



Reducing Ethnocultural Bias in Assessing Students' Intercultural Competence: An Emic-Etic Approach

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Article History:

Received: 14-01-2025

Revision: 27-03-2025

Accepted: 02-04-2025

Publication: 01-06-2025

Cite this article as:

Goldstein (2025). Reducing Ethnocultural Bias in Assessing Students' Intercultural Competence: An Emic-Etic Approach. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 25(2), 18-29.
doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v25i2.1069

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Abstract: Intercultural competence (ICC) is now widely recognized as essential to living and working in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world. As a result, considerable attention and resources are devoted to programs for enhancing and assessing ICC, particularly within post-secondary institutions. Concomitantly, these efforts have spurred a massive increase in the volume of publications focused on fostering students' ICC. Yet, recently, researchers and practitioners have raised concerns about the potential for ethnocultural bias in ICC models and measures, in that they tend to have Western-centric, dominant-culture origins and orientations. Such bias would have significant conceptual, methodological, and ethical implications. This paper first identifies and details potential sources of ethnocultural bias in assessing students' ICC, including those that result from ambiguity in the conceptualization of intercultural, as well as from criteria for competence that center on frequency and enjoyment of intercultural contact, low ethnocentrism, intercultural knowledge, and level of confidence in intercultural interactions. Then, applying cross-cultural research methodology, this paper proposes employing an emic-etic approach to investigating and minimizing such bias. This approach combines strategies for assessing the universality of ICC components with the search for culture-specific and context-specific variations to attain greater inclusivity, accuracy, and functionality of ICC models and measures.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Cross-Cultural Competence, Internationalization, Emic-Etic, Ethnocultural bias

1. Introduction

Intercultural competence (ICC) is now widely recognized by universities, professional associations, and national governments as essential for thriving in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world. ICC promotes cultural exchange and conflict resolution (Aleksandrova et al., 2024), reduces prejudice (Ardhy, 2024), enhances the functioning of diverse work teams (Arasaratnam, 2016), and supports the provision of culturally appropriate services (De-María, Topa, & López-González, 2024). Additionally, ICC may be central to the psychological well-being of immigrant and bicultural individuals, for whom navigating across cultures is embedded in daily life tasks (e.g., Benbow & Rutland, 2017; Torres, 2009). A recent systematic review of the ICC literature concluded that “the absence of ICC is a crucial reason for failure in many modern professionals” (Sarwari, Adnan, Rahamad, & Abdul Wahab, 2024, p. 1). According to Arasaratnam-Smith (2020, p. 20), “The urgency and interest to produce graduates who are ready for the global marketplace has never been more prevalent amongst educators as it is today.” As a result, the development of intercultural competence has become a central learning objective for post-secondary students across the globe (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios, & Liu, 2016; Smith-Isabell & Rubaii, 2020).

Definitions and labels for ICC have emerged from a wide range of academic disciplines, including psychology, communication, education, linguistics, and anthropology, and thus vary to some extent in content and emphasis. However, there is considerable consistency across ICC models (Peng & Wu, 2016; Ramstrand, Weisova, Nylander, & Johansson, 2024). Whether labeled intercultural competence, cultural competence, global competence, cross-cultural competence, intercultural communication competence, or similar terms, most align with Bennett's (2008, p. 97) definition of ICC as the “cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” Across models, the cognitive component generally refers to intercultural knowledge and awareness of cultural differences; the affective component, to motivation for intercultural contact and nonjudgmental respect for unfamiliar cultures; and the behavioral component, to the ability to obtain and appropriately apply cultural information (Goldstein, 2022).

A fairly consistent set of personality and individual difference variables has been associated with ICC. These include the Five-Factor Model traits of openness to experi-

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-ence and extraversion (e.g., Rings & Allehyani, 2020; Wang & Ching, 2015; Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013); the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire traits of emotional stability, flexibility, social initiative, cultural empathy, and open-mindedness (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2013); and Deardorff's (2006) requisite attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery. Characteristics such as these, along with the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of ICC, are reflected in the quantitative assessment tools most frequently employed in research on students' ICC antecedents and outcomes (Ramstrand et al., 2024).

