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# Major ethical issues in the field of intercultural relations: An exploratory study



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## ABSTRACT

A major initial step in professionalizing intercultural relations as an applied field of study is to determine the ethical concerns of people actively involved in both scholarship and practice. Some intercultural relations organizations have established committees to develop standards of ethical behavior. There are many anecdotal accounts of unethical practices but there have been few systematic studies of such practices. This is the first large comprehensive quantitative survey of intercultural experts that contrasts and compares the concerns of both scholars and practitioners. The purpose of this exploratory study is to identify major ethical issues in the field of intercultural relations. Members of two major professional organizations were asked to identify what they believe are the major ethical concerns in the field of intercultural relations. Members of one organization were mostly intercultural practitioners while the other included mostly scholars. The results revealed that although there were great similarities in ethical concerns, there were also differences that were most likely a result of the two different professions. Of course, there were also some respondents who were members of both organizations and both professions. We identify, differentiate, and prioritize ethical concerns of scholars and practitioners. Although some differences were found in the types and ranking of ethical concerns, members of both professions believe that perpetuating cultural stereotypes and deceptively presenting one's intercultural relations training skills are the top two major ethical concerns, followed by misuse of training tools or instruments and delivering services that are not in the best interests of clients.

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## 1. Introduction: the need for a preliminary study of ethical concerns and standards

The field of intercultural relations is becoming a well-established profession. Various aspects of intercultural relations are now routinely taught at major universities around the globe and intercultural training and consulting are now well-established professions. On some campuses, intercultural literacy is considered as vital as Internet or computer literacy for a well-educated student. Hundreds of books and journal articles are now published each year in this field and dozens of professional associations hold meetings and conferences bringing together both scholars and practitioners.

Intercultural practitioners are found in the international human resource divisions of major international companies and organizations, in the international or study abroad student services division of universities, and in a wide array of

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intercultural consulting and training firms. They provide workshops and seminars for international exchanges, diversity and multicultural management training, joint venture consulting, and cross-cultural coaching.

Given the dramatic increase of people interacting with those who are culturally different and the expansion of domestic and international areas of intercultural relations scholarship and training, this profession is expected to continue to grow into new areas of inquiry and practice (Weaver, 2014). With this growth will come demands for greater professionalization including the development of standards of practice and some kind of certification of competence in the applied field.

Although there are understandable differences, scholars and practitioners need each other. All applied academic fields are based upon a body of research and publication that can be critically examined by others. This scholarship guides practitioners and often provides evidence of effectiveness. Conversely, those engaged in the practice of intercultural relations inform the scholarship. As with any applied academic field such as law, education, counseling, or business, many members are both scholars and practitioners.

Cross-cultural trainers bring hands on experiences into their workshops, seminars, and consulting to help others to develop the cross-cultural communication, negotiation, management, and adaptation skills that are necessary in today's practice of business, counseling, health care, and education. Their credibility is based upon actual interactions with those who are culturally different.

With the increasing pressure to develop intercultural competence across fields and organizations worldwide, the question of ethics is becoming critical for both scholars and practitioners. Intercultural educators, trainers, and researchers are now members of a well-established profession and, as any applied area of studies becomes a profession, there is a growing concern for the establishment of ethical standards and practice. This is certainly true for such fields as counseling, education, business, law or medicine. Members of these professions have determined what ethical standards should guide the appropriate behavior and they would agree that those who engage in unethical behavior discredit their field of practice and study.

## 2. Overview of ethics study in intercultural relations

The discussion of intercultural communication and intercultural training began in the post-World War II period of the 1950s (Paige & Martin, 1996; Pusch, 2004). In the late 1950s and the 1960s, intercultural training was carried out by government agencies for the U.S. Foreign Service, Peace Corps, and the military (Paige & Martin, 1996). At the same time training for Fortune 500 company managers and executives who were relocating overseas was provided by organizations such as the Business Council for International Understanding Institute (BCIU) at American University. During the 1970s, the field further expanded with the addition of more independent trainers and number of small consulting and training firms. The Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research (SIETAR International) was founded in 1974 in an effort to bring together these independent intercultural professionals (Hayles, 2012).

It was during the early 1980s that scholarly literature began to consider the ethics of intercultural communication (Condon, 1981; Howards, Frank, Pusch, & Renwick, 1982; Paige & Martin, 1983, 1996). It was at that time that members of SIETAR-USA began discussing a code of ethics and certification system for intercultural trainers, and codes of ethics have continued to be drafted and revised in cycles since 1982 (Thacker, 2012). At its 2013 annual conference, SIETAR-USA presented the code of ethics it had developed.

### 2.1. Ethics in intercultural relations: key themes

Previous works on ethics in intercultural communication fall on a continuum from the assumption that there are universal ethics or some universal set of values that are in common across all cultures to a version of cultural relativism which asserts that ethics are specific to particular cultures and cannot be judged by the standards of outside cultures. Another version of cultural relativism simply argues that ethics can only be understood in the context of each culture. However, understanding what motivates a behavior in the context of a culture does not necessarily mean that an interculturalist must deem that behavior ethical.

Criticizing the relativist perspective, Richter (2012) argued that some cultural practices can be universally ethical or unethical. Evanoff (2004) also noted that using cultural relativism as an ethical norm for intercultural communication is counterproductive. Although relativism acknowledges and appreciates cultural differences it does nothing to help reconcile those differences when encountered in intercultural communication. Others have taken the position that nothing in a single culture's ethical structure prepares its adherents to interact across cultures (Condon, 1981; Evanoff, 2004; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012). According to them, cultural relativism, therefore, cannot be used as a basis for intercultural communication ethical standards on its own.

Acknowledging cultural relativity, Morgan (1998) offered a framework for ethics based upon legality and appropriateness. That is, cultural practices should be understood based on whether they are legal, culturally ethical, just and fair, and culturally appropriate from the lenses of individual, community, and global perspectives. Fleischacker (1999), however, argued that existing international human rights laws and conventions are too vague and open to interpretation to form a strong and effective basis for intercultural ethics.

Conversely, universal values have been a key discussion point in intercultural ethics. A few scholars have proposed that core values such as justice, fairness, truth, love, unity, and loyalty do exist in most cultures, but such values lay only the barest foundation for intercultural communication (Johannessen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008; Pratt & Ogundimu, 1997). Others

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