CHAPTER 14

Synthesizing Conceptualizations of Intercultural Competence

A Summary and Emerging Themes

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What is necessary for people from different cultural backgrounds to get along with each other? What is intercultural competence? How is intercultural competence defined from a variety of cultural perspectives? How does intercultural competence intersect with other concepts such as identity, leadership, conflict resolution, and global citizenship? These are some of the questions addressed by the chapters in this first section of *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, with the first section of the handbook focusing specifically on conceptualizations of intercultural competence, including from a variety of different cultural perspectives. (The second section of this handbook focuses on specific applications of intercultural competence in different professional fields, while the third and final section of the handbook addresses research and assessment in intercultural competence.) So what common themes emerge from these chapters in regard to intercultural competence? This chapter provides a brief reflection, from a U.S. perspective, on the discussions that have transpired in these chapters. Readers are also invited to reflect on these discussions by identifying for themselves the different themes that have emerged, looking for the intersections between these different perspectives, and interpreting these discussions from those different perspectives.

An initial read of these chapters brings to the fore several themes regarding intercultural competence that will be highlighted here, including the importance of relationship development and of identity, the importance of context and interconnectedness in intercultural competence, the need for transcendence of boundaries, the transformation of differences, and the need for genuine respect—and humility— toward each other.

Importance of Relationships

As discussed in Chapter 1 in this volume, much scholarly effort has been invested, particularly among Western cultures, in defining intercultural competence. As noted in that chapter, three common themes can be found in most Western models of intercultural competence—empathy, perspective taking, and adaptability. The chapter ends by calling for more of a focus on relational aspects in developing future models of intercultural competence, which means focusing on the relationships and on all interactants involved, beyond the individual (who is the primary focus of Western models and definitions), since this was a noted gap in the existing Western definitions of intercultural competence. Other chapters in this section reinforce this call for a focus on the relational, in particular the chapters on Arab, African, and Latin American perspectives of intercultural competence. Zaharna, in her chapter on Arab perspectives on intercultural competence (Chapter 9), discusses the importance of relationship building within intercultural competence, noting that "the significance, meaning, and purpose of communication are derived from relationships among the parties" (pp. 183–184). Nwosu (Chapter 8) illustrates how Africans' very identity is found in who they are in relation to others. And Medina-López-Portillo and Sinnigen's chapter (Chapter 13) highlights the Andean concept of "*alli kawsay* (good living), a concept that stresses reciprocal, complementary, and cooperative relations" and the implications of such relationships, including the role and importance of equality in such relationships (p. 251). Other chapters in this section also highlight in some way the importance of relationship in intercultural competence. For example, in the chapter on a Chinese perspective of global leadership, Chen and An (Chapter 10) even go so far as to note that "the degree of a leader's ability to achieve harmonious relationships can be used to represent the degree of the leader's competence" (p. 199). Ting-Toomey in Chapter 5 discusses the dichotomy of individualistic versus collectivist cultures in which those in more collectivist cultures "think of themselves as individuals with interlocking connections with others" (p. 108), which in turn has implications for conflict resolution across cultures, including a possible communal approach to conflict resolution in which there is a "recognition of authentic interdependent connection to others and genuine interpersonal equality" (p. 108). And in Ashwill and Du'o'ng's chapter (Chapter 7), which includes a Vietnamese perspective, the authors note the importance of intercultural competence in providing "the necessary skills to make those real, interpersonal connections—to forge deep, mutually beneficial, and lasting cross-cultural personal bonds" (p. 156). As part of those necessary skills,

Bennett (Chapter 6) notes that two "core intercultural competencies—empathy and anxiety management—contribute importantly to enhancing the impact of intercultural contact" and thus relationship development (pp. 132–133). These various perspectives on the relational aspects of intercultural competence raise several questions for further discussion, investigation, and research: How can future definitions of intercultural competence better integrate this relational aspect, given its prominence within non-Western conceptualizations of intercultural competence? What are the implications of this relational focus for those who have been culturally conditioned in cultures oriented toward the individual? How do holistic views of interconnectedness affect intercultural competence development? As raised in Chapter 1, where is competence situated—within the individual or within all individuals involved in the interaction? How do intercultural competence models account for relationships over time? And what are the ramifications for assessment if the focus of intercultural competence is placed more on the relational aspects rather than on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of an individual, especially given the plethora of individual-focused assessment tools that exist?