Over the past few decades, efforts to foster ICC in higher education institutions have shifted from a focus on study abroad programs to more comprehensive internationalization initiatives that incorporate domestic curricular and co-curricular programming. Concomitantly, there has been a massive increase in the volume of publications detailing and evaluating strategies for enhancing and assessing students' ICC (Ramstrand et al., 2024). Recently, however, the potential for ethnocultural bias in ICC models and measures has gained attention as a significant conceptual, methodological, and ethical concern (e.g., Fukuda & Nishikawa Chávez, 2021; Hanada, 2019; Lieberman & Gamst, 2015). For example, in reference to ICC research in Japanese educational and business settings, Kudo (2009, p. 104) suggested that the "uncritical import of the Western construct has hampered the theoretical development of communication competence scholarship..." Similarly, Ardhy (2024) observed that the integration of "Western-centric" ICC approaches in Islamic education has been viewed as a potential threat to religious and cultural identity. Domestically, questions have been raised about the applicability of ICC models and measures to the experiences and skills of minoritized students, whose intercultural encounters may occur in the context of structural inequality (e.g., Punti & Dingel, 2021). This issue has been largely neglected in the existing body of ICC research. Lieberman and Gamst (2015) noted the lack of publications cross-referencing the ICC and social justice literatures, and Islam and Stamp (2020) identified the intersection of ICC and inclusive excellence as a critical direction for future research in higher education. Thus, given the growing level of attention and resources devoted to ICC by higher education scholars and practitioners, it has become urgent to evaluate and address such ethnocultural bias. In this conceptual paper, I first explore the potential for ethnocultural bias in assessing students' ICC and then propose adopting an emic-etic approach to investigating and minimizing such bias, with the goal of enhancing the inclusivity, accuracy, and functionality of ICC models and measures.

2. Ethnocultural Bias in ICC Models and Measures

ICC models and related assessments have generally been presented in the literature as socioculturally universal (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005), despite emerging nearly entirely from a Western, dominant group perspective (Peng & Wu, 2016; Zhang & Zhou, 2023). For example, apart from the translation of test items, there has typically been minimal, if any, modification of ICC measures when administered across cultures internationally or domestically. Yet universality has not been established (Fantini, 2020; Kealey, 2015), and scholars are increasingly asking whether models and measures of ICC privilege a specific set of intercultural experiences, knowledge, or skills while neglecting others.

There are several forms of ethnocultural bias that may impede social science research. Most relevant to ICC are construct, item, and method bias. According to van de Vijver and Leung (2021), construct bias exists if the underlying concepts measured differ in meaning, relevance, or domain coverage across cultural groups. Item bias occurs when test items are interpreted differently across cultural groups due to translation, wording, or the appropriateness of item content. Finally, method bias arises from cultural differences in social desirability, response style, stimulus familiarity, or test conditions. These forms of bias threaten the universality of the ICC as they are embedded in the way both the *intercultural* and *competence* components have been conceptualized.

2.1. The Conceptualization of Intercultural

Concepts associated with intercultural interaction in models and measures of ICC, such as *intercultural contact*, *one's own culture*, and *other cultures*, are ambiguous and may be interpreted in a variety of ways (Borghetti, 2017). Construct and item bias will exist if these concepts are interpreted differently by students from different sociocultural backgrounds. In addition, even if these concepts are perceived similarly, ethnocultural bias may exist if they address the intercultural experiences of members of some groups more fully or more appropriately than those of others. Thus, it is critical to investigate how these intercultural concepts are perceived by respondents to ICC measures.

One concern is that *cultural*, *intercultural*, and related terms implicitly or explicitly tend to cue cross-national contact (Punti & Dingel, 2022). For example, Greenholtz (2005) observed that Japanese respondents view the term "cultural differences" as indicating country-level differences despite the increasing sociocultural diversity of Japan's population. This tendency is not surprising given that ICC has been investigated largely in relation to international sojourners, such as international students and study abroad participants (Rathje, 2007; Torres, 2013). However, by targeting interaction across nationality, the ICC of those who experience other forms of intercultural contact may not be adequately assessed.

