

Motives for Intercultural Friendships in Higher Education: A Case Study of First-year ESL Students and Native Speakers of English

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ABSTRACT This paper investigated the formation of intercultural friendship between native speakers of English and first-year ESL students at a large urban university in the Free State Province. Qualitative approach was used with open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews to collect data to understand factors that lead to the formation of intercultural friendship. The research population of this study included fifty first-year students (twenty-five females and twenty-five males). The study found that personal liking, similar values and beliefs facilitated social contact among students from different cultures. The results suggest that intercultural friendship provides students with the opportunity to learn each other's cultural beliefs, values and languages which underpin the Interdependence Theory. This study recommends that higher education institutions should encourage academics to infuse intercultural friendship as an adjustment and teaching and learning tool to celebrate multiculturalism within and outside the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies identified individual motivation for individuals to formulate friendship. For instance, the study by Lee (2008) and McEwan and Guerrero (2010) found that students are motivated by the discrepancy between resources on information, affection and enjoyment that they already have and resources that they still need to seek out new friends who would provide those wanted sources, and an interesting person to talk with, as well as an understanding person to relate to or identify with. Friendship is a unique and an important type of interpersonal relationship which builds a foundation of appreciation and respect, and also makes use of small opportunities to stay focused on positive aspects rather than mistakes. This could be achieved by exploring common interests; enjoying things together and most importantly, establishing a pattern of trust and understanding each other's feelings. According to Sias et al. (2008) individuals' cultures and differences characterize intercultural friendships which bring rewards as well as challenges as individuals negotiate differences in cultural values, languages and overcome stereotypes. This may lead to different attitudes and beliefs about life, different expectations about how people should behave in social circumstances and even different understandings of what friendship means. Un-

doubtedly, intercultural friendships have the potential to help individuals to gain unique cultural knowledge, broaden their perspectives, and break stereotypes. Thus, intercultural friendships have benefits for both native and non-native speakers of English such as better academic performance, life satisfaction, lower levels of stress and positive mood (Furnham and Erdmann 1995; Hotta and Ting-Toomey 2013; Redmond and Bunyi 1993; Ward and Masgoret 2004). In support of the findings of the above scholars, Gareis et al. (2011) found that intercultural friendships with English native speakers and non-native speakers have a significant positive effect on students' general sojourn satisfaction, academic success, as well as foreign language growth.

It is worth noting that research on intercultural friendship has focused on differences between cultural or ethnic groups through cross-cultural analysis with special emphasis on expectations of friendship or behavioural norms by using culture as one variable to predict differences in behaviour. For instance, the study by Gudykunst (1985) focuses on cultural similarity of (intercultural vs. intracultural relationship) as one of the variables influencing self-disclosure (as cited in Sias et al. 2008). Building on Gudykunst's research focus, Martin et al. (1994) found that African American and European Americans preferred different strategies to

resolve problematic situations in their inter-ethnic friendships, with African American respondents preferring strategies requiring joint action, while European American preferred action and responsibilities to be taken by others. On the other hand, Collier (1996) studied ethnic background and emergent cultural competencies in South Africa and found that members of different groups value different competencies which were consistent with core differences in understanding the concept of friendship. However, these studies inform understanding of cultural differences in friendships and do not focus on the motives of intercultural friendships between native speakers of English and non-native speakers with South African indigenous language background.

