Intercultural Communication Competence: Well-being and Performance of Multicultural Teams

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Abstract: Multiethnic groups coexist in a typical Malaysian university setting. Cultural patterns are expressed through communication, facilitating better understanding between diverse cultural groups. Intercultural communication competence based on ethnicity is explained by employing structural equation modelling using Barrett and colleagues' (2013) indicators of attitude, knowledge, and skills. These three constructs are hypothesized to explain intercultural communication competence and its effect on well-being and performance. Purposive sampling via a self-administered survey involved 288 Malaysian educators from higher education. The findings confirm that both endogenous constructs -- well-being and team performance-- can be used as predictive factors to assess intercultural communication competence.

Keywords: intercultural communication, communication competence, educators, well-being, team performance.

1. Introduction

Malaysia comprises multiracial and multicultural communities where three predominant ethnicities coexist. Malays form the majority (67.4%) of the population, followed by the Chinese (24.6%) and Indians (7.3%) (Department of Statistics 2018). With the increased impact of globalization on the multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, multireligious society of Malaysia, there is a need to function effectively in one's own culture as well as that of others. In multicultural university settings, a large amount of communication and interaction takes place between educators from various ethnic backgrounds. Creating a culturally compatible communication platform that rejects ethnic, racial, religious, and gender discrimination and promotes equality is the aim of all multicultural research (Woolfolk 2010). Higher-education institutions need to develop an understanding and recognize their educators' cultural ethnocentrism and other biases before they form judgments.

Attitudes are usually based on people's cultural background (Nunan 1991). To understand these attitudes, researchers must address the underlying beliefs on which these attitudes are based (Benson & Nunan, 2002). Effective intercultural communication demands adopting a variety of strategies (Gay 2002, Ladson-Billings 1994). Inspiration comes from exploratory studies finding that culture and cultural diversity affect communication (Brooks, Bloomer & Manias, 2018; Chung, 2019). Cultural patterns of thought are expressed through communication.

Wen Huey (2012) found differences in work culture between Japanese and Malaysians when tested against five cultural dimensions. Idrus (2012) addressed the concept of shared identity among multicultural Malaysians. A study conducted on the three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia reported significant differences in negotiation styles (Osman-Gani & Tan,

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2002). Zawawi (2008), who studied the cultural values of employees, was clear about the limited scope of the study, which failed to consider all the main ethnic groups. Malaysian Culture as analyzed by other researchers, does not disclose any justification for the subtle differences that exist within its different ethnicities. Despite a national development plan for 2020 focused on uniting the three main ethnicities, studies highlighted intercultural discord and cultural disparities (Mustapha *et al.* 2009, Abdullah 2010).

Sualman, Hamzah, and Roskhamdi (2019) found that different Malaysian ethnic groups perceived engagement with other cultures as a challenging experience largely due to ethnocentrism, which is to say bias caused by historical forces. Although Malaysia is a multicultural nation, Malaysian ethnic groups perceive themselves as segregated. Previous studies have ignored the heterogeneity, a byproduct of global transformation and the emergence of a pluralistic Malaysian society (Fontaine & Richardson 2003; Fontaine, Richardson & Peik Foong 2002; Hofstede 1991, 2001). Different cultural groups have cultural similarities, but it would be wrong to assume that these groups share the same values. Communication competence is largely influenced by one's culture. Understanding differences leads to better, mutually beneficial relationships (Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella 2008).

Research on higher-education institutions has identified deficits in intercultural communication competence that result in conflicts and negatively affect the productivity of the institution (Ismail & Lawrence, 2012). This study aims to understand communication competence among the different cultural groups in Malaysia, with its effect on respondents' well-being and performance.

1.1 Cultural factors affecting communication

According to Hall (1990) and Lewis (1999, 2005), different cultural backgrounds facilitate different ways of communication that can lead to misunderstandings. Culture influences thought patterns, feelings, actions, and interactions, constituting basic communication behavior (Neuliep 2011). Dalib, Harun, and Yusof (2017) identified the critical importance of cultural identity consciousness toward intercultural competence.

Cultural congruence can be achieved when an ethnic group acknowledges the values, beliefs, traditions, practices, and lifestyles of other cultures. Would-be communicators must be able to accommodate others' demands for culturally adapted communication (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010). Woolfolk (2010) focuses on communication as the heart of interaction and the way that culture affects communication. Communication is never merely an interaction tool but a reflection of one's culture.

1.2 Intercultural communication competence

Hall (1959) was the first to use the term "intercultural communication", and his publication became "the first founding document" (Rogers & Hart 2002). Hall identified two major communication styles he called "high context" and "low context" (see also Dumitrescu 2013).

Bennett (1998) identified direct/indirect and contextual/personal communication styles as the main contributors to the scope and perception of intercultural communication. Neuling (1999) wrote that understanding a communicator's intentions can be challenging and lead to serious misunderstandings, including distorted and disrespectful views (see also Salo-Lee 2006). Côté and Clément (1994) describe an intercultural communication competent individual as recognizing the verbal and nonverbal communication styles of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Competency can be achieved when individual qualities, abilities, and intellect come together to form a unified self (Matveev 2002). Dinges and Lieberman (1989) treat communication competence and intercultural communication as synonymous.

