

## INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS ONE BASIC TYPE OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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### ABSTRACT

In this article we aim to discuss approaches on the conceptualization of intercultural competence and its study spheres. Some theories related to competence studies we have considered here. The term competence is itself a contested conceptual site. For some time, the term has been too loosely bandied about in scholarly literatures, with surprisingly little attention to its many semantic and conceptual landmines.

**Keywords:** co-orientation, effectiveness, interactant, conceptualization, adaptational, collectivity.

### INTRODUCTION

Competence has been variously equated with understanding (e.g., accuracy, clarity, co-orientation, overlap of meanings), relationship development (e.g., attraction, intimacy), satisfaction (e.g., communication satisfaction, relational satisfaction, relational quality), effectiveness (e.g., goal achievement, efficiency, institutional success, negotiation success), appropriateness (e.g., legitimacy, acceptance, assimilation) and adaptation. Each of these criteria of competence has been defended or criticized elsewhere. Furthermore, competence is sometimes conceptually equated with a set of abilities or skills and at other times a subjective evaluative impression. The former meaning is by far the most common approach and fits with the more normative semantic sense of the term. There are, however, numerous problems with such an approach. The same behavior or skill may be perceived as competent in one context but not another or one perceiver but not another and thus no particular skill or ability is likely to ever be universally “competent”. Despite such problems, for the purposes of this review, any competence conceptualizations are considered relevant that attempt to account for the process of managing interaction in ways that are likely to produce more appropriate and effective individual, relational, group or institutional outcomes.

### MATERIALS AND DISCUSSION

In one of the more exhaustive efforts at developing a conceptual model of intercultural communication competence, Kupka defines intercultural communication competence in terms of “impression management that allows members of different cultural systems to be aware of their cultural identity and cultural differences and to interact effectively and appropriately with each other in diverse contexts by agreeing on the meaning of diverse symbol systems with the result of mutually satisfying relationships”.

This definition clearly has allegiance to other models but specifies three outcome criteria (i.e., impressions of appropriateness and effectiveness, awareness and agreement on diverse meaning systems, and mutual relationship satisfaction). Thus, despite the model's relevance to componential and adaptational approaches, it is reviewed as a co-orientational model because of the extent to which all three outcomes are predicated on levels of mutuality and agreement in meaning systems. The model posits that basic human needs (i.e., motivations) are relatively common across cultures. The perceptual world of one interactant interacts with the perceptual world of another interactant through the process of communication (simultaneous action—reaction), producing levels of overlap in the interactants' shared symbol systems and thus their levels of mutual understanding. All this takes place in the context of various sources of contextual (e.g., environmental, situational) and personal (physiological, psychological, semantic) interference. The components that facilitate individual competence include many of the commonly recognized constructs, including perception of cultural distance, foreign language competence, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, self-awareness, motivation, and knowledge. Although not modeled as outcomes, appropriateness, effectiveness, and affinity represent implicit criteria by which individual competence is evaluated, even though the model clearly portrays the outcome of interaction as an overlap of meaning systems.

Co-orientation models take for granted the value of mutual understanding. Rathje (2007) attempts to point out that such presumptions oversimplify underlying dialectics of cultural tension. Cultures have the effects of unifying (coherence vs. cohesion). Members of cultures understand the differences within their own cultural "multicollectivity" and understand these differences in ways that members from other cultures do not understand. The unique feature of culture is that it achieves its unity in large part by its unique amalgam of internal differences. Although ongoing interactional adaptation and integration within a culture do produce degrees of uniformity and coherence among its members (the left side of the model), this process also produces a sense of cohesion in which individual differences are sustained as a unique marker of the culture itself (the right side of the model). "Intercultural competence is best characterized therefore, by the transformation of intercultural interaction into culture itself".

The co-orientation that occurs in competent intercultural interaction is the coproduction of a cultural milieu that does not reflect common cultural identities but actually produces those common identities, without overly conforming the interactants to any particular hegemonic identity. Co-orientational models are useful in drawing attention to the foundational importance of achieving some minimal level of common reference through interaction. They also emphasize one of the most fundamental issues underlying the study of communication since the earliest scholarly efforts to model it—how do we account for the fact that we are able to co-orient (i.e., adapt to one another's meanings and behaviors) given that we come from different, or even divergent, perspectives toward the world? To some extent, from this view of co-orientation, all interactions are in part intercultural. One of the biggest problems that co-orientation models face, however, is that much of competent everyday interaction is dependent on ambiguity, uncertainty, misunderstanding and disparity in comprehension. Politeness, for example, is considered a universal pragmatic and is obviously integral to competence.

Politeness, however, requires considerable ambiguity, indirectness, and even legerdemain in its competent achievement. Ambiguity, uncertainty and indirectness therefore become vital interactional resources for the ongoing maintenance of any relationships, perhaps especially intercultural relationships. It is largely for this reason that many theorists view co-orientation as a criterion subordinate to other more macrolevel objectives of interaction. The maintenance

of intercultural relationships depends in part, therefore, on the deft management and balancing of directness and indirectness, understanding and misunderstanding, clarity and ambiguity. If intercultural interaction competence is understood from the perspective of an ongoing relationship, rather than an episodic achievement, it illustrates the importance of an element missing from the compositional and co-orientational models. Not only is time an important causal consideration in terms of what follows what in the process of a given interaction, but it is also an inevitable factor to consider in any ongoing relationship among representatives of different cultures. One of the ways that models of intercultural communication competence have accounted for the role of time is to consider the process from a developmental perspective.

### CONCLUSION

Conceptualizations of intercultural communication competence have seen over five decades of scholarly activity. An encouraging conclusion from this activity is that there is a rich conceptual and theoretical landscape from which many models have emerged. Furthermore, there is extensive commonality across these models, which provides strong conceptual paths along which future theory development can and should progress. There is also, however, a strong suspicion, that many conceptual wheels are being reinvented at the expense of legitimate progress. Specifically, relatively few efforts have been made to systematically test the validity and cross-cultural generality of the models posited to date. Only a few efforts have been made to produce models inductively generated by thorough surveys of existing theoretical models or actual interactants or experts. Social processes and systems are very complex, but it seems implausible that they need to be this complex. Models are necessarily simplified versions of the reality they seek to represent and therefore need to provide parsimonious guidance to theoretical and investigative pursuits. Theorists will be in a better position to develop more useful and conceptually integrated models to the extent the underlying theoretical structures, dimensions, and processes examined in these models are identified and synthesized.

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