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Intercultural communication competence: Continuing challenges and critical directions



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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews and extends calls for researchers and trainer/practitioners to clarify what is meant by culture, intercultural communication, and competence; ask critical questions about the validity and relevance of our work; and reconsider who benefits from research and training. Several limitations of previous research about intercultural competence are demonstrated, e.g., approaching culture as a nationally shared, homogenous, mental program developed through socialization, or as a communicative system associated with a single and unitary group identification. The author also problematizes instances when communication competence is presented as an individual impression rather than a contextually and relationally contingent process of negotiation and struggle. The author offers examples from her program of research that began in 1989 to illustrate how she began to give more attention to contextual factors, status hierarchies and power relations and differential benefits for diverse parties in intercultural encounters. The essay concludes with further recommendations related to how to incorporate broader notions of macro, meso and micro contexts, approach cultures as plural and contested; attend to status positions of interactants as negotiated and dynamic; and ensure that outcomes and consequences of intercultural competence research and training are oriented toward justice, equity and inclusion.

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Based on my 30 years of familiarity with intercultural competence, my goals in this brief essay are to reiterate and extend several calls for researchers and trainer/practitioners to: clarify what is meant by culture, intercultural communication, and competence; ask critical questions about the validity and relevance of our work; and reconsider who benefits from training and research. In my early research, I developed a theoretical framework for intercultural competence based on accounts of relational communication from diverse students and found that individuals' impressions of situated intercultural competence reflected multiple cultural group identities, and these were situationally/relationally contingent, differed in salience and intensity of avowal and ascription, and were often contradictory (Collier, 1989, 1991, 1996). In 1989 I called for clearer, more complex, and contextually contingent conceptualizations of cultures since I found that interactants who aligned with a particular national or ethnic group described very different ideas of appropriate and effective conduct, partly dependent on their other cultural identifications and those of their conversational partners. I called for increased attention to validity and relevance of constructs, since many of my respondents noted that the situation, relationship with other(s), and their roles mattered. Additionally, I discussed the importance of consistency between researchers' epistemological and

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ontological assumptions. For example, researchers seemed to be assuming that individuals' impressions of communication competence could be reliably measured and predict "positive" outcomes in intercultural interaction.

Today, having added a decidedly critical turn to my previous interpretive orientations, I find the same issues still require attention and others have emerged. First, many approaches to culture are problematic. Often culture continues to be approached as a mental program developed through socialization, and the mental programs are often conflated with nationality (Ono, 2010). Second, culture is often presented as singular, relatively static, homogeneous, and consensus based (Avruch, 2012). Third, cultural associations are presumed to predict social/psychological tendencies and binary patterns of conduct such as individualism or collectivism (Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep, 2002). Fourth, culture is approached as if individuals "carry" culture instead of enacting interculturality through dynamic representations, identifications, and relationships (Collier, 2014). For example, international sojourners not only have a range of ways of enacting competent conduct based on nationality(ies) but these cannot be separated from class, race, sexual orientation, and political alignment of all interactants.

Early approaches to culture, communication, and interpersonal competence, have been expanded and reframed into orientations that incorporate more attention to contextual factors (Collier, 2005); power and unequal status relations (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010); and attention to outcomes and benefits of particular relationships related to exclusion, inequity and injustice (Collier, 2014). For example, in research on international community engagement, newer orientations include attending to culture as: enacted, contextually contingent codes, negotiations of multiple and contested group identifications and representations, sites of struggle over voice and positioning, and sets of structures and ideologies (Collier, 2014). Cultures become sites of struggle since contact occurs in spaces in which identifications and representations as insiders/outside, international visitor/local, immigrant/Diaspora/community member, as well as those based on nationalities, races, genders, sexual orientation, class and religion/spiritual affiliation, are all being negotiated, contested, and positioned in relation to others. For instance, being identifiable as Muslim and/or having an Arabic last name in Kenya are linked with particular representations since 9-11 and being identified as gay means imprisonment in several countries; such representations are also important because how groups are represented are linked with how they are treated (Hall, 1997). Thus, these need to be included in what is considered "competent" intercultural communication.

Impressions of intercultural competence are always contextually contingent and situated in macro structures; historically influenced and framed by global, political, economic systems, and ideologies such as neoliberalism. Histories related to race, changing laws, and social norms related to immigration and international conflicts, organizational policies around diversity, media representations in film and online news production, all affect how cultural group members are positioned and the extent to which individuals will be viewed as competent. Based on interviews with international volunteers working with the UN and international nongovernmental organizations in Nepal, I showed how researcher/practitioners are served by attending to histories of ethnic conflict and examining UN policy statements and training materials about aid distribution. Additionally, interviews with local community members and those in the field showed tensions between well-resourced "Western" international UN workers and women and mothers in communities.

Additional gaps in the literature include interaction, the process through which intercultural competence is constructed; and relationships, how individuals and group members position themselves and are positioned in regard to others. These relationships are unfolding and negotiated dances with difference (Collier, 2014) and they occur in spaces of institutional influence such as governments, international organizations and universities. Researchers can attend to contextually contingent performance aspects, embodied, experiential practice and dialogic reflexivity to understand cultural biases and the impact of conduct on each other. For example, researchers might ask research subjects to reflect on how their intercultural relationships have changed over a period of time, or ask them to reflect on their experiences of alliances, and about outcomes from intercultural contact. More research can attend to assessing multiple partners' views of intercultural relationships, moving beyond a focus on sojourner or stranger views alone (Curtin, 2010).

Adding attention to privilege and how various locations construct dis/advantage would be another welcome addition. Researchers listing levels of privilege, such as my white race, U.S. American citizenship, heterosexuality, English proficiency, and university resources, is not sufficient. Uncovering these levels of privilege and their effects on relationships can occur through critical, reflexive dialogue. Through reflexive conversations with my Kenyan colleagues I learned where my international board position, my whiteness, and my economic class privilege, all rather invisible to me in the moment, were speaking very loudly to my Kenyan collaborators. In a formative evaluation study for a national nonprofit organization, Circles® USA working to ameliorate poverty (Lawless & Collier, 2014) we asked interview questions about levels of privilege and assumptions about causes and strategies for ending poverty. We found that many middle class volunteers (often white-identified) tended to approach those moving out of poverty (often persons of color) as individuals who "have made bad choices" and "need to work harder." Those moving out of poverty noted that racism was a regular occurrence and that many volunteers, though well-intentioned, did not recognize their levels of privilege. These findings were integrated into training curriculum on negotiating intercultural, cross-class relationships.

While newer ethnographic approaches and "emic" orientations focus on local contexts and feature perspectives of local community members, the emic/etic distinctions are arbitrary (Collier, 2005). "Emic approaches" neglect macro contexts, over-emphasize national and local cultures as if they are homogeneous, neglect within group diversity, and underemphasize that there are multiple and contested views of what is appropriate and effective.

Final questions relate to what researchers and trainers are “producing” and who benefits from our work. Desired external outcomes of intercultural competence often feature achievement of individual goals, for example “adaptation” of international students in the U.S. Are these goals and outcomes mutually negotiated? If we recommend particular behaviors or attitudes such as directness, respect, or demonstrating empathy, who is served? Who benefits more/less? The “Western”/U.S./European/middle or upper class student benefits more because the standards and norms being rewarded are the same ones that already reward “Western”/U.S. European identified communicators (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). Researchers might also address how to manage unintended consequences from research or training programs, for instance when international students from Japan politely but directly ask a “critical” question of an instructor, because they have been taught that this is acceptable in U.S. classrooms, they may be viewed as “disruptive” or “argumentative” given instructor expectations for them to be “polite, collectivist, and other-face oriented.” Implicit expectations for the rewards of intercultural competence related to interpersonal acceptance or academic success need to be problematized. Finally, there is a lack of attention to communication processes and outcomes that reflect jointly constructed views and actions characterized by intercultural inclusion, equity and justice. If our work reproduces U.S. or Western/Northern privilege and neoliberalism, we should be rethinking what “intercultural competence” means and who it serves.

Next steps for intercultural communication competence researchers are clear. First, the study of intercultural competence can be strengthened by acknowledgment of macro (structural) meso (group level) and micro (situated) contextual factors as illustrated above. Second, researcher/practitioners can benefit from adding transparency about who establishes the guidelines for competent conduct, and whose input generated impressions of competence. At a minimum obtaining multiple parties' views of competent conduct is a good starting place. Examining views of competence that reflect more than national or ethnic cultural identifications is essential, and recognizing that what is competent differs for those who are positioned as citizen/undocumented, those with diverse racial positioning, ethnic positioning, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religious affiliations, and so on. Because male students who are Arab or Muslim appearing, African American, undocumented, and/or gay identified, are all treated with suspicion in the U.S., what is competent for their circumstances differs from those with different positions. Researchers can easily attend to relational negotiations of competence and utilize surveys at different points in time as well as different contexts and with different interactants. Researchers can study transcripts or videotapes of conversations between intercultural roommates, friends or spouses as they negotiate what would be appropriate and effective for their particular relationship and topic. Finally our research should have an answer for such questions as, who benefits from these findings. Who benefits from this research? How does our work enhance contextually contingent, intercultural inclusion, equity and justice? These are questions that need to be addressed.

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