An additional concern regarding the conceptualization of *intercultural* in ICC models and measures deals with what we might term *ICC centrality*, the degree to which effective intercultural interaction is relevant to and essential for an individual's successful functioning in daily life. ICC models and measures have tended to assume that the respondent has low ICC centrality, in which crossing cultures is motivated by intercultural interest and the

broadening of one's horizons, rather than high ICC centrality, in which crossing cultures is critical for obtaining resources and maintaining well-being. Furthermore, culture in ICC models and measures is generally presented as fixed and monolithic, as opposed to fluid, socially constructed, and intersectional (Müller et al., 2020; Puntí & Dingel, 2021), and the respondent of ICC measures is often assumed to be a member of the dominant group with culture framed as something largely possessed by the Other (Kumaş-Tan, Beagan, Loppie, MacLeod, & Frank, 2007; Nguyen, Avila, Ferguson, & Benet-Martínez, 2023).

As a result of this conceptualization of *intercultural*, most approaches to ICC may fail to fully address the traits, attitudes, knowledge, and skills required of students who identify with two or more cultures, such as the ability to navigate domestic cultures, traverse heritage cultures, or negotiate cultural differences across generations within one's family. Arasaratnam (2016) explained that whereas ICC is not conceptually equivalent to acculturation or biculturalism/multiculturalism, there is significant overlap. Yet, despite an extensive extant literature on acculturation and bicultural competence (e.g., LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993), these contexts have been largely ignored within ICC models and measures. A more inclusive conceptualization of *intercultural* communication may also require attention to linguistic competence. Fantini (2020) suggested that, given the access to intercultural interaction and to varied worldviews it provides, it seems odd that language ability is typically excluded from models and measures of ICC. Ignoring linguistic competence in assessing ICC may vastly underestimate the intercultural abilities of bilingual students and those who effectively code-switch as they move across cultural contexts.

In cases where ICC models and measures are explicitly applied to a domestic context, intercultural interaction tends to be equated with interracial or interethnic interaction (Kumaş-Tan et al., 2007). Doing so ignores the skills students develop through learning to negotiate other types of cultural barriers, such as those associated with LGBTQ+, disability, low income, and other marginalized identities (Kumaş-Tan et al., 2007; Puntí & Dingel, 2021). A more dynamic and multifaceted approach to conceptualizing the intercultural component of ICC is needed so that ICC models and measures are inclusive of the traits, attitudes, knowledge, and skills developed through and required for a wide range of intercultural contexts. One recent example of a step in that direction is the Intercultural Competence Developmental Model for Multiculturals (ICDM4M; Nguyen et al., 2023), which traces the emergence of skills that support the intercultural effectiveness of minoritized multicultural individuals.

2.2. The Conceptualization of Competence

Across ICC measures, competence is often equated with the frequency and enjoyment of intercultural contact, lower ethnocentrism, greater intercultural knowledge, and greater self-reported confidence in executing intercultural interactions. As detailed below, these approaches to assessing ICC may not be universally applicable across student populations and may be subject to construct, item, and method bias.

2.2.1. Competence = Frequency and Enjoyment of Intercultural Contact

Operationalizing ICC as the frequency or enjoyment of intercultural contact ignores the disparate experiences of members of socially dominant and minoritized groups. ICC may be unrelated to the frequency of intercultural contact when this type of contact is unavoidable, such as for students of color in predominantly White universities. In addition, ICC may be unrelated to the enjoyment of intercultural contact when systemic inequality results in interactions that are uncomfortable, unsafe, or aversive. Consider, for example, the millions of children of immigrant families who take on the role of "language broker," interpreting and translating in interactions between family members and dominant language speakers, such as school officials, healthcare professionals, government workers, and landlords. Research on language brokering university students indicates that while this experience is frequently perceived as stressful, it also fosters a variety of ICC-related skills that differentiate these young adults from their non-language brokering peers (Weisskirch, 2017). Thus, operationalizing ICC as the enjoyment of intercultural contact may underestimate the ICC of some minoritized students. In contrast, doing so may overestimate the ICC of dominant group students in that more comfortable intergroup interactions may reflect the sense of belonging and control associated with group privilege rather than intercultural respect or harmonious intergroup relations (Kumaş-Tan et al., 2007).

Martin (2015) reminded us that power dynamics are a central component of every intercultural interaction. However, most models and measures of ICC take a power-blind approach, often positioning the dominant group's experience as the norm, and focusing on the members of dominant groups' knowledge of, exposure to, and comfort with members of minoritized groups (Kumaş-Tan et al., 2007; Puntí & Dingel, 2021). Operationalizing ICC as the frequency or enjoyment of intercultural contact assumes that navigating intercultural interactions is a choice motivated by interest in diverse perspectives or self-growth and may not apply to students with greater ICC centrality for whom effective intercultural interaction is a necessity of daily life.

2.2.2. Competence = Low Ethnocentrism

Multiple studies have wholly or partially operationalized ICC in terms of the level of ethnocentrism, the tendency to view one's own culture as superior to others and as the standard of comparison (Keith, 2013). Yet, the nature of ethnocentrism itself appears to vary across cultures, perhaps along with geopolitical positionality. While ethnocentrism is certainly incompatible with ICC (Arasaratnam, 2016), the specific form of ethnocentrism that

characterizes ICC research may not be universally valid. For example, Uhlmann (2012, p. 381) coined the term *American psychological isolationism* to refer to a distinctly U.S. “cultural mindset characterized by a lack of regard for and even lack of awareness of the perspectives of other countries, coupled with a passionate desire to spread American values throughout the world.” In contrast, López and Morales (2021, p. 262), in their discussion of ICC development in Chilean preservice teachers on short-term study abroad programs, explained that “Chileans from the Global South are not accustomed to thinking of the world as revolving around them, as many students of the Global North studying abroad do ...and instead are keenly aware of global issues from a position of less power, compared to the United States.” Thus, ethnocentrism-based assessments of ICC may need to be modified to better fit specific populations of respondents.

2.2.3. Competence = Intercultural Knowledge

ICC models and measures generally include a component targeting knowledge of cultures outside of one’s own. Such knowledge is assumed to be indicative of intercultural interest but may instead reflect how opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction are shaped by social identity. For example, Nyunt, Veron, & Sledge (2022) reported that, as study abroad participants, U.S. American women of color face greater barriers to cultural immersion than their White peers due to the intersectional manifestations of sexism, safety concerns, and cultural gender norms. These authors suggested that in this context, intercultural interaction may also be limited by what Devos and Mohamed (2014) identified as the *American = White effect*, in that U.S. individuals who do not meet host nationals’ expectations of their nationality may encounter harsh or exclusionary treatment.

In addition to opportunities to access intercultural knowledge, the content of outgroup knowledge may vary with social power. ICC instruments tend to target areas of intercultural knowledge primarily of interest to international sojourners, such as familiarity with the cultural values or non-verbal behavior of a culture other than one’s own. However, members of minoritized groups may prioritize seeking intercultural knowledge about dominant group members, which supports safe and successful day-to-day functioning (Fiske, 2018). Thus, ICC instruments may be limited in their ability to fully assess intercultural knowledge across social contexts. In addition, although some measures of ICC assess awareness of social inequalities, they generally fail to gauge whether and how that knowledge may be put into practice (Kumaş-Tan et al., 2007).

2.2.4. Competence = Confidence

Multiple measures of ICC implicitly or explicitly link competence scores to the confidence with which one’s intercultural knowledge and skills are held. For example, in their analysis of ten ICC measures commonly used in health professions, Kumaş-Tan et al. (2007) found that eight of these relied to some extent on respondents’ self-ratings of their intercultural confidence or comfort. Relying on respondents’ intercultural confidence to indicate competence threatens the universality of ICC measures. First, it is questionable whether ICC is actually associated with greater confidence. In fact, the reverse may be the case. Multiple scholars have reported what might be called the *intercultural learning paradox* (Goldstein, 2022, p. 33), “...the idea that as one gains ICC, they become more aware of their own intercultural insensitivity, discomfort with unfamiliar cultures, and need for cultural knowledge, and thus perceive themselves to be less interculturally skilled.” For example, Alpers and Zoucha (1996) found that nursing students who had received intercultural training were less confident about their ability to provide culturally sensitive care than their peers who had not received such training.

