Confronting Underlying Racism for Effective Intercultural Communication

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Introduction

Racism is never an easy topic to discuss, particularly when one is exposing racism within an individual or community. It is my belief that racism can and will lose its power and influence with increased cultural awareness, sensitivity, and intercultural communication.

In order to contribute to this goal, this paper will reflect two separate studies: The first study, and first part of this paper, explores the necessity to acknowledge and confront underlying racist thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes toward minority cultures who are living in a monocultural society. The study focuses on Japanese perceptions of Nigerian immigrants living and working in Japan. The second study, and second part, discusses the necessary steps to effectively communicate interculturally, and will introduce a new approach to a well-used tool in intercultural communication training—the D.I.E. exercise.

The goal of this study is not to paint Japan as a monocultural racist country, but use Japan as a way of illustrating a global communicative issue, as well as build an argument for more effective, authentic, and intentional intercultural communication.
Confronting Underlying Racism

Neither a history of Japan's racial tensions with other cultures nor the current extreme right-wing racist views of Japan's nationalist groups will be included because such historical events, such as the Nanjing incident (Askew, 2002), or modern acts of xenophobia, such as the attack on a Chinese tour bus (Jize, 2010) would not accurately depict Japan's current stance with regards to immigration and cultural diversity.

In order to obtain a glimpse into this current state of mind, 50 Japanese participants, male and female between the ages of 20 and 55, were randomly chosen, and asked for two things: 1) their age, and 2) their immediate and honest response to one phrase: "Say the first word that comes to mind when I say *Nigerian*" (The phrase was asked in Japanese, but translated into English for publication).

Forty-eight responded, without hesitation, "Kowai," which is Japanese for *scary* or *I'm afraid* (many of the younger female participants made facial and hand gestures to indicate their fear, and although I did not officially document the second word out of their mouths, half of the Japanese females followed their response up with "Yada," which has many translations, but most commonly, "I don't want [it]"); and the remaining two, both older men, stated matter-of-factly, "Hanzaisha"—criminal.

Kovel (1994) explores models of white racial identity development, and pointed to some startling research: "The less aware subjects were of their White identity, the more likely they were to exhibit increased levels of racism" (p. 265). While I am not suggesting the Japanese should be compared to white Anglo-Saxon Americans, I do think there is a connection between the racial identity models and current racial beliefs with regards to a small number of immigrants inhabiting a country like Japan where there is one dominant race.

Again, the point of this survey was not to implicate the Japanese in acts of racial profiling, but rather reveal the need to further cultural awareness, sensitivity, and acceptance on a global scale. One way this can be achieved is through effective intercultural communication.

Effective Intercultural Communication

Countless articles and books have indulged in the now-cliché observation regarding the world becoming smaller. The world is, in fact, becoming easier to access, both physically and virtually, thanks mostly to advancing technology; however, it is deceiving to believe that an easier accessible world equals a diverse, accepting, and communicative one.

During the 2010-2011 academic year, I surveyed 300 people from America, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, almost every country in Western Europe, Russia, Iran, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. They were all asked to respond to the same statement: "List the three things that are most important to you." 98% of responses fell into these 3 categories:

1. Family
2. Career/Passion (e.g., writing)
3. Health/Quality of life (personal satisfaction with overall conditions)

I presented these research results for the first time during the 2013 Asian Conference on Language Learning in Osaka, Japan, but not before presenting the same statement to the attendees. Although their responses varied to some degree (one gentleman said, "Sleep"), the overall consensus mirrored my findings.

So the question now is, "Are we that different?" Well, yes, in fact. We are complicated beings separated by language, culture, beliefs, and so on. This leads us to define the term *culture*: In 1871, Edward B. Tyler provided the first working definition of culture: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, law, morals, custom, and any other habits acquired by humans who are members of a society." Kovel (1984) defines *culture* as "an evolving system of meaningful relations deriving from the sum total of the activities and institutions of a society" (p. 25). To extend these definitions, Klopf and McCroskey (2007) present two means of viewing culture—a broad version and a narrow version: the broad version includes "artifacts" (society's manufactured items), "sociofacts" (society's norms and laws), and "mentifacts" (cognition and emotion); the narrow version includes a more personal experience that influences how one thinks and behaves within that society (p. 21).

Now that we have defined culture, it is imperative that we separate the following terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, which is one of the missteps that leads communicators further away from communicating effectively interculturally: multicultural, cross-cultural, and intercultural:

Multicultural means two or more cultures living alongside one another, and while this involves some levels of tolerance and superficial social interactions, communication usually does not reach deeper depths than that.

Cross-Cultural means two or more cultures living alongside one another, and while there are attempts at reaching across cultural borders, there is a level of

> intentionality and community building that is necessary in order to build permanent bridges between cultures.
>
> Intercultural means social structures and interactions are defined by understanding, acceptance, respect, freedom, equality, diversity, and celebration.

Therefore, intercultural communication is "a communicative exchange between persons of different cultures" (Klopf and McCroskey, 2007, p. 58). Challenges to intercultural communication should be fairly obvious: cultural assumptions, prejudices, stereotypes, miscommunications, misinterpretations, and so on. Strategies to overcome these are self-awareness, avoiding stereotypes, honesty, respect, inquiry, and acceptance of differences and the difficulties that natural occur in communication.
D.I.E., D.A.E., or something else?

D.I.E. is a common exercise used in intercultural training that asks participants to describe, interpret, and evaluate an ambiguous object or photograph (Bennett, Bennett, & Stillings, 1977). Finding the model and it acronym problematic, Nam & Condon (2010) suggested D.A.E. (Describe, Analyze, Evaluate), with "analyze" supposedly being clearer directions for participants compared to the previous term "interpret" (problem solving vs. judging) (p. 84).

While I agree that D.A.E. is more effective in its clarity, I believe there is merit to allowing participants to first evaluate, then analyze (or interpret, if you choose to remain faithful to the original D.I.E.), and finally describe. When I present the new form—E.A.D.—to participants, it is much more powerful to illicit evaluations of an unknown object, photograph or scenario (e.g. case study). If one is going to undertake the unpleasant goal of uncovering underlying racism in order to learn how to better communicate with other cultures, it is necessary to engage in exercises that confront racism head-on. E.A.D. accomplishes this goal by not asking participants to objectively describe what they see first, but instead, evaluate what they see; in other words, immediately answer the question, "How do I feel about what I see" (Nam & Condon, 2010, p. 85). By moving backwards through the D.I.E./D.A.E. process, we are able to confront underlying racism, which will hopefully pave the way for self-awareness, cultural respect, and effective intercultural communication.

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