TOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY AND RESPONSES TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROJECT

This project will seek to test the relationship between cognitive flexibility and openness to cultural diversity and intercultural mixing. We propose that experiences and interventions that promote cognitive flexibility may also increase one’s tolerance of uncertainty. Tolerance of uncertainty is proposed as a motivational component of cognitive flexibility, which reflects one’s willingness or desire to apply one’s capacity for cognitive flexibility in uncertain, ambiguous, and unpredictable situations. Based on prior research conducted in Bobby Cheon’s (the main supervisor) lab, rejection and discomfort towards cultural diversity and mixing may be a product of an individual’s underpinning intolerance of uncertain and unpredictable situations. Situations and products that involve foreign cultural influences may seem ambiguous, uncertain and difficult to understand. As such, people who encounter such culturally-ambiguous experiences may not be quite sure how they should behave or respond, which may promote a reactive close-mindedness and rejection of these items and situations. Consequently, individuals prone to high levels of intolerance of uncertainty may be less likely to reap positive psychological outcomes associated with exposure to multicultural experiences and diversity, such as increased creativity, open-mindedness and tolerance of people of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds.

This project will test:

1) Potential methods that could bolster the motivational component of cognitive flexibility, and whether improvements in the capacity for cognitive flexibility also produces improvements in tolerance of uncertainty (testing the level of interdependence between the capacity and willingness for cognitive flexibility).

2) The relationship between tolerance of uncertainty and psychological responses to different patterns of intercultural contact and mixing. Prior research has suggested that distinct patterns of cultural diversity produce varying psychological responses from observers. For instance, culture fusion, which involves blending and fusing elements of different cultures into a novel product or practice may elicit more rejection and feelings of disgust compared to the same cultural elements being encountered simultaneously without fusing (i.e., multiculturalism). This project will test whether cognitive flexibility and tolerance of uncertainty promote acceptance of more unexpected and intrusive forms of cultural diversity, such as culture fusion.

3) Whether improvements in cognitive flexibility and tolerance of uncertainty also transfer to organizational and group decision-making contexts (e.g., working in diverse teams). Specifically, this project will test whether an intervention that promotes cognitive flexibility and tolerance of uncertainty also facilitates the ability to cooperate and work more effectively in groups consisting of members with diverse backgrounds, values or opinions.

SCOPE OF WORK FOR SELECTED PHD STUDENT

The PhD student’s research activities and thesis will involve the major research activities described above. The student will also receive training on diverse methodologies and skills that are required to conduct these studies such as:

- Assessments of cognitive flexibility and associated processes (i.e., problem-solving, creativity, etc.)
- Functional neuroimaging and cognitive-neuroscience methods to examine the neural substrates of tolerance of uncertainty and acceptance of intercultural mixing
- Assessments and evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions
- Methodologies and statistical approaches to assessing and analyzing dynamics of individuals within teams/groups