Research indicates that relationships are conceptualized as socially constructed entities that are created, maintained and altered through communication based on individuals' perceptions on the relationship (Jackson 2014; Sias et al. 2004; Sigman 1995). In the context of this study, communication can enrich individuals' understanding of various cultures and to demonstrate how cultural differences can simultaneously enhance and hinder individuals' experience of multi-cultural friendship as Zhang and Merolla (2007) pointed out. Communicative competence, culture compatibility, sojourn expectations, degree of cultural identification, level of cross-cultural adjustment, friendship conceptualizations, frequency of contact, and institutional support are found to be significant factors influencing intercultural friendship formation (Arasaratnam and Banerjee 2007; Massengill and Nash 2009; Pitts 2009; Ujitani 2006). In the context of this study, communicative competence is a combination of verbal proficiency, nonverbal appropriateness, levels of verbality and topic selection which creates and sustains relationships (Bruess and Pearson 1997). It is worth mentioning that specific communicative competencies for making and keeping friends have not been explored in South African universities, particularly for English native speakers and ESL students with indigenous language backgrounds. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine selected communication variables and their relationship with intercultural friendship to determine which facets of communicative competence foster intercultural friendship formation.

From a different position, close friendships in Western as well as non-Western cultures share

the same core of valued traits such as mutual affection, trustworthiness in sharing confidences, approval, and support (Gareis 1995; Glass et al. 2014). However, individual traits and communicative competencies differ in the manifestations of the above-mentioned traits and the degree of their importance. For instance, Barnlund (1989) and Morse (1983) assert that self-disclosure is a common characteristic of friendship around the globe which tends to be modest in countries such as Japan and Australia than in the United States and Brazil (as cited in Gareis et al. (2011). From a similar view, Gareis and Wilkins (2011) and Mortenson (2005) argue that emotion-focused forms of communication differ across cultures wherein instrumental forms of communication such as persuasion and referential clarity are highly valued by Chinese than U.S. Americans. In the same line of argument, they also found that love expression in friendship is more direct in the United States than in Germany, although love expression could be observed in both cultures which confirms Wierzbicka's (1997) warning that the meaning of friendship varies over time as it focuses on cross-cultural differences. With this in mind, it could therefore be argued that communicative competencies related to the initiation of interaction and strengthening of emerging relationships require an empirical inquiry. As a result, this study concentrates on three such communicative competencies: willingness to communicate, communicative adaptability, language proficiency, as well as exploring the relationship of these variables with friendship numbers, satisfaction levels, and degrees of loneliness. In this case, willingness to communicate (WTC) is a predisposition to talk in various situations which focus on communication with strangers, acquaintances, and friends with respect to the orientation and exploratory stage of friendship development (McCroskey 2007). Communicative adaptability is a mixture of communication (or message) skills and personal attributes which describe a person who is witty, supportive, and relaxed; enjoys meeting and engaging with others; is self-aware concerning appropriate self-disclosure; and possesses excellent verbal skills (Gareis et al. 2011). These skills and attributes are relevant for intracultural friendship formation; hence, there is no study that explored specific role of communicative adaptability in intercultural friendship formation between English native speakers in South

Africa and ESL students with African language background. Language proficiency as the third variable of communication under study is consisting of linguistic competence of four basic skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Successful relationship initiation and development of intercultural friendship are closely related to language proficiency in respect of self-disclosure, tactful emotional support, and responsiveness in conversation, entertaining storytelling, and competent conflict management in oral communication (Gareis et al. 2011). For this reason, research on the impact of language proficiency on intercultural friendship seems to be inconclusive especially for English native speakers in South Africa and ESL students with African language background.

Theoretical Framework

Social network perspective through functional model is a theoretical framework of this study because it explains how international students and co-nationals formulate their friendship. This model is based on the premises that the stronger the tie is, the higher level of friendship the individual perceives to have with the other. According to Cheng and Starosta (2005) the strength of the ties and proximity reveals the degree of closeness and intimacy of the individual's ego and those connected with him or her. For this reason, it affirms their original cultural identity and facilitates students' adaptability to the academic and professional world as they strive to have fun together. In other words, it provides students with ample opportunities to enhance their understanding of the new culture through discussions, social interaction, and intellectual exchange with one another (Liu et al. 2015; Woolf 2007). Within the same line of argument, social network perspective through functional model serves to attenuate the stress that students often experience when crossing cultures as the initiative interaction happens in the classroom or student organizations, and other similar places where members from both cultures are imposed to interact with each other (Borgatti et al. 2014; Kim 2001; Pavel 2006). This leads to frequent interactions, high emotional closeness and reciprocity as two parties truly like each other and are concerned about one another, see each other relatively frequently, and have similar perspectives and outlooks on the importance

of their relationships (Perry-Smith and Shalley 2003).

