary from one culture to the next.

In spite of the focus on the two theories, which are collectivism/individualistic and identity/face negotiation theories of culture, there are other theories that have a great influence on the above theories, for instance, the anxiety/uncertainty theory. It is one of the greatest influences on intercultural conflict where people get caught in anxiety and doubts about other individuals of different cultures. Gudykunst (2005) describes uncertainty as the inability to estimate or explain others' attitudes, behaviours,

or feelings, whereas anxiety is the feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried or apprehensive. These two words both explain the situation that an individual usually experiences when coming across a stranger or a foreigner. This is a situation where one becomes tense and worried because of not being sure whether this stranger will respond to one positively or not. Sometimes you are not sure whether they are going to understand you when you talk to them. This means that in the selected institution, which consists of different cultural groups that might be unfamiliar to other cultures, students might have uncertainty and therefore be anxious towards other cultural groups. One has to understand that the selected university is a diverse environment, which has to be accepted as it is, and students have to adapt to each other's difference.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a qualitative research method that was used to evaluate intercultural communication challenges and their impacts on interpersonal relationships of students from the selected university. Qualitative data was, therefore, collected through the use of two focus group interviews, which comprised of local students and international students and data findings were analysed qualitatively.

Non-probability sampling method based on purposive sampling technique was employed in this paper. Johnson (2020) points out that in purposive sampling (sometimes called judgemental sampling), the characteristics of a population of interest were specified and individuals who possess those characteristics were then located. Therefore, for this paper, purposive sampling technique was used in the establishment of focus groups among local (ten participants) and international students (ten participants) at the selected university. For purposive sampling, researcher's judgement was used to consider the participants in the study. This type of sampling technique reduces biasness, as the researchers had to only consider the units of analysis that possesses certain characteristics required in this paper, in which students were the target population. Below are the results from the focus group discussions.

RESULTS

Two focus groups were separately conducted in this study. However, the two focus groups conducted constituted of local students in one group (10 participants) and international students in one group (10 participants). There was a desire for having more than two focus groups, but there was a feeling that there would be a repetition of answers from the participants. Hence, results are presented separately in paragraphs below.

Intercultural Communication Challenges Among Students

Throughout the evaluation of intercultural communication challenges and their impact on the interpersonal relationships of students in the selected university, this paper found that all participants think that there are intercultural communication challenges at this university. From the first focus group of local students only, all the respondents agreed to be experiencing intercultural communication challenges when communicating with other students. For instance, from the first focus group that consisted of local students the following were the views:

"One way or the other, there are intercultural communication challenges at our university in the sense that every culture has its own given stereotype by other cultures and most of them are not positive stereotypes; therefore, we react differently towards them, and these stereotypes are one of the intercultural communication challenges on their own". (Participant 3)

"These stereotypes make it hard, at times, to peacefully and effectively communicate across one's own culture". (Participant 4)

From the second focus group, which consisted of international students only, all the participants also agreed that they are experiencing intercultural communication challenges at this university. The following were some of the views:

"The way we dress, our accent and our values and beliefs are, in a way strange, to other cultures, and we end up reducing conversation to one another therefore intercultural communication is hampered". (Participant 7)

"I also experience intercultural communication challenges when a culturally mixed group in the classroom has a lot of tension because of cultural differences because some think they are better than others". (Participant 2)

Communication Across Culture

It was important to find out from the participants if they communicate across cultures and this paper had to have this type of question first at the starting point of questioning for data gathering to make sure that the participants are the most relevant and valid ones for this paper. From the first focus group consisting of local students only, all the participants agreed that they communicate across their cultures, meaning that they all engage in intercultural communication. Below are some of the views from the participants:

"Whether you like it or not, everyone at this university is bound to communicate across his or her culture". (Participant 4)

"Yes, the communication takes place both verbally and non-verbally". (Participant 7)

From the second focus group consisting of international students only, all respondents also agreed that they engage in intercultural communication with other students. Below are some of the participants' views:

"In one way or the other, we are obliged to engage in information exchange with other students of different cultures, as the university is diverse on its own, and if we are not communicating with other students of other cultures, there would be no academic progress". (Participant 6)

"Yes, the intercultural communication takes place inside and outside of the classroom". (Participant 1)

"It is impossible to think that there is no intercultural communication among students, as that is directly part of student living on university campus." (Participant 10)

From this paper's point of view, once any institution becomes diverse, whether multicultural or international, people inside it are bound to exchange information whether they like it or not. Hence, Zheng (2009) notes that in an institution that has many languages spoken and many cultures existing in it, intercultural communication happens. In this regard, the selected uni-

versity for this paper is a diverse university with many cultures in it. Hence, intercultural communication does exist in this context, which is good for smooth interpersonal relationships among students.