Second, there may be group differences in willingness to rate oneself as interculturally competent that are not based on one’s actual level of competence. This is a form of method bias. One way that this may occur is via differences in self-deceptive positive enhancement, which is a tendency for people to view themselves in an unrealistically favorable manner. Self-deceptive positive enhancement has been associated with self-reported ICC (e.g., Dune et al., 2022) and appears to vary across cultures (Chung, 2012). Group differences in the expression of intercultural confidence may also stem from sensitivity to social desirability or the tendency to deliberately impression-manage. Kealey (2015, p. 14) observed that “most individuals in responding to [ICC] questionnaire items will easily know the ‘right answer’, i.e., how to look culturally sensitive and knowledgeable.” Middleton and Jones (2000) reported a greater tendency for students from several Asian nations than those from the U.S. to endorse socially desirable items, a response set they attribute in part to collectivist value systems. Regarding these general response styles, Lalwani, Shrum, & Chiu (2009) found that individualism was associated with students’ self-deceptive enhancement but not impression management, whereas collectivism was associated with impression management but not self-deceptive enhancement. Further research is needed to explore the potential for these forms of method bias to influence how students from different ethnocultural backgrounds respond to measures of ICC.

These threats to the universality of ICC models and measures stemming from the conceptualization of the *intercultural* and *competence* components indicate the need for a systematic investigation of the potential for construct, item, and method bias. This may be best accomplished via a combination of emic and etic approaches.

3. The Combined Emic-Etic Approach

Berry (1969) distinguished between etic research, which takes an outsider’s perspective and focuses on the search for human universals, and emic research, which takes an insider’s perspective and seeks a deep understanding of

the values, beliefs, and practices of a single culture. In the etic approach, key concepts and classifications are identified in advance based on the extant literature and are then applied across groups (Chao & Lambert, 2013). In contrast, the key concepts and classifications in emic research emerge from within the culture of interest and are identified using culturally specific and appropriate terms.

ICC research has been dominated by the etic approach in that fairly uniform and widely accepted models and measures have been used to investigate and assess ICC regardless of the ethnocultural context. The risk inherent in this approach is what has been labelled an *imposed etic* (Berry, 1989) in which exported models and measures may be falsely assumed to hold similar meanings and be equally valid across cultures. Hwang and Ting (2013, p. 516) noted that it is difficult to avoid such ethnocentrism when taking an etic approach because it “assumes objectivity and uses one’s culture of origin as the reference group.”

The emic approach is also not without limitations. Although it provides insights into the cultural meanings, manifestations, and relevance of different phenomena as well as cultural practices relevant to data collection (Hansen & Heu, 2020), it alone does not allow for the development of general models to understand and predict outcomes or with which to create interventions. Thus, multiple scholars have called for the integration of these two approaches, once viewed as mutually exclusive (Cheung, van de Vijver, & Leong, 2011; Gardiner, Lee, Baranski, Funder, & Members of the International Situations Project, 2020; Hansen & Heu, 2020). According to van de Vijver and Leung (2021, p. 18), “A defining characteristic of the emic-etic approach is that it is assumed that many psychological phenomena have both more universal and more culture-specific features and that we should try to uncover both aspects.” Cheung et al. (2011), in relation to their research on personality traits, suggested that this strategy combines the methodological rigor of the etic approach and the cultural sensitivity of the emic approach.

There are several additional benefits to the combined emic-etic approach. It facilitates the triangulation of research findings, particularly since the etic approach tends to utilize quantitative methods, whereas the emic approach is generally based on qualitative methods (Chao & Lambert, 2013; Galperin, Punnett, Ford, & Lituchy, 2022). The combined approach aids rich theory development and thus incremental validity by incorporating contextual variables (Burtăverde, de Raad, & Zanfirescu, 2018; Galperin et al., 2022). And perhaps most importantly, the combined approach has the potential for identifying *derived etics*, or universals based on common features present across emic phenomena (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011).