Research Question

What are the factors leading to the formation of intercultural friendship between Native speakers of English and ESL students at a large urban university in the Free State Province?

Aim of the Study

Due to global and national demand for higher education, students travel across cultural boundaries and have contacts with students from different cultural backgrounds. This study seeks to explore factors that lead to the formation of intercultural friendship between Native speakers of English and ESL students at a large urban university in the Free State Province.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample was comprised of fifty first-year students (twenty-five females and twenty-five males) in the faculty of education, Bloemfontein campus. They represented different ethnic backgrounds including Afrikaans, Ndebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Swazi, Tshonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu. The sample included five respondents per ethnic background. Twenty-five respondents were male, twenty-five were female. The researcher used a convenience and snowballing sampling method to recruit participant whom were identified via friends and acquaintances. The researcher did not interview someone he knew personally and in order for participants to qualify for inclusion in this study, their friendship had to be with someone they considered to be culturally different from them and he/she must have known his/her friend for at least six months. Furthermore, the respondent must consider his/her friendship to be "very close" or worthy of "best friend" status; but not be a romantic relationship.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected using qualitative methods to understand the intercultural friendship motives between native speakers of English and

South African ESL students with indigenous language background who lived through the experience. For the purpose of this study, qualitative research methods are used to discover how native speakers of English and South African ESL students with indigenous language background construct the meaning of their intercultural friendships and understand how they live with those shared meanings in their relationships (Ersanilli et al. 2011; Labaree 2013; Lee 2008; Sias et al. 2008). According to Motlhaka (2014) qualitative research also helps the researcher to understand the subjective experience of the participants and how they shaped their personal and cultural factors through intercultural relationships. Data was collected through the use of open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews in order to gather culturally specific and contextually rich data to easily engage participants to share their opinions.

Data Analysis

Open-ended questionnaires and interviews transcripts were analysed using grounded theory which constantly compares responses to determine connections to identified themes (Charmaz 2011). For this study, questionnaires and transcripts were read, reread, and compared to identify categories that impacted the motives of intercultural friendships and the role of communication in constructing these friendships. Furthermore, the researcher used bracketing method to understand and make meaning of data to allow the emergence of themes. The researcher located key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question (Tuford and Newman 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine motives for intercultural friendships of native speakers of English with first-year ESL students with indigenous language background at a large urban university in the Free State Province. The results of this study may serve as a significant cornerstone for the South African context and the world at large to understand the development process of intercultural friendship and identify factors involved in intercultural friendship formation. The discussion of the results of this study is presented through the category of will-

ingness to communicate, communicative adaptability, loneliness and improvement of English proficiency of students with the following sub-categories: personal liking or attraction, similar values and beliefs, social activities, mutuality, communication, self-disclosure and personal attributes which are significant factors that motivated native speakers of English and South African ESL students with indigenous language background to formulate/forge intercultural relationships.

Personal Liking or Attraction

Similarities in a variety of behaviours, attitudes, personality, physical attractiveness, proximity, and demographic features are found to be significant factors of personal liking or personal attraction that result in a friendship (Mehra et al. 2001; Mongeau et al. 2013; Rubin et al. 1994; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010). From the same perspective, the matching hypothesis proposes that people tend to pick partners who are about equal in level of attractiveness to themselves. Matching hypothesis in this case agrees with the findings of this study which suggest that people tend to pick partners who are similar to themselves in terms of their characteristics such as age, religion, social class, personality, education, intelligence and attitude rather than focusing on race and nationality. Furthermore, the study found that people are more likely to have friends and partners who are similar to themselves simply because they would be more accessible to them rather than people who are farther away from them. In other words, friendships develop after getting to know someone, and this closeness provides the easiest way to accomplish this goal. Physical attraction was also found to be having a profound impact in the establishment of intercultural friendship because people would enjoy several benefits such as kinder, gentler and more able among others wherein our own beliefs and traits play an important role.