Analysis of Cultural Accommodation and Interpersonal Relationships

Participants (only international students) were asked if they are being accommodated well by local South African students, especially the Xhosa culture, which is the culture prevalent where the selected university is located. However, this question was only asked to the second focus group that consisted of international students only. Many participants agreed that Xhosa culture is accommodative and welcoming enough for other cultures to co-exist. Few of the participants said that "a little", which means from a researcher's viewpoint, they were agreeing with the question, but they suggested that there are some underpinning issues that they could not disclose. The least participants disagreed, saying that Xhosas are not accommodative and welcoming enough, and that as a result they are ethnocentric. One of the respondents also mentioned that:

"Xhosa's are so ethnocentric in that they even have names for international students (usually other African students) such as Makwere-kwere and Magrigamba". (Participant 3)

"Some are accommodative but most are still hard to relate with". (Participant 5)

"Most of them are accommodative but some are still calling us with derogative names". (Participant 8)

"It's hard to make friends with them". (Participant 7)

"Some think they are better than us". (Participant 1)

"I have a friend who is Xhosa. So I would say yes I have met pretty nice locals". (Participant 4)

Based on the above responses, this paper notes that there is ethnocentrism amongst students from this university and this would no doubt constitute challenges to good intercultural communication and smooth interpersonal relationship among students in this university.

Local Students' Views on Other African Students' Cultures

This paper wanted to know how the accommodating culture (local students) perceives other international students' cultures. Many respondents brought up negative arguments towards international students whereas a few had positive opinions towards international students. Below are some of the responses:

"International students think that they are mentally brilliant or clever in simple terms". (Participant 10)

"Based on our cultural differences, I embrace their presence". (Participant 9)

"In lecture rooms, international students form their own study and work groups, especially Zimbabweans". (Participant 4)

"We are not different from them. We are all Africans after all, divided by colonial boarders". (Participant 7)

"The university put them first than us (priority)". (Participant 2)

All the above shows that local students have allowed prejudice against foreign students and this would no doubt create an unfriendly and unproductive atmosphere where they would not be able to work together in groups or learn from each other. This view is also shared by Zheng (2009) who notes that prejudice is a bane to good intercultural communication.

Suggested Measures Reduce and Eliminate Challenges in Intercultural Communication and Good Interpersonal Relationships

Liu et al. (2014) note that culture impacts how conflict is perceived and interpreted, and that effective intercultural communication challenges management therefore requires intercultural awareness and sensitivity. Thus, this paper had to pose this kind of a question to seek for resolutions on what the university, students and lecturers could do to reduce or eliminate intercultural communication challenges.

From the first focus group that consisted of local students only, the common answer from the participants was that the university should have a cultural day. Below are some of the views from the participants:

"The university should reinforce and strengthen the Cultural Day as much as possible where there will be a show of cultural food, clothing and even music". (Participant 2)

"Cultural Day could help students to gain information and interest about other cultures, as well as reducing stereotypes, ethnocentrism and prejudice among students". (Participant 9)

From the second focus group that was composed of international students only, many participants had common responses pointing out that students must also do something to reduce challenges to intercultural communication. Below are some of the participants' views:

"Students should possibly form some sort of Student Intercultural Organisation where they could ensure that there are campaigns and programmes that run against intercultural conflict at this university". (Participant 5)

"Lecturers should always force students to mix when group assignments are issued out". (Participant 7)

It is highly possible to eliminate some intercultural communication challenges that are experienced at that particular moment, and the main way to overcome those intercultural communication challenges is through raising awareness (Clausen 2006). This means that if cultural day could be emphasised by the management of the selected university, it could help to raise awareness among students about the importance of knowing more about other cultures, their norms and values, like the way they dress, their traditional food and so forth. This could also reduce stereotypes among students. This would ensure better culture-accommodation, smooth intercultural communication and good interpersonal relationships among students.

DISCUSSION

Intercultural Communication Challenges and Associated Stereotypes

Under the conditions of a globalising world, young people face the issues of adaptation to new life conditions, unexpected phenomena and the diversity of inter-cultural contacts (Kolosova and Poplavskaya 2017). In light of this view, in a diverse classroom consisting of students from various cultures and different countries, it

is impossible not to think about intercultural communication challenges experienced by students. Therefore, throughout the evaluation of intercultural communication challenges and their impact on the interpersonal relationships of students in the selected university, this paper found that all participants are of the view that there are intercultural communication challenges experienced by students at their university, which are perpetrated by inappropriate behaviours among. This viewpoint can be easily underpinned under the communication divergence theory. As argued by Giles (2016), in communication divergence theory, intercultural communication challenges mostly begin with distinctive expectations based on appropriate or inappropriate conflict behaviour in a conflict scene, and people end up neglecting adapting to other cultures.

