Of cultures and moral circles:
Traveller as a tool for intercultural sensitivity training
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The eCUTE (Education in cultural understanding, technologically enhanced) project works towards increasing children’s and young adults’ sensitivity to intercultural differences. It is a collaboration between partners from Herriot Watt University, INESC-ID University, Sunderland University, Augsburg University, Wageningen University, Jacobs University, Seikei University, and Kyoto University. One of our developments – Traveller – is a computer application designed as a training environment with game-like elements. In the application, user engages in multiple interactions with virtual agents that embody synthetic cultures. Characteristics of these cultures are defined along three cultural dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), comprising individualism vs. collectivism, femininity vs. masculinity, and power distance.

Learning goals
The overarching aim of training within eCUTE is formulated in terms of accepting people from other cultural backgrounds into one’s own moral circle (Singer, 1981; Pizarro, Detweiler-Bedell, & Bloom, 2006). Moral circle (or “all who are present in my mind”) represents those who share one group identity and adhere to a common set of rules (Hofstede, 2009). Typically, individuals belong simultaneously to many moral circles; some of them are stable and long-lasting, for instance one’s neighborhood, village, or society as a whole, and others are created in emergent social settings, such as a queue or an elevator ride.

Every culture has its unwritten rules and prescriptive behavioral patterns. By inviting people from other cultures to one’s moral circle in the context of cross-cultural encounters, an effort is made to understand their unwritten rules and to recognize that these may be different from what one is familiar with. However, this is a challenging process. Intercultural training is supposed to smoothly guide people through it, refining their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to intercultural situations. Based on previous research, Traveller defined learning goals to be achieved through interactions in the application.

Affective:
• recognize emotions arising from interactions with people from different groups,
• observe behavior of another group without prejudice,
• share emotions of a member of another group.

Cognitive:
• identify practices and values of other groups,
• understand the differences between another group and their own.

Behavioral:
• be fully present in attending to other’s verbal and non-verbal messages.

Evaluation
One way of evaluating the effectiveness of training via Traveller will be to test how people react to scenarios of culture-dependent events that may potentially lead to a conflict between the parties involved. Emotional behavior will be assessed by employing self-report, as well as physiological responses of the somatic nervous system (SNS): 1) facial electromyography (EMG) at the sites of Corrugator Superficialis (brows) and Levator Labii (upper lip) for negative responses as well as Zygomaticus Major (corners of the lips, "smile") for positive responses - while these muscles do not provide a readout of affective state, they have been shown to be related to affective changes (Kappas, Krumhuber, & Küster, 2013), 2) electrodermal activation as an indicator of the activation of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) in the shape of skin conductance level and responses (SCL, SCR). In short, if Traveller successfully increases intercultural understanding, it will be hypothesized that people’s emotional reactions to the scenarios would be less intense compared to those who were not exposed to the training.

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References: