



Culture-general competence: Evidence from a cognitive field study of professionals who work in many cultures



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ABSTRACT

We describe a cognitive field research study of professionals with repeated and varied intercultural experiences, and a resulting model of culture-general competence. Twenty professionals with varied sojourns and considerable experience working with members of other cultures participated in 2-h long, semi-structured interviews. We elicited critical intercultural interaction incidents during the interviews, and followed with detailed questions designed to probe existing competencies hypothesized to be important in the literature. Interview transcripts were subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis, as well as coding to support quantitative, frequency analyses. Results confirmed the importance of several hypothesized competencies, and suggested a reconceptualization of specific knowledge and skill elements. Several additional competencies emerged from the qualitative analysis, as well. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

I had studied German and Spanish in high school and college; I was an International Studies major. I lived in the Netherlands for a year and a half to go to graduate school before I came into the military. [...] When I first got selected into my career and organization, a few months before I started, I got a notice saying that they had selected me for an assignment in Korea. I had two weeks to accept it. They obviously didn't read my resume, because it had nothing to do with Korea and nothing to do with Asia; it was the opposite side of the world. I thought, sure, I will do that.

What are the culture-general competencies that allow people to go anywhere at a moment's notice—spend a small or large amount of time in a new environment—and work effectively with members of any local population? By “culture-general,” we mean the skills and knowledge that allow adaptation and interaction in any culture, as opposed to competencies that enable adaptation and interaction in a specific culture. This sense of the term culture-general is in line with Brislin and his colleague's use of the term to describe cultural training that focuses on covering themes that are universally important (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986). The term, “cultural-general,” is also sometimes used in a slightly different way, specifically, to distinguish intercultural communication competencies that are used universally from those that are used only by members of certain cultures (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005).

In this article we present the results of a study that builds upon the existing literature to derive an empirically and conceptually sound model for culture-general competence. We conducted a review of the existing literature to identify a

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set of hypothesized competencies. Then, using an open-ended cognitive field research methodology, data we collected data that allowed both hypothesis testing and exploratory analysis.

1.1. Culture-general competence

Previous research has provided evidence to suggest that a core set of competencies exist that enable adaptation to any culture (Hammer, 1987). A large number and variety of intercultural skills and abilities relevant to intercultural competence have been identified over the years (see Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009 for an overview). Already in the late 80s, enough elements of intercultural competence had been suggested to prompt Martin and Hammer (1989) to note that it has become unclear what the relevant behaviors are that are associated with these skills and abilities. According to Deardorff (2009) this deficiency still stands. Deardorff nominates identification of the ways elements of intercultural competence manifest themselves in actual intercultural encounters, within different contexts and professional fields as a key area for future research.

The knowledge and skills that have been identified as relevant to culture-general competence have been derived from a variety of empirical sources. Some of these include asking sojourners to reflect on competencies (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Hammer, 1987); researcher's personal experiences in multicultural settings (Byram, 1997); observations of specific intercultural interactions (Olebe & Koester, 1989; Ruben & Kealey, 1979), interviews with students studying in a foreign culture (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005); and interviews with scholars working in the intercultural relations field (Deardorff, 2006). Importantly, the intercultural experience base of the participants in these past studies is often either limited to a single, significant sojourn or not controlled. In the present study, we instead examine a population that has had repeated and varied intercultural experiences.

From a theoretical point of view, why might it be important to systematically study a population that has had repeated and varied intercultural experiences for the purposes of developing a model of culture-general competence? From a cognitive perspective key differences can be expected to exist between individuals who have spent significant time in a single culture and individuals who have spent time in a variety of cultures. Endicott et al. (2003) suggest that as people increase their intercultural expertise their schemas for intercultural problem solving grow in breadth and depth. However, the way in which their schemas grow may depend on the types of intercultural experiences they have had. Endicott proposes that a person who spends significant time in a single culture, likely develops a complex, highly interconnected schema for that culture. Someone who visits many cultures for shorter periods of time likely develops several, shallower schemas. Endicott found initial support for the idea that different cultural activities lead to the development of different schemas in a survey-based study of undergraduate students with varying types of intercultural experiences (Endicott et al., 2003). The results showed that, relative to breadth, depth of cultural experience was more strongly associated with both intercultural development and development of moral reasoning.

Given the cognitive differences between generalists and specialists, there is a possibility that the two types of cultural 'practitioners' enact intercultural competencies differently—and even that their performance is supported by different competencies.

1.2. Culture-general competencies suggested in the literature

In the current study, we identified a set of nine competency areas from a review of the literature related to intercultural competence. Many competencies have been suggested as contributing to intercultural adjustment and adaptation and a variety of models and frameworks have been proposed (see Spitzberg and Chagnon, 2009). In order to reduce the extensive space of competencies that have previously been proposed to a set meaningful for data collection, we culled a more manageable list from the literature. An initial list of competencies was created based on a literature review. This was reviewed by three senior members of the research team. The researchers met to discuss direct semantic as well as theoretical areas of overlap. The larger list of competencies was collaboratively collapsed thus eliminating redundancies.

The resulting smaller set of competencies therefore represents a reduction rather than a subset. The nine competency areas were: Cultural sensemaking, perspective taking, cultural knowledge, self-presentation, language proficiency, emotional self-regulation, managing affect and attitude toward difference, withholding and suspending judgment, and self-efficacy and confidence.

These nine competency areas were hypothesized to support effective performance in a high-stakes job domain that involves extensive intercultural interaction. In the following each competency is discussed in turn.

1.2.1. Cultural sensemaking

Two men are holding hands. Why? Interpreting behavior is difficult within one's own culture and even more complex across cultures. In America, men mostly do not hold hands with other men unless they are homosexual. In the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia it is not unusual for two male friends to hold hands. In an intercultural context, a person's first guess about what motivates a behavior is likely to be grounded in expectations based on experiences within their own culture (Archer, 1986). This means that when people are interpreting behavior in intercultural situations, they are more likely to come to the wrong conclusions (Everett & Stening, 1980; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).

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