

The integrated model of intercultural communication competence (IMICC)

Model test

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ABSTRACT: Research in intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been focused over the years on the development of models that identify the variables that influence, as well as the processes that contribute to, ICC. This study introduces a comprehensive test of an ICC model, namely the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC); this stems from a line of research involving the use of an emic approach to develop a model of ICC that incorporates multiple cultural perspectives into its construction. The IMICC was empirically tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). The results generally support the model. The implications of IMICC are discussed.

Introduction

The concept of intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been studied through various theoretical lenses. Some of the well-known models of ICC in the intercultural communication literature are the Anxiety/Uncertainty Reduction Model (Gudykunst, 1993, 1995; 2002; Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999); the Identity Negotiation Model (Ting-Toomey, 1993); and Spitzberg's (1997) model of ICC. This is by no means an exhaustive list. A detailed review of existing models of ICC is not the purpose of this paper (for a more comprehensive review of past theoretical approaches to ICC, see Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). Neither is it our intention to compare and contrast models based on their viability.

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The purpose of this paper is to present a structural equation modelling (SEM) test of a recently developed model of ICC. This model, which we have named the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC), is one of the few models that is a culture-general mode of ICC (that is, one whose utility is not limited by cultural context) that has been empirically tested. The study presented in this paper is the latest in a line of research on the development of the IMICC. The background of the development of this model is outlined before detailing the present study in which the model was tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

The need for a new model

One may wonder why there is a need for yet another model of ICC, given the several already in existence. Despite the proliferation of various theoretical models that attempt to explain ICC, only a few have been empirically tested and fewer still have been tested in multiple cultural contexts. A few key factors are addressed in the IMICC. First, there is a view in the intercultural literature that ICC is best studied from the perceiver's perspective, because self-reports of ICC are likely to be biased by social desirability and/or a distorted view of one's own competency or a lack of distinction between perceived competency and effectiveness (Bradford, Allen, & Beisser, 2001; Carrell & Willmington, 1996). Further, there are well-established arguments in the literature that the study of social phenomena needs to be done in consideration of an 'insider's' perspective (Bruner, 1990; Geertz, 1973), or the perspective of someone who is within (or part of) the phenomenon in question. In response to this, the IMICC was constructed based on ICC from the perceiver's point of view, including the perspective of perceivers from various cultural backgrounds. Second, given that people are inclined to process information based on the cultural cues with which they are most familiar (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000), to minimise any cultural biases which the researchers could have contributed to the framework of the IMICC, the inception of the IMICC was based entirely on data gathered from participants' responses. And third, this approach of incorporating various cultural perspectives into the construction of the IMICC was chosen in order to build a model that would be relevant in various cultural contexts (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997).

Once a model is developed, it is necessary to empirically test it in multiple cultural contexts, involving participants from multiple cultural perspectives, to determine its cross-cultural relevance. Accordingly,

the following section presents the research conducted to date in order to develop and validate a new model and lead to creation of the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence that this study tests empirically.

The development of a new model

In this section we provide a brief summary of each of the studies upon which the present study is built. As is apparent from these descriptions, the model presented in this paper has been in existence for a few years, though this is the first time it has been named.

In 2005, Arasaratnam and Doerfel argued that there is a need for a model of ICC that is built from an emic approach. Using Popper's Three Worlds of Knowledge theory (Popper, 1972; Popper & Eccles, 1977) as a framework, the authors argued that, in any given culture, there is likely to be a shared idea of what ICC is because there is shared meaning in a culture (Bruner, 1990); therefore, a researcher can access this information by soliciting multiple cultural perspectives of ICC and looking for overlaps in these perspectives. To this end, they collected qualitative data from participants who represented fifteen cultural perspectives. By analysing the data using semantic network analysis (Doerfel, 1998; Rice & Danowski, 1993) and extracting dominant themes, the authors identified five variables that the participants associated with ICC, namely empathy (the ability to relate to another at a cognitive as well as emotional level); experience (prior exposure to and/or training in intercultural communication); motivation (to interact with people from other cultures); positive attitude toward people from other cultures; and the ability to be an engaged listener. The authors concluded that the identification of these five variables as being associated with ICC—based on qualitative data collected from participants who represented multiple cultural perspectives—is the first step in developing a culture-general model of ICC.

Based on Arasaratnam and Doerfel's findings, Arasaratnam (2006) then developed a model of ICC and empirically tested it using a series of regression analyses. The model depicted experience and empathy as exogenous variables, with a pathway going from empathy to positive attitude towards people from other cultures to motivation to communicate with people from other cultures, leading to ICC. The model also depicted a pathway from empathy to engaged listening, leading to ICC. According to the model, experience leads to a positive attitude towards people from other cultures, which leads to motivation

to communicate with people from other cultures, which in turn leads to more experience in intercultural communication. The model was generally supported by the results. There were, however, a couple of limitations in this test. First, ICC was measured using intercultural scenarios (Arasaratnam, 2004). Though this measure provided an indication of ICC, there was a need for a tested instrument of ICC that could be used to measure this variable. Further, the model in its entirety needed to be tested using a more sophisticated method for model testing (such as SEM). The ICC model has since been used in various forms in related research (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007; 2009). Recently, a new instrument of ICC was developed and tested in relation to the model of ICC (Arasaratnam, 2009). We used this instrument in our study.

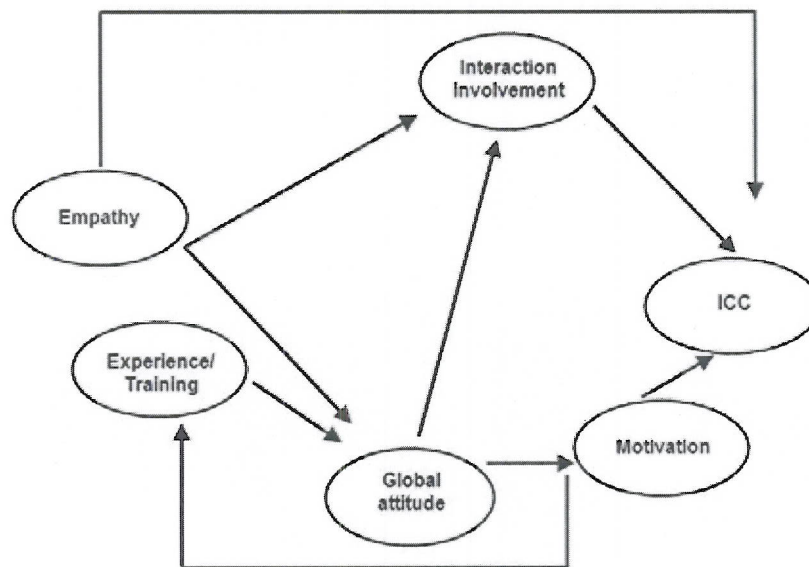


Figure 1. Proposed model of integrated intercultural communication competence

The proposed model (Figure 1) is based on previous studies (Arasaratnam, 2004; 2006), depicting empathy and experience as exogenous variables and identifying interaction involvement (active listening), motivation (to interact with people from other cultures), and positive attitude toward people of other cultures as mediating variables leading to ICC as the endogenous variable. The model

predicts a cyclical relationship between experience, global attitude, and motivation by reasoning that those who have experience with/ exposure to intercultural communication are likely to be more positively oriented toward people from other cultures (assuming those experiences were generally enlightening), and thus motivated to seek intercultural interactions, which in turn contributes to more experience in intercultural communication. The model also predicts a direct relationship between empathy and ICC, based on the reasoning that an empathetic individual, regardless of prior experience with intercultural communication, would still be able to communicate effectively and appropriately merely by being able to identify with the other person at a cognitive and emotional level.

Though our starting point is the model developed in previous research, our study addresses the limitations of previous testing (Arasaratnam, 2006), which was conducted using participants who were local and international students, based in the United States. We conducted our study in a different cultural context, namely Australia, to further explore the utility of IMICC across cultures. Further, the IMICC is tested in its entirety for the first time using SEM in the present study.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 400$) were undergraduate students in a large university in Australia (Males = 226, Females = 163, 11 participants did not indicate their gender). The participants represented 35 countries, with the majority being from Australia ($n = 246$). The next few largest groups were from China ($n = 21$), India ($n = 20$), and Sri Lanka ($n = 17$). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 42, though the average age fell within the range of 18–22. The participants fell into six categories of religious affiliation: Christian ($n = 137$), No religion ($n = 129$), Buddhist ($n = 44$), Hindu ($n = 22$), and Other ($n = 36$). One hundred and forty-two participants indicated that they had travelled abroad for study, 246 indicated they had not studied abroad, and 12 participants did not respond to this question. One hundred and seventeen of the participants indicated that they had never travelled abroad for leisure, while 276 participants indicated that they had (7 did not respond to this question). Only 67 of the participants indicated that they had worked abroad, while 322 participants indicated they had not (11 did not respond to this question). Overall, the participant pool consisted of people who had wide first-hand exposure to other cultures.

Measures

The variables measured included motivation, empathy, attitude towards other cultures, interaction involvement, intercultural communication competence, and experience. Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted on multi-item scales to ensure that they met the criteria of face validity, internal consistency, and parallelism (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982). Reliability was estimated by Cronbach's alpha.

Motivation. For the purpose of our study, motivation is defined as a 'set of feelings, intentions, needs, and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication' (Wiseman, 2002, p. 211). This variable was measured using a 7-item motivation scale (Arasaratnam, 2006) with responses ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly Agree. Sample items included the following: 'I enjoy initiating conversations with someone from a different culture' and 'I always like to experience new things, including meeting people of different cultures'. CFA were performed and fitness of model was achieved (after deleting 3 items), $\chi^2(2) = 3.38$, $p = .19$; $\chi^2/df = 1.69$, $CFI = .99$, $RMSEA = .04$. The remaining items were summed and averaged with a higher score, indicating high levels of motivation (Cronbach's alpha = .78, $M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.18$).

Empathy. Empathy is defined as 'the capacity to clearly project an interest in others, as well as to obtain and to reflect a reasonably complete and accurate sense of another's thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences' (Ruben, 1976, p. 340). Empathy was measured using the 18-item Cultural Empathy sub-scale of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000) with responses ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly Agree. Sample items included were 'I take other people's habits into consideration,' and 'I am able to voice other people's thoughts'. CFA were performed and fitness of model was achieved (after deleting 5 items), $\chi^2(65) = 192.96$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.97$, $CFI = .95$, $RMSEA = .07$. The remaining items were summed and averaged with a higher score, indicating high levels of empathy (Cronbach's alpha = .85, $M = 5.14$, $SD = .81$).

Attitude towards other cultures. We use the notion of 'attitude towards other cultures' interchangeably with global attitude and define global attitude as a positive, non-ethnocentric attitude towards people who are culturally different from one's self. Attitude towards other cultures (Global Attitude) was measured using the 8-item Attitude Towards Other Cultures Scale (Remmers, Gage, & Rummel, 1960) with responses ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly

Agree. Sample items included were 'people of other cultures should be treated the same as people of my own culture', and 'I consider it a privilege to associate with people of other cultural backgrounds'. CFA were performed and fitness of model was achieved (after deleting 2 items), $\chi^2(9) = 25.25$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2/df = 2.81$, $CFI = .95$, $RMSEA = .07$. The remaining items were summed and averaged with a higher score, indicating more positive attitudes towards other cultures (Cronbach's alpha = .65, $M = 5.13$, $SD = .74$).

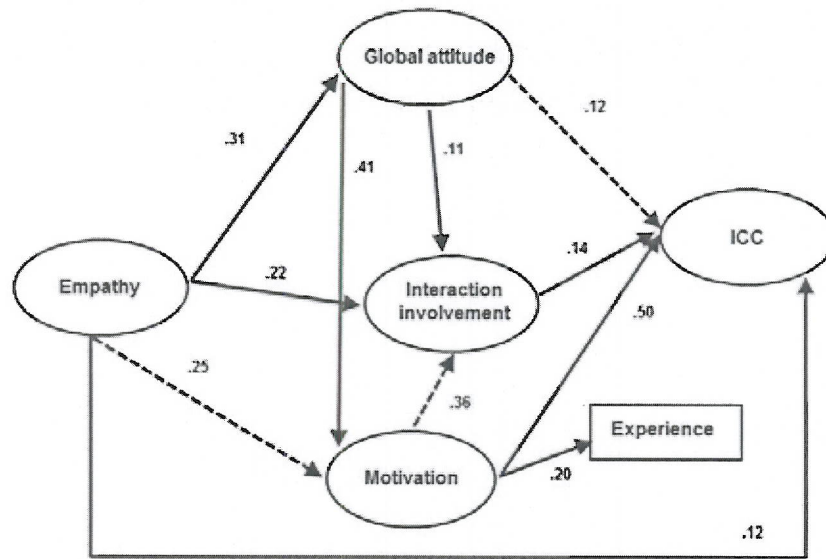
Interaction involvement. We define interaction involvement as engaging in active listening by paying close attention to the other person's communication. Interaction involvement was measured using a modified version of the 11-item Interaction Involvement Scale (Cegala, 1981), with responses ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly Agree. Sample items included were 'during conversations with someone from a different culture I listen carefully and obtain as much information as I can', and 'usually when speaking with someone from a different culture I feel confident during my conversations, I am sure of what to say and do'. CFA were performed on the variable and fitness of model was achieved (after deleting 4 items), $\chi^2(14) = 37.22$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.66$, $CFI = .95$, $RMSEA = .06$. The remaining items were summed and averaged with a higher score, indicating higher levels of interaction involvement. (Cronbach's alpha = .71, $M = 4.61$, $SD = .89$).

Intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence was measured using a modified, 21-item version of Arasaratnam's (2009) scale with responses ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly Agree. Sample items included were 'I usually change the way I communicate depending on with whom I am communicating', and 'I often notice similarities in personality between people who belong to completely different cultures'. CFA were performed on the variable and the model fit the data (after deleting 9 items), $\chi^2(54) = 140.39$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.60$, $CFI = .91$, $RMSEA = .06$. The remaining items were summed and averaged with a higher score, indicating higher intercultural communication competence. (Cronbach's alpha = .70, $M = 4.82$, $SD = .76$).

Experience. We define experience as prior exposure to other cultures and participation in intercultural communication. We integrated multiple types of intercultural experiences to calculate this variable (Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak, 2005). The experience variable was computed as a cumulative variable including the participants' responses to whether

they had travelled abroad, studied abroad, worked abroad, the extent of their travel (based on number countries experienced), whether the members of their immediate family were all of one nationality or not, and the amount of time spent travelling abroad ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.54$).

Results



- > Significant hypothesised paths
 - - - -> Paths added based on modification indices
 All paths significant at $p \leq .05$

Figure 2. The integrated model of intercultural communication competence (N = 400)

Analyses

Maximum likelihood structural equation modelling was employed to test the model in Figure 1. In particular, the latent composite (LC) approach (see Holbert & Stephenson, 2002; Stephenson & Holbert, 2003) of model building was employed, using AMOS version 16. The LC approach specifies all variables as latent and can employ single-item or composite measures. The LC approach uses two steps in testing a structural model: first, specifying the composite as a single variable loading on a latent construct and fixing the path from latent construct to its observed variable to 1, and second, fixing the error variance of

this composite observed index to $(1-\alpha) (\sigma^2)$ (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002; Stephenson & Holbert, 2003).

Three goodness-of-fit indices were used to gauge the fit of the CFA model. The χ^2/df adjusts the χ^2 statistic for sample size (Kline, 1998). The CFI calculates the ratio of the noncentrality parameter estimate of the hypothesised model to the noncentrality parameter estimate of a baseline model (Bentler, 1990). The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) accounts for errors of approximation in the population (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). We determined that the data would fit the proposed model if χ^2/df was less than 3, CFI was more than .90, and RMSEA was less than .10. Results of the structural equation models are presented next.

SEM Results

The first step required calculation of the error variance $(1-\alpha) (\sigma^2)$ of each variable to account for unreliability within the measures (Bollen, 1989). Results of the structural equation modelling for Figure 1 indicated that the original model did not adequately reflect the data, $\chi^2(6) = 93.87$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 15.64$; $CFI = .86$, $RMSEA = .19$.

In order to improve the fit of the model, we first removed nonsignificant paths. Under that criterion, we eliminated the following path: the path from experience to attitude towards other cultures. The fit of this model was not dramatically improved, $\chi^2(7) = 95.23$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 13.60$, $CFI = .86$, $RMSEA = .18$ because elimination of paths in structural equation analysis may not always result in an adequately fit model (see Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001). Next, we added paths based on modification indices. Before adding the path, we confirmed that a theoretical rationale guided this new addition. Thus, the following paths were added: (a) from motivation to interaction involvement, (b) from empathy to motivation, and (c) from attitude towards other cultures to intercultural competence. Inclusion of these paths resulted in a model that adequately represented the data, $\chi^2(4) = 6.73$, $p = .15$; $\chi^2/df = 1.68$; $CFI = .99$, $RMSEA = .04$.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to test the IMICC in its entirety using SEM, and based on data collected in a different cultural context compared to previous studies. The results are optimistic. Most of the predicted pathways were supported. The most notable difference is in the results in relation to the experience variable. The original model

predicted a cyclical relationship between experience, global attitude, and motivation. The results do not support these pathways, with the exception of a direct relationship between experience and motivation. In fact, the model resulting from the SEM analyses shows experience as an endogenous variable, as opposed to an exogenous variable as predicted in the proposed model. This finding could be a factor of the specific measurement used to evaluate experience. The experience variable, as mentioned earlier, was an additive variable consisting of different types of intercultural experiences. Though there is merit in measuring experience in such a cumulative way to ensure that a variety of experiences is represented, this measure has not been tested for its reliability. Though our experience measure was devised following the lead of Takeuchi, Tesluk, Yun, & Lepak's (2005) study, the measure in its current form is yet to be widely tested. It is necessary to address the need for a more sound measure of experience in future studies. If the results were not a factor of an unsound experience measure, then it is also possible that there was no significant pathway between experience and global attitude because intercultural experience may not necessarily lead to positive global attitude. This version of IMICC does not take into account variables, such as ethnocentrism, which may hinder positive global attitudes, regardless of the amount of intercultural experience one has (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2009; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

The results reveal three new pathways that have interesting theoretical implications. First, the results show empathy leading to motivation, which in turn leads to ICC. In their explorative study, Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) reported that the participants perceived as competent intercultural communicators are people who '*...are person-centered (me), sensitive, and kind, have experience with different cultures, want to learn about cultural matters, and are good at these processes. The attributes that are described resemble empathy*' (p. 157). Reading further into the response of these participants, the 'want to learn' about cultural matters indicates a desire or motivation to engage in intercultural interaction. Hence our results are consistent with these previous findings, in that the ability to empathise with culturally different others enables a person to connect to the other person in such a way that it motivates them to further engage in intercultural communication, which in turn is perceived favourably by a culturally different other. This finding provides an explanation for instances in which a person who has no prior experience with intercultural communication is still able to be perceived as a competent intercultural communicator. It is possible that, in such instances, empathy is a key

variable contributing to ICC. A second pathway is shown from empathy to motivation that leads to interaction involvement, which in turn leads to ICC. This, too, shows how a person who has the ability to empathise is motivated to communicate with and listen to the other person, thus engaging in active listening (interaction involvement), which in turn results in perception of ICC. This, too, is consistent with Arasaratnam and Doerfel's findings, in which the authors indicate that, when asked to describe qualities of a competent intercultural communicator, the participants indicated a preference for good listening skills. The authors state: '...some of the most frequently used words in these responses, show [sic] a strong preference to one's ability to take *time to listen* (*listening*), *talk*, *know*, and *make friends*' (2005, p. 158).

The third pathway that differs from the proposed model is one between global attitude and ICC. The path begins from empathy, proceeds to global attitude, and then to ICC. The relationship between empathy and global attitude was predicted in the proposed model, but the results indicate that there is also a direct connection between a positive attitude towards people from other cultures and ICC. This is understandable, given that a positive attitude towards people from other cultures motivates one to interact with such people, which in turn can lead to active listening, and ICC, as the model depicts.

Apart from the predicted pathways involving the experience variable, the rest of the proposed pathways were supported by the results. This is noteworthy, given that this model test was conducted in a different cultural context, with a different composition of diverse participants compared to those featured in Arasaratnam's (2006) initial test.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in our study that need to be mentioned. First, this study used cross-sectional survey data to examine pathways of association, which limits the causal interpretation of results (see Yanovitzky, 2006). Longitudinal studies that examine the effects of empathy, motivation, and attitude towards other cultures on intercultural experience and intercultural competence are needed to explain the causal relationships using more effective means.

As mentioned earlier, the measure of the experience variable in this study is a possible limitation. This needs to be addressed in future research by employing a tested and rigorous measure of experience.

Conclusion

Our study was the successor to a series of studies in the development of a new integrated model of ICC, built from an emic approach, and incorporating multiple cultural perspectives into the design. The resulting IMICC was tested using structural equating modelling, with generally positive results. Though the results of our study did not support some of the previously proposed pathways (possibly due to an inadequate measurement of the experience variable), most of the proposed pathways were supported, in addition to the revelation of a few new pathways that present interesting theoretical implications. The IMICC represents a new breed of models of ICC in its design and utility. More research is needed to test and refine the model further; however, the results so far are promising.

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