Identity in Intercultural Competence

Identity, as well as understanding the lens through which we each view the world, becomes a foundational point for exploring intercultural competence. As Kim discusses in her chapter (Chapter 2), research has shown that an inclusive identity orientation and a strong identity security (the degree to which an individual feels secure in his or her identity) are both important in successful intercultural engagement, leading to greater degrees of adaptability, flexibility, and cultural empathy, all elements of intercultural competence. Indeed, Kim sees this inclusive identity orientation and identity security as "a necessity for anyone striving to develop meaningful and fruitful intercultural relationships" (p. 62). Other contributors to this volume note that identity is often defined in juxtaposition with another cultural group. Kim concurs by noting that the human tendency is to identify oneself through in-group or out-group categorizations. Ting-Toomey (Chapter 5) further elaborates on the role of in-group/out-group identities in intercultural conflicts. And Hofstede (Chapter 4) elaborates on the role of trust in intercultural competence as it emphasizes the in-group/out-group distinctions.

Numerous cultural perspectives abound regarding the conceptualization of identity in intercultural competence. Nwosu (Chapter 8) discusses how in many African cultures, one's identity is through the community and not based in the Western conceptualizations of the individual. He cites several African sayings to this end, including the Xhosa saying "a person is a person through persons" and the expressions of *ubuntu*, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 167). And Zaharna (Chapter 9) notes that individuality (which is different from individualism) can be found within Arab cultures, where individuality is viewed within the larger social context of the group. She notes that individuals "must learn to straddle the dichotomy of individuality and collective conformity" (p. 192). This

placement of the individual within the context of the larger community is echoed in other chapters such as Manian and Naidu's chapter (Chapter 12) on an Indian perspective of intercultural competence and Medina-López-Portillo and Sinnigen's chapter (Chapter 13) on understanding Latin American perspectives on intercultural competence, which places the emphasis on the relational as well as contextual aspects of intercultural competence, and defining identity in relation to "the other." Ashwill and Du'o'ng (Chapter 7) discuss identity within the larger national identity, including the impact of the Vietnamese insecurity around identity, which relates back to Kim's key points in her chapter. Based on the discussions in these chapters regarding the pivotal role of identity in intercultural competence, it seems that transcending boundaries in regard to one's identity is crucial in developing intercultural competence. In this age of globalization that often leads to politicized cultural identities, this transcendence of one's identity seeks to defy simplistic categorizations of cultural groups, addresses the adaptive and fluid nature of multicultural identities, and strives to instead understand the fullness of who one is, moving beyond the traditional dichotomous in-group/out-group mentality to one that embraces and respects others' differences as well as commonalities and, in so doing, keeps the focus on the relational goals of engagement.

Context and Intercultural Competence

Numerous chapters in Part I of this volume emphasize the importance of context in intercultural competence, and while most Western definitions and models of this concept tend to view this construct in a vacuum devoid of context (although understanding of contexts was one aspect agreed upon by intercultural experts in Deardorff's models of intercultural competence found in Chapter 1), the chapters in this volume on Latin American, Arab, and German perspectives of intercultural competence, as well as the chapter on American and Vietnamese conceptualizations around global citizenship (Chapter 7), note to some degree how crucial it is to consider the political, historical, and social contexts of intercultural competence. For example, Moosmüller and Schönhuth (Chapter 11) note that "there is a widespread conviction that it is impossible to discuss intercultural competence without reference to equality of power" (p. 210) and that common German conceptions of intercultural competence emphasize "context boundedness" (p. 211). Likewise, Medina-López-Portillo and Sinnigen (Chapter 13), in their chapter on Latin American perspectives on intercultural competence, raise key questions about the role of equality and power in intercultural competence, as well as the impact of such historical contexts as colonialism and its subsequent effect on indigenous cultures. The chapters on Indian and Chinese perspectives discuss the more holistic context, with the Manian and Naidu chapter (Chapter 12) highlighting the core principle of "oneness" and the Chen and An chapter (Chapter 10) noting the harmony that can be achieved through balance within a constant state of change. Ashwill and Du'o'ng (Chapter 7), discussing the U.S. and Vietnamese conceptualizations of intercultural competence within global citizenship, point out the interconnectedness of multidimensional global citizens:

"Global citizens think and feel themselves as part of something much grander and all-inclusive than one culture or nationality" (p.). Situating intercultural competence within these contexts becomes fundamental in understanding the true complexity of intercultural competence. Thus, how can future research and modeling of intercultural competence provide a more holistic and contextualized juxtaposition of intercultural competence within larger societal and global issues?

Other Key Points and Research Areas in Intercultural Competence

In reviewing other discussions around conceptualizations of intercultural competence, several additional key points can be found. Two chapters (Chapters 3 and 10) address interculturally competent leadership, one from a Chinese perspective and one from a U.S. perspective (concepts of interculturally competent leadership will be applied through a discussion in Chapter 16 within the specific context of leading global teams). Common themes in both global leadership chapters in Part I, though from different cultural perspectives, include the need for leaders to have a multicultural mind-set and empathy and to be able to manage change, which according to Chen and An (Chapter 10), is a "fundamental principle of the universe that dictates human interaction" (p. 198) in Chinese philosophy. In Chapter 6, Bennett discusses the importance of intentionally cultivating one's intercultural competence, in which "identifying our own cultural patterns, acknowledging the patterns of others, and, eventually, learning to adapt across cultures" play a key role in such development (p. 122). Intercultural competence usually does not naturally occur, and thus it becomes crucial to address the intentional development of intercultural competence.

Several areas of research emerge from these discussions. One key area for further research includes what appropriate behaviors "look like" in different cultures and in different contexts, such as professional fields (this will be discussed some in Part II of this volume). Another key question that often arises in regard to intercultural competence is the degree to which one should adapt to "the other," which provides fertile ground for further debate. As Spitzberg and Changnon point out in Chapter 1, the question is to what extent must one adapt to another? "If both are adapting, it seems possible that both interactants become chameleons without a clear target pattern to which to adapt" (p. 35). This question certainly deserves further discussion and research. (For further discussion on adaptation, see Bennett's Chapter 6 in this volume.) One solution to consider is that of finding "common ground" or a "third way" where both parties must adapt to a certain extent to the other and, in some cases, even creating a "third culture" to which both can subscribe.

One final set of questions raised after reading the discussions in these chapters: First of all, what is missing in these discussions? For example, Moosmüller and Schönhuth raise the question of what intercultural competence looks like at the organizational level, given the current Western preoccupation with intercultural competence primarily at the individual level. Second, given this diversity of perspectives

around intercultural competence, is it possible to develop a global definition of inter-cultural competence, of developing an intercultural competence model that can be applied across many cultures and contexts? What are the many different cultural conceptualizations of this concept, and is it possible to find enough overlapping themes and common values within these and other perspectives that would give rise to a more universal model of intercultural competence? Or are models and definitions too simplistic in capturing the essential realities of human interaction? There are currently few answers to these questions, and further research is certainly welcome and needed on this.

Conclusion

As we continually search for ways to get along together as human beings sharing this one planet, the need to transcend boundaries, to bridge and transform our differences, to be in relationship with one another, to join in the oneness of our humanity while accepting our differences—these needs will continue to drive us as we seek to overcome misunderstandings and conflicts (Chapter 5) arising from differences that may divide us, which in some cases lead us to the point of war and unimaginable atrocities. This search for intercultural competence underscores the need for genuine respect and humility as we relate to one another, meaning that we arrive at the point of truly valuing each other and, in so doing, bridge those differences through relationship building. In the end, intercultural competence is about our relationships with each other and, ultimately, our very survival as the human race, as we work together to address the global challenges that confront us.