There is no single procedure for combining emic and etic research strategies. S. X. Chen (2010, p. 367) recommended that one “start from emics, usually in a non-Western culture, and then export the identified emics to test their applicability in other cultures, especially Western societies.” For example, Chen demonstrated that the presumably emic constructs of face, harmony, filial piety, and modesty also have etic properties. Hansen and Heu (2020, pp. 361–362) suggested examining the generalizability of existing theories while moving “from the etic endeavor of testing theorizing across cultures to emic approaches to better understand cultural differences, and back to integration of emic and etic elements in theorizing with universal and culture-specific elements in an ‘etic-emic research cycle.’” In contrast, Galperin et al. (2022) advocated for a cycle of emic-etic-emic research. This procedure involves initially eliciting responses from panelists, interviewees, or focus group members using open-ended questions about the phenomenon of interest. These (emic) responses may then be content-analyzed to identify potential material for the construction of an instrument to be distributed across groups and quantitatively analyzed, such as via factor analysis (to identify etics). Subsequently, in a second emic phase, semi-structured interviews or focus groups are conducted to explore any unexpected survey findings or to better understand the relationship between factors. Regardless of the sequence implemented, taking an emic-etic approach to investigating and assessing students’ ICC will allow for the identification of universal components, culture-specific components, and instances of an imposed etic in the form of construct, item, and/or method bias.

3.1. An Etic Approach to ICC

In 2014, Leung, Ang, & Tan (p. 505) stressed the need to investigate forms of bias and demonstrate equivalence across measures of ICC, an effort they described as “still in its infancy.” In the decade since, there have been a large number of validation studies of ICC measures, but only limited analyses of measurement invariance (or the absence of bias; examples include Davidson, 2018; Genkova et al., 2021; Hammer, 2021). Of the 68 publications on ICC instruments reviewed by Richter, Schlaegel, Taras, Alon, & Bird (2023), only five addressed measurement invariance, and three of these dealt with the same (Cultural Intelligence) scale. After reviewing the psychometric properties of multiple ICC instruments, X. Chen and Gabrenya (2021, p. 50) concluded that “The most serious threat to the generalizability of [ICC] models is their frequent administration outside of the culture/language in which they were developed in spite of the scant equivalence evidence justifying such use.” Of the extant investigations of ICC measurement invariance, most use a version of factor analysis on data collected from international student or business sojourners to assess the degree of configural equivalence with the original model (e.g., Schnabel, Kelava, & van de Vijver, 2016).

Although such demonstrations of measurement invariance can help to build evidence for the universality of ICC models and measures, the identification of etic dimensions does not preclude the possibility that the frequency or value of these dimensions differs across cultures or identity groups. For example, Gierke et al. (2018)

investigated lay definitions of ICC and reported that whereas both U.S. students and international students in Germany included the same dimensions in their definitions (knowledge, external outcomes, attitudes, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills), knowledge was prioritized in the U.S. sample, whereas external outcomes were prioritized in the sample from Germany. Furthermore, even when etic dimensions are identified they may not fully represent the domain of intercultural contact experiences across ethnocultural groups and contexts. This type of information may only be identified through an emic approach.

3.2. An Emic Approach to ICC

In addition to assessing the ethnocultural bias of models and measures presumed to be etic, it is critical to identify emic aspects of ICC that are typically absent from these models and measures. Both top-down and bottom-up strategies have been used to identify emic psychological phenomena. The more structured top-down approach typically assesses an established model, set of dimensions, or series of scale items for culture-specific variations. Two closely related strategies for this type of assessment are cognitive interviewing and think-aloud protocols. Whereas in cognitive interviewing, questions and prompts from the interviewer probe and clarify the participant's interpretation of the task, the think-aloud method allows the research participants to voice their thoughts as they respond to the stimulus (Hansen & Heu, 2020; Wolcott & Lobczowski, 2021). Lásticová, Popper, Findor, Hruška, & Petráňová (2021) suggested that cognitive interviewing provides insights into item, construct, and method bias in cross-cultural research. Güss (2018) proposed that cognitive interviewing and think-aloud be combined and recommended such techniques specifically for accessing nuanced cultural differences and improving the validity of cross-cultural theories and assessments.

Bottom-up strategies may be considered more purely emic than top-down approaches. These typically involve identifying emic phenomena by essentially starting from scratch and taking a more exploratory approach to eliciting constructs and categories from within the culture of interest. For example, Schembri (2024) consulted with local Indigenous leaders as an early step in constructing an ICC instrument customized for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in an Australian higher education context. Gierke et al. (2018), mentioned above, administered an open-ended item to students asking that they define intercultural competence in their own words, the results of which were then content analyzed to identify common themes.