Within the same line of argument, the findings of this study also underpin the Interdependence Theory which predicts that we like people with whom we have such gratifying interactions. That is, when we find out that an attractive person likes us, we are more likely to reciprocate that liking. In general, the experimental data support the prediction that liking causes

liking wherein we do indeed like people more when we learn or infer that they might like us. In fact, reciprocal liking plays a more prominent role in people's falling-in-love memories than any single other variable, including similarity and the presence of desired characteristics such as good looks and appealing personality in the partner. In conclusion, reciprocal liking plays a prominent role in participants' memories of falling in intercultural friendships, although it is typically more pronounced in falling-in-love experiences as one of the central principles of attraction, along with similarity, familiarity, proximity, and physical attractiveness.

Similar Values and Beliefs

Similar values and beliefs facilitate interaction and develop attraction which increases social contact among people of different cultures; which results in intercultural relationship (Furman and Rose 2015; Leaper 2015; Reisinger and Turner 2004). Thus, it is important to share similar values in order to be close friends. This study found that it is better to befriend someone who is basically compatible with the broad belief system you embrace, although it is worth noting that we are all unique individuals and there are infinite ways to look at the world. In this case, values serve as a personal guideline of what two or more people are prepared to accept in their intercultural relationships which are based on their experiences in life on everything from whom they are attracted to, their political leanings, things they do in their spare time or that they have interests in and their social interactions. The study also found that similar values and beliefs strengthen the friendship because partners could communicate or understand each other better and have fun with each other. In other words, similarity in values could be criteria for selecting friends which help build up understanding between friends in intercultural friendships. On the other hand, the study found that most participants thought it is normal to have different values or beliefs among individuals even those from the same culture, but there should be some shared values or beliefs between friends. Therefore, respect and willingness to learn each other's values and beliefs are the keys to overcome possible conflict from value or belief differences wherein both parties respect each other's opinion and do not try to convince the

other. This means that friends are expected to acknowledge the fact that although their personal value systems are different, each of them deserves respect and not mockery or criticism because one personally does not believe in the other. Thus, a friend would be able to understand that the implementation of the belief system is not ideal and may help the other to improve on it or will understand the situation instead of making a fuss about it.

Social Activities

Social activities such as providing assistance, rituals, activities, rules, and roles, self-disclosure, sharing personal information, networking, exploring cultures and languages, emphasizing similarities and exploring differences have an influence in the formation of intercultural relationship (Lee 2008; Liu 2013; McCord et al. 2014; Tupas 2014). This study found that students started an intercultural friendship because they would be able to provide help, support and advice to each other while engaging in joint activities where rules and roles emerge and meeting significant others. It was also found that social activities provide students with an opportunity to learn each other's cultural beliefs, values and languages and stress shared values while respecting different points of view. Thus, common interest on social activities becomes a cornerstone/significant tool for intercultural friendship.

Mutuality

Mutuality is an integral and significant aspect of starting an intercultural friendship by sharing meaningful goals and making progress regarding those shared goals in terms of supporting one another's personal goals and honouring each other's dreams (Avivi et al. 2009; Clinton et al. 2014). This study found that mutuality in intercultural friendship may represent an important source of similarity that relates to better relationship quality and satisfaction. In other words, mutual understanding on what their friendship stage is, mutual sharing on the same topics, and mutual assisting in solving some problems is very important in an intercultural friendship wherein mutual support, mutual sharing and mutual efforts may indicate caring, interest and sincerity to each other. The finding of

this is supported by Cole and Teboul (2004) and Reisinger and Turner (2004) who argued that partners' pursuit of shared goals entails teamwork in the form of joint activity, shared interests, and mutual knowledge which relates to better relational outcomes. This means that partners could feel motivated to develop shared goals because of the expanded identity that such fusion with one's partner offers. Thus, mutuality would also help students to share an equal amount of information for their academic and personal prospect.

