

Multicultural Effectiveness and Chinese Adolescents' Psychological Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic

-- The Preliminary Results of Chat-Pal

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Abstract

Anti-Asian discrimination has risen to a new level during the COVID-19 Pandemic. To support the Asian community, the present study examines the effectiveness of a virtual peer social support program serving Asian adolescents during the pandemic and examines its impact on Asian adolescents' psychological well-being. Specifically, the current study recruited 28 adolescents in a program that focuses on the discussion of culturally related topics, aiming to enhance participants' Multicultural Effectiveness. The result shows that Chat-Pal, the intervention used in the current research, was effective for the experimental group in reducing the anxiety level, with a significant interactive effect between the experimental group and control group. The current study is the first to investigate the effectiveness of peer social support programs for Asian adolescents in coping with the cultural and psychological challenges and strategies of resilience accentuated by the pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19; Mental health; Intercultural effectiveness; Multicultural personality; Multiculturalism; Intercultural education.

1. Introduction

Research suggested that simply through talking, the level of anxiety and stress of adolescents is decreased [1, 2]. Knowing that Asian adolescents' psychological well-being might be influenced by the current pandemic due to the quarantine policy and rising hate crime against Asians, it is important to investigate if peer social support would make a difference in relieving anxiety for Asian adolescents during the pandemic [3-5].

In the current study, intercultural effectiveness is the skill to interact effectively with foreigners [6]. Multicultural personality is defined as the ability to adapt successfully into a culturally diverse environment [7]. A new word "Multicultural Effectiveness" is created in this research, suggesting the combination of intercultural effectiveness and multicultural personality.

Previous research has shown that Chinese adolescents who were integrated into host culture, meaning that they have a high intercultural effectiveness, had higher self-esteem than their peers who were marginalized [8]. More importantly, another research directly shows that a higher multicultural personality is related to a higher psychological well-being [9]. Together, these research show that having a high multicultural effectiveness may be related to a higher psychological well-being. As a result, the present study wants to examine if having a higher multicultural effectiveness can increase the psychological well-being for Asian adolescents.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study are 10 grade Chinese students (N=28), half are in the control group (n=14) and the other are in the experimental group (n=14).

All the participants are Asian students, who identify as Chinese and speak fluent Mandarin or Cantonese. Within the participants, 7 are self-identified as male, while the other 21 self-identified as female. All participants come from middle and upper social economic class. And all are recruited via WeChat, which is a popular social networking application in China.

2.2. Research Design

The current study is a quasi-experimental design. Participants are assigned to the groups based on the date of entering the program. Participants in both groups are surveyed twice, before and after Chat-Pal. The proposed Chat-Pal pre and post assessment are the same, including general self-reported demographic information, anxiety construct, three categories of Multicultural Personality, three categories of Intercultural Effectiveness, and three categories of Cultural Stereotypes towards American culture. The purpose of this assessment is to evaluate the anxiety level of the Chat-Pal Chinese participants, their multicultural effectiveness level, and their cultural stereotypes before and after the intervention.

The experimental group receives the actual community outreach program. During the sessions, participants discuss culturally related topics that spark differences between Eastern and Western cultures with their American Chat-Pals. Topics includes Education System, Beauty Standard, and Pets and Animals. The control group receives the same procedures; however, they are not restricted by specific topics.

2.3. Measures

The proposed pre and post assessment includes general self-reported demographic information, anxiety construct, three categories of Multicultural Personality: Cultural Empathy, Open Mindedness, Social Initiative, three categories of Intercultural Effectiveness: Behavioral Flexibility, Identity Maintenance, and Interaction Management, and three categories of Cultural Stereotypes towards American culture: Behavioral Flexibility, Identity Maintenance, and Interaction Management. The items regarding anxiety level are selected from General Anxiety Disorder 7-item Scale (GAD-7) [10]. The items regarding the intercultural effectiveness level are selected from the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) [6]. The items regarding multicultural personality and cultural stereotypes are selected from The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) [7]. See Table 1 for specific construct number for the pre and post surveys.