This strategy can also be implemented in an interview format. Torres (2009, p. 580) investigated ICC via interviews with U.S. Latinx participants in which they were asked to respond to the following prompt: "Think about a Latino/Hispanic person you consider to be 'successful' in the mainstream U.S. culture. What skills or characteristics does that person have?" The resulting Mexican Intercultural Competence Scale (Torres, 2013) dimensions include ambition/perseverance, networking, the traditional Latino culture, family relationships, and communication.

In addition to individual interviews, researchers have also used group interviews and focus groups. These practices may be included in ethnographic studies. For example, Leyerzapf and Abma (2017) conducted interviews, a focus group, and participant observation to investigate the perspective of cultural minority medical students in the Netherlands regarding the intercultural competence activities integrated into their curriculum.

Finally, it may be possible to identify emic aspects of ICC via the lexical approach, which has been used extensively in cross-cultural research (e.g., Cheung et al., 2011). The lexical approach assumes that significant individual differences become encoded into language (Goldberg, 1981). Typically, a large set of terms dealing with a specific phenomenon (e.g., personality, emotion) is extracted from a dictionary or other narrative source. These terms may be either content analyzed or administered as a rating scale, and the results factor analyzed to identify culture-specific categories. A lexical investigation of ICC might involve identifying words representing traits, attitudes, or behaviors and then asking student participants to indicate the degree to which each describes an individual portrayed (in a scenario, for example) as interculturally successful.

Emic investigations have begun to identify components of ICC that have not been sufficiently represented or tested in current models and measures. These studies are situated in contexts that expand existing understandings of ICC. For example, Western conceptions of ICC appear to be strongly individualist in nature and may be less relevant to societies and communities rooted in collectivist values. Zhang and Zhou's (2023) intercultural competence scale for Chinese university students incorporates several behaviors (e.g., indirectness, compromising conflict-handling style, listening-centered communication) and traits (e.g., attentiveness, respectfulness, humility, cooperativeness) which they view as more characteristic of collectivist than individualist societies. This research suggests that current approaches to ICC research may, in fact, be emic to individualist societies.

Steyn and Reygan (2017, p. 85) investigated emic forms of ICC specific to the decolonization of South African universities. They suggested that ICC models focusing on effective and appropriate intergroup contact may generate distrust given that "The 'appropriate and effective management' of difference in the colonial and Apartheid history of South Africa meant laws and an education philosophy geared to maintain spatial and educational segregation and oppression." These authors (p. 89) advocated for a form of critical cultural competence that facilitates the decolonization of South African institutions by creating opportunities for engagement with "questions of historical injustice, ongoing inequality, and their dismantling."

An additional example of an emic approach is the development of ICC within the context of modern Islamic education. Ardhy (2024, p. 29) described how educational programs that foster a deep understanding of Islam and other religious traditions strengthen students' religious identity, teach interpersonal qualities valued in Islam, such as empathy, respect, and patience, and prepare students to be ethical and engaged members of diverse local and global communities. According to Ardhy (2024), this ICC training also contributes to the development of skills students may need when encountering stereotypes and prejudices directed at their Islamic identity.

3.3. A Combined Emic-Etic Approach to ICC

A combined emic-etic approach to ICC would have several components, with the researcher selecting the order in which these are implemented. Potential etic dimensions would be identified and tested across groups for construct, item, and method bias as well as the contexts in which these dimensions vary. For example, own-culture awareness is generally considered to be a universal component of ICC (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2020). However, the development of that awareness may be more significant for members of minoritized populations as compared to that of dominant group members, for whom own-culture awareness may occur later or not at all (Nguyen et al., 2023). Some presumed etic aspects of ICC will likely be identified as *imposed etics* in that they are actually culture- or context-specific rather than universal. For example, Petrović, Starčević, Chen, & Komnenić (2015) suggested that differences in the factor structure of G.-M. Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale when administered to Serbian as opposed to U.S. participants may be due in part to an assumption of low-context communication that is not applicable to high-context cultures such as Serbia. The individualist orientation of the predominant ICC approaches may also fall into this imposed etic category.