Communication

Intercultural relationship is formulated, maintained and altered by effective communication in order to advance a relationship and disclose information to the other partner (Sias et al. 2008). The study found that culture has the potential to influence people's perception on how to communicate appropriately and effectively in an intercultural relationship, hence, effective communication may mean different things in different cultures. Thus, language differences tend to provide barriers to broad and intimate communication and shared understandings that characterize a successful friendship and emphasize increased communication depth and breadth as relationships develop (Kim 2001; Scollon 2011). The study also found that communication cultivates an understanding and awareness of different cultural values while attempting to increase intercultural communication competence within students. In other words, communication helps students to recognize, accept and appreciate their cultural differences in a friendship and creates an environment where students are able to identify and describe cultural values shared through communication and also transfer that knowledge to their own personal experiences through small group and class discussion (Crook 2014; Gareis 2012). Ultimately, students would have stronger language skills, better academic performance, lower levels of stress, and greater life satisfaction.

Self-disclosure

Loyalty, mutual commitment, and mutual trust are important for friends' ability to self-disclose and, by extrapolation, to develop intimacy in their intercultural friendships (Bauminger et al. 2008;

Turner et al. 2007). This study found that self-disclosure plays an important role in the formation of an intercultural friendship by enabling students to share their feelings, thoughts, and desires and to develop an affective bond with a friend. Closeness to another person and openness in describing and sharing thoughts and feelings are students' ability and capacity to build trust and experience intimacy to appropriate their self-disclosure in intercultural friendship. In this case, self-disclosure is coherent with the social penetration theory that the width and the depth of information are high in intimate friendship which has the potential to enhance students' spoken English skills.

Personal Attributes

Authenticity or openness and honesty, trust, helping behaviour, and self-concept are important personal traits in the formation of intercultural friendships (Lee 2008; Vigil 2007). This means that respect for the social and psychological self in the relationship and reciprocal assistance in time of need should be addressed. The study found that age, similarities, complementary characteristics and intercultural experiences also influence the establishment of intercultural friendships.

CONCLUSION

Due to globalization, the findings of this study indicate that intercultural friendship help students from cultural diversity to textualize essentialisms, tensions and struggles in everyday classroom practice. The findings suggest that intercultural friendship prepares students for the complex world and guides them for the creation, development, experiencing and interpretation of knowledge and skills through the micro-lenses of inter-culturalism and intercultural education. This helps students to recognize, accept, and appreciate each other's cultural differences to ensure that behaviours and adjustments are seen as unique features of intercultural friendship development. The study found that personal liking or attraction, similar values and beliefs facilitate interaction and develop attraction which increases social contact among students from different cultures. The study also found that mutuality; communication; self-disclosure and personal attributes cultivate an understanding

and awareness of different cultural values, mutual support, mutual sharing, mutual efforts and sincerity to each other. The results suggest that intercultural friendship provides students with the opportunity to learn each other's cultural beliefs, values and languages and shared values while respecting different points of view which underpin the Interdependence Theory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that higher education institutions should encourage academics to infuse intercultural friendship as an adjustment and teaching and learning tool in a group activity to enable students from different cultural backgrounds to share their feelings, thoughts, and desires with the aim of accepting and celebrating multiculturalism within and outside the classroom. The study also recommends to intercultural communication scholars to apply the results of this study to examine friendships across ethnic, generation groups, gender, regions, or classes using ethnography or diary recording to explore participants' friendship experiences.

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