An effective intercultural approach to communication takes a *receiver-centered view* (Sulkowski & Deakin, 2009), which encourages communicators to be more introspective (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). Nunan (1991) believed that an intercultural approach should take into consideration the attitudes of the receiver and the preferred nature of communication.

Intercultural communication competence requires remaining flexible, adapting to suit the needs of different individuals. An effective intercultural approach helps communicators create a tolerant, respectful, and comfortable environment.

Such an approach is a spinoff of Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Powesland, 1997), where one tries to match one's verbal and nonverbal communication to suit a listener. Americans and European men largely adopt a linear and direct communication approach, unlike Africans, Arabs, and Asians, who prefer indirect, contextualized communication. Such contextualized approaches are typical among European and American females, too. Malaysians are known to be indirect and ambiguous and to seek to save face under adversity. Each style has its strengths and limitations. Interculturalists try to develop competency in all these styles.

Intercultural communication competence enables interaction based on a better understanding among individuals and groups (Liu 2016). Differences in communication can be attributed to different language structures, compositional styles, cultural practices, norms, and thinking styles. While these differences can be a major source of misunderstanding and conflict, a good understanding of the fundamental patterns of intercultural communication competence can accommodate differences, reduce communication barriers, build relationships, and facilitate collaboration (Liu 2016). Appreciating differences is the main objective of intercultural communication.

There is neither a common approach nor a set of similar assumptions in this research area. What can be said is that intercultural communication competence thrives on interpersonal relationships and focuses on differences in all aspects of communication where one's culture is expressed.

Dalib, Harun and Yusof (2017), in studying university students, identify the critical importance of identity consciousness toward intercultural competence. Individuals can hold multiple cultural identities. Interculturally cultured individuals view their identity as continually reconstructed during the course of interaction in a multicultural environment.

Byram (1997) proposes five dimensions of intercultural communication: knowledge, interpretation, interaction skill, an open attitude, and cultural awareness. Gu (2017) classifies intercultural communication competence models into compositional (see also Hunter, White & Godbey 2006), co-orientational (see also Fantini 2005), developmental (see also Bennett 1986), adaptational (see also Kim 1988, Navas et al. 2005) and causal (Hammer *et al.* 1998).

Barrett and colleagues' (2013) comprehensive model serves as the main reference for this study. The model was adapted to suit the Malaysian context. Particular attention was given to the dimension of attitude, which includes appreciating culturally pluralist views, understanding the heterogeneity of culture, and showing the ability to adapt and maneuver in other cultures (Barrett et al. 2013, Byram 1997).

1.3. Intercultural communication, well-being and performance

Studies have highlighted how knowledge transfer is more effective when organizations take the necessary measures to cater to the well-being of their employees (Sulkowski & Deakin 2010, 2009). These studies have found that communication competence instills a sense of belonging, which promotes active participation and facilitates interpersonal relationships. An

interculturally competent individual should be able to display a range of behaviors appropriate to any given situation.

It is very important to connect before any real work output takes place. Recognizing the perceptions of individuals from different cultural backgrounds assists in the management of work teams for more effective performance.

Researchers define well-being in different ways. Easterlin (2003) associates well-being with happiness, growth, and satisfaction. Diener, Scollon, and Lucas (2009) relate well-being to feelings of satisfaction and pleasure. In most cases, well-being and happiness are used interchangeably (Diener, Scollon & Lucas 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

This study will use the term "well-being". It should be understood as a high-quality-of-life factor (Durand 2015, OECD 2013). The relation of well-being to overall happiness, life satisfaction, and positive emotions will be analyzed to understand the way it mediates between intercultural communication competence and multicultural team performance.

The impact of culture on intercultural communication competence and the performance of multicultural teams has not been studied extensively in Malaysia. Buzaglo and Wheelan (1999) studied the work performance of multicultural individuals to reveal the traits that promote productivity and efficiency (see also Matveev & Milter, 2004; Johnson, Lenartowicz & Apud 2006). The study's results revealed that a work group emerges as a high-performance team and achieves its work targets when its members recognize the need for continuous group development. A number of other studies have found a direct relationship between intercultural communication competence and effective performance (Matveev & Miller 2004; Sizoo et al. 2005; Chen, Lin & Sawangpattanakul 2011), while Gut, Wilczewski and Gorbaniuk (2017) express the need to explore continuously the relationship between cultural diversity and communication efficacy; they recommend further research on the best practices for building effective work teams.

Intercultural communication plays a crucial role in reducing anxiety, discomfort, and uncertainty during interaction with different cultures (Neuliep 2019). According to Yeasmin, Koivurova, and Heikkilä (2019), intercultural interaction promotes a feeling of trust and fairness. To the extent that intercultural communication exerts influence on well-being, it is a predictor of satisfaction and happiness.

To enhance the performance