Table 1. Construct for Pre and Post Surveys

Construct	Sub-construct	Item Number
Anxiety General Anxiety Disorder 7-item Scale (GAD-7)		1-7
Intercultural Effectiveness Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES)	Behavioral Flexibility	8,9
	Identity Maintenance	10,11
	Interaction Management	12,13
Multicultural Personality / Cultural Stereotypes Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ)	Cultural Empathy	14,15
	Open Mindedness	16,17
	Social Initiative	18,19

2.3.1. Demographic Data

A designed questionnaire is used to collect data about participants' current grade, home city, gender, intention to study abroad, and experience of studying with a foreign teacher.

2.3.2. General Anxiety Disorder 7-item Scale (GAD-7)

The GAD-7 screening is a 7-question scale item that measures the severity of generalized anxiety symptoms. In this study, the total score of this scale will be used to assess the anxiety level of Chinese participants.

Four-point Likert-type scales are used to describe the frequency of oneself with respect to each item, ranging from 0-not at all sure to 3-nearly every day. The total score is obtained by summing responses to items comprising each of the four subscales. Higher scores indicate greater levels of the anxiety. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the GAD-7 is .92 [10].

2.3.3. Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES)

The IES is a 20-item scale measuring the behavioral ability in intercultural interaction. In the current study, we selected items from "Behavioral Flexibility", "Identity Maintenance", and "Interaction Management" subscales.

Each item of the IES is answered using a four-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 4-strongly agree. Items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 18 are reverse-coded before summing the 20 items. Higher scores of this measure refer to being more interculturally effective. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the IES is .85. [6].

2.3.4. Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ)

The multicultural Personality and Cultural Stereotypes questions are developed from the MPQ. The original questionnaire contains 138 items that measure multicultural effectiveness. In the current study, we selected items from "Cultural Empathy," "Open Mindedness," and "Social Initiative" subscales.

Each item of the MPQ is answered using a four-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 4- strongly agree. The scale scores can be calculated by taking the unweighted mean of the item scores, after they were obtained by taking the unweighted mean of the item scores and first recording the items were mirrored. The Cronbach alpha for subscale "Cultural Empathy" is .81; "Open Mindedness" is .86, for "Social Initiative" is .90. All the Cronbach alphas are from the self-rating section [7].

In the current study, participants will be asked to rate the MPQ twice: the first time assessing their perceptions toward themselves on the abilities adapting into a multicultural environment, while the second time assessing their perceptions towards a typical American. The second rating will be considered as participants' stereotypes towards American culture, and the difference between self-rating and stereotypes will be compared before and after the intervention for both groups.

3. Procedure

Participants in the experimental and control group will be meeting with their counterparts, students from The Ethel Walker School, for one hour per week for seven weeks. However, only experimental group receives Chat-Pal. Chat-Pal consists of 2 parts: large group discussions about broad open-ended questions that are meant to provide background and random pairing of one-on-one talk in breakout rooms about specific open-ended questions that meant to enhance the multicultural effectiveness of participants. The specific questions and topics being discussed in Chat-Pal can be found through the link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sQ6dkSszPcSBwqf_nW1Mf3eCllknsveGIsfLY2RBB7w/edit?usp=sharing. Chat-Pal sessions are hosted over Zoom, and for the individual talk session,

each pair (one participant and one student from the Ethel Walker School) will be sent into breakout rooms. The control group will not receive Chat-Pal but will still be meeting with American counterpart from the Ethel Walker School for the same duration, frequency, and routine.

Before the survey is administered, the oral consent from all Chinese and other participants are obtained. The email message invites participation in the study and will have the research internet link (Qualtrics survey and wenjuanxing) embedded within the research information. All the survey items will be translated into Chinese and back translated from Chinese to English by Chinese native speakers who are also fluent in English in order to make sure the Chinese translations express the same meaning of the English version. Each instrument item will be presented in both Chinese and English. The following are the links to the survey: <https://www.wjx.cn/m/96647657.aspx> and https://syracuseuniversity.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_e4108UN2Qx4QQeN

4. Results

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare the anxiety level before and after receiving the sessions of the Chinese participants in control and experimental group. There was a significant difference in the anxiety level for experimental group before ($M=7.57$, $SD=4.48$) and after receiving Chat-Pal ($M= 5.57$, $SD=4.09$), $t=2.55$, $p=.02$. These results suggest that the Chat-Pal is statically significant in reducing the anxiety level of the participants. Specifically, the result suggests that after receiving Chat-Pal, the anxiety level of the participants decreases by 2 points.

Results also indicated a marginally significant difference for cultural empathy before ($M=0.5$, $SD=0.65$) and after intervention ($M=1.21$, $SD=1.12$), $t=-2.11$, $p=.06$. With an increased cultural empathy, this shows that the participants developed a better understanding of American culture during Chat-Pal, suggesting a lowered cultural stereotype towards American culture overall.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Results

Growing research regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic and the mental health of the general population has suggested that the spreading virus has negative impacts to the people in many ways: shortage of testing, growing financial losses, and conflicting messages from authorities and losses of families and friends can all influence the psychological well-being of the people [11, 12]. And of the limited research that focused on the Asians during the pandemic, some suggests that Asians, especially Chinese, are being "othered." The pandemic allows another virus to spread among and between countries: racism, discrimination, and even xenophobia [13]. And thus, these limited research call for more attention spent on supporting the Asian communities, especially Chinese communities who are by far the most vulnerable population [14].

Therefore, in order to find an effective approach to support the Asian adolescents' community during the pandemic, the current study proposes and investigates the possibility of a community outreach program at high school, hoping to reduce anxiety level of Chinese adolescents by improving their multicultural effectiveness.

The result shows that the current community outreach program is significant in reducing the anxiety level for participants. From the participants' oral feedback after the research, those who received Chat-Pal believed that they had learned new culturally related information about

America during the intervention. Some believed that this program helped them to develop a more accurate image of American culture. But mostly everyone reported that they felt less stressed after talking to their Chat-Pals.

The marginally significant result of increase in cultural empathy shows that participants adjusted their perceptions about Americans and American culture during Chat-Pal: Americans are able to notice when others are in trouble and that they can empathize with others within a multicultural environment. This shows that Chinese adolescents' cultural stereotypes towards American culture has decreased after receiving Chat-Pal. From the result done by Itakura, simply by exchanging emails from students who are learning Japanese and native speaker in Japan, cultural stereotypes can be modified and validated [15]. Thus, in the present study, with the direct talk via Zoom, Chinese students may be able to modify their cultural stereotypes directly from the native speakers (American students).

Overall, the present study shows that peer social support has an impact on adolescents' psychological well-being, specifically, talking about culture is meaningful for reducing anxiety level. More importantly, this research suggests that educating adolescents about multicultural effectiveness is associated with better mental health.

5.2. Limitation

Given the fact that using multicultural effectiveness to enhance mental health, especially during the pandemic, rarely have been empirically examined in the literature, the current study may be described as exploratory in nature.

Participants are being assigned into different groups conveniently in the present study. Participants who first signed up were automatically placed into the control group, while the rest were placed into the experimental group. Thus, the time different between the data collected from the two groups might explain the higher starting anxiety level of the experimental group, since it was collected during the last quarter of the 2020, when the rising Asian hate crime was first being globally noticed.

The lack of participants might also be related to the insignificant difference of multicultural effectiveness before and after intervention for the Chinese participants. And it might also be related to the high Standard Deviation number. Thus, the future research will recruit more participants to ensure a better understanding on the topic.

5.3. Implications

People around the globe are influenced by COVID-19 Pandemic, yet there has not been enough research regarding finding an effective approach during the pandemic to support the Asian population. Thus, the present study provides a plausible way to alleviate the anxiety of Asian adolescents during this unprecedented time.

As the pandemic further separates people by race and nationality, ways to combat these barriers that may influence intercultural communications are desperately needed. The current study offers a possible approach to enhance the communication between Americans (predominately white) and Asian adolescents and Asian adolescents' multicultural effectiveness to connect the two populations.

Future research of this study will focus on exploring if Chat-Pal might enhance the multicultural effectiveness of non-Asian participants, more importantly, if it will reduce their cultural stereotypes towards Asian culture during and beyond the pandemic.

This study offers a possible way for schools and organizations to promote the psychological well-being for Asian students during the pandemic. More importantly, Chat-Pal has already been introduced into a high school in America: at the Ethel Walker School, Chat-Pal has been approved as a community partnership for the students where through discussions about

culturally related topics with Chinese students via Zoom, the program hopes to support the Asian community during the pandemic, and even beyond the pandemic.

The current research is only a beginning to comprehend the complex relationship between multicultural effectiveness and psychological well-being and how to manipulate multicultural effectiveness to result in a better mental health for adolescents. May an optimal approach be found to better support the people in need.

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