Thus, this paper's findings, based on participants' views, suggest that prejudice, among other variables, and stereotypes form part of culturally inappropriate conflict behaviours among students at this university. These behaviours, therefore, are challenging smooth intercultural communication and interpersonal relationships among students of the selected university. For instance, based on the participants' views, some of the stereotypes mentioned include that Basotho people are associated with livestock theft. Shonas are associated with poverty. Xhosas are thought to be ethnocentric and impolite. Zulus are thought to be cruel, as associated with the ancient Zulu King-Shaka. Ndebeles think they are South Africans. Nigerians are seen as fraudsters and drug dealers. According to Francuski (2011), stereotypes often hinder the communication process with the members of the other cultures since they offer limited insight on the part of the whole culture". Hence, this paper wants to argue that awareness among cultures by the students of this selected university can reduce challenges to effective intercultural communication. In this view, Banks and McGee-Banks (2020) and Francuski (2011) point out that understanding and knowing stereotypes of one culture does not equal an understanding of that particular culture.

Culturally Inappropriate Conflict Behaviours: Ethnocentrism and Prejudices

Another significant finding from this paper is that among stereotypes, ethnocentrism and

prejudice have also emerged to be one of the culturally inappropriate conflict behaviours among students. Ethnocentrism and prejudice are the beliefs that one's culture or cultural group is superior to all other cultural groups, and one can prejudice others without having known them. Bennett (2015) and Vavrus (2015) note that the term 'ethnocentrism' was coined by William Graham Sumner in reference to the perception that one's own group is the centre of everything, and others are consequently judged in terms of the familiar standards of that particular group. Therefore, these behaviours have also been found to be challenging for smooth intercultural communication and interpersonal relationships among students of the selected university. For instance, based on the participants' views, some ethnocentric views from the local students towards other African students like Zimbabweans include that Zimbabweans, are fashion out-dated. They wear very long skirts as if they are old ladies.

Findings from this paper also indicated that male students that are from the Xhosa culture are addressing foreign male students as *amakhwenkwe* (boys). Being called *amakhwenkwe* means that they are not man enough. This is because, according to their views, they are not circumcised in a Xhosa traditional way and thus cannot be considered men. Furthermore, the issue of language is also a problem. Just because international students use their languages when they communicate amongst each other and local students cannot understand their language, local students developed names (considered derogative) for international students and call them *amakwerekwere* or/and *magrigamba*. It was also found out that local students also use their local languages when in a group discussion, which also has other African students and the other African students are at a disadvantage until they call themselves to order. Amongst these factors, negative perceptions towards one another's indigenous food is also another factor contributing towards intercultural communication challenges. For instance, Shona culture regards mice as part of their food. Just because local students do not consider mice as part of their food, they mock Shonas and believe that they eat mice because of poverty in Zimbabwe. Findings from this paper also suggest that there

are ethnocentric behaviours and prejudices even among local students in the same factor, such as food. For instance, students from the Venda tribe who are also studying in the same university are mocked and prejudged by the fellow local students, for their mopane-worms dish. Therefore, as suggested by Jandt (2015), it is also evident in this paper that these culturally inappropriate conflict behaviours also prevail among local students.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that intercultural communication at this selected South African university is poor, and variables such as ethnocentrism, stereotypical behaviours and prejudice are a great influence and these variables are promoting intercultural communication challenges. It is also this paper's opinion that there still remains a lot to be done to close the gap to improve intercultural communication amongst the international students and local students at this selected university. This will also go a long way to help the university to be proactive enough to prevent related possible intercultural communication challenges, like xenophobia.

There is also a strong factor, which also contributes towards the poor level of intercultural communication, which is the value system (food, dress coat, language, bathing system and others). This also in some ways has affected good interpersonal relationships among these students and causes cultural conflict at times, as they have negative attitudes towards one another. Consequently, this might not only affect students' interpersonal relationships but also affects one's academic progress and social well-being negatively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this paper was to evaluate the intercultural communication challenges and their impact on interpersonal relationships of the students in the selected university and based on the data collected, this paper has come up with the following recommendations.

The university, especially residence offices should mix different individuals in terms of their cultures so that students understand and appreciate each other's cultural practices and also

get used to communicating well across their culture. More so, as noted by the international students, the university should introduce a language module that can educate them about the Xhosa culture being the dominant culture on campus. Also, as pointed out by the international students, when given academic tasks and to improve intercultural communication and reduce cultural conflict, local students must not use their mother tongue in the company of foreign students. It is also being recommended that lecturers should do random grouping in lecture rooms so that students can mingle with their classmates from different cultural backgrounds to encourage acceptance, tolerance and reducing factors like ethnocentrism. Furthermore, the university should showcase more intercultural programmes and such programmes should involve all students of the university to improve cultural awareness amongst them and to reduce factors like stereotype and prejudice. Also, local lecturers, especially Xhosa speakers should be discouraged from using local language to lecture and crack jokes because it motivates negative attitudes towards the language and even to their class slots. This also puts the foreign students at a disadvantage. Lastly, a permanent Cultural Awareness Day should be put on the university's calendar to encourage all students to accept, tolerate and get along with one another to reduce tension, intercultural communication challenges, and negative attitudes and also to improve intercultural communication as well good interpersonal relationships.

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