Additional insights into emic forms of ICC, such as those described in the preceding section, are also needed. These presumed emic dimensions can then be tested to determine whether they have etic qualities. For example, the quality of *kanjinshugi* or contextualism (Hamaguchi, 1977, as cited in Mabuchi, 1998, p 188) is described as an emic phenomenon in which "Japanese people are aware of themselves only in relationship with others and they regard that relationship as part of themselves." However, Kudo (2009) cited evidence indicating that *kanjinshugi* is a valid descriptor of interpersonal interaction among British and U.S. American as well as Japanese samples. Once multiple emic aspects of ICC are delineated, there is the potential to identify *derived etics* based on common features across these emic cases. For example, based on descriptions of ICC from 37 student and non-student volunteers in 15 different countries, Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) identified empathy, experience, motivation, positive attitude toward other cultures, and listening as potential derived etics. The ability to respond to stereotyping, described as an aspect of ICC within the context of modern Islamic education (Ardhy, 2024), is likely relevant to other intercultural contexts and may also be a currently unrecognized, universal ICC skill.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this conceptual paper was twofold. First, it sought to identify and describe potential sources of ethnocultural bias specific to ICC, alerting researchers and practitioners seeking to mitigate such bias. It is clear that intercultural competence models and measures, when applied across cultures internationally or domestically, privilege a specific set of intercultural experiences, knowledge, and skills while neglecting others.

There are significant costs in failing to attend to this issue. On an individual level, measures that produce an over- or under-estimation of ICC may hinder the development of new skills or target the wrong areas for improvement. In some circumstances, assessments that fail to recognize a student's ICC may deprive them of opportunities for professional growth. On an institutional level, the use of ethnoculturally biased models or measures may result in inaccurate program evaluations or assessments of interventions. Most importantly, unless ethnocultural bias is addressed, ICC research will likely perpetuate a limited understanding of the nature and development of ICC.

A second aim of this paper was to detail how the combined emic-etic methodological approach can be used to increase the inclusivity of the ICC research literature. The emic-etic approach, which until now has not been applied to ICC, has the potential for identifying new universal aspects of ICC derived from a synthesis of culture-specific investigations. In addition, it facilitates the triangulation of research findings and aids rich theory development and incremental validity by incorporating contextual variables. Doerr (2020, p. 90) observed that ICC is not about the knowledge or skills themselves, "but their usefulness in a particular context." Testing the universality of presumed etic components of ICC and identifying likely emic components of ICC would aid in revealing the contexts that determine the value of specific intercultural traits, attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Current research on ethnocultural bias in ICC points to the need to better understand the role of power dynamics and ICC centrality in shaping such contexts.

It is thus prudent to facilitate the implementation of an emic-etic framework in future investigations of ICC. Researchers who have conducted emic-etic investigations on other topics (e.g., Cheung et al., 2011; Hansen & Heu, 2020) recommend the formation of international research teams and collaboration with local community members to ensure that both emic and etic perspectives are represented and to reduce the likelihood of imposed etics. It may also be helpful to make the evaluation of potential etics less daunting by allowing for more flexible approaches to assessing measurement invariance. For example, Fischer, Karl, Luczak-Roesch, & Hartle (2025, p.

151) reject the view that invariance is a binary in which any “identification of non-invariance ... deals the death blow to empirical research” and advocate for a more nuanced mapping approach.

Although the benefits of an emic-etic approach to ICC research are significant, in practical terms, this approach, particularly when used iteratively, is labor-intensive and time-consuming (Cheung et al, 2011). However, it is possible for ICC researchers, even in constructing a single study, to approach their contribution to the field from an emic-etic perspective and build on the extant literature with the goal of improving our understanding of the etic and emic aspects of ICC. This more inclusive approach will produce strategies for enhancing and assessing ICC that are germane to the diverse conditions in which students’ intercultural interactions occur and intercultural competence is essential.

Acknowledgement Statement: The authors would like to thank to all participants and the reviewers for providing comments in helping this manuscript to completion.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' contribution statements: The sole author is responsible for all aspects of this article, including conceptualization, investigation, writing, and editing.

Funding statements: As there was no external funding received for this research, the study was conducted without financial support from any funding agency or organization.

Data availability statement: Data is available at request. Please contact the corresponding author for any additional information on data access or usage.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect JICC's or editors' official policy or position. All liability for harm done to individuals or property as a result of any ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content is expressly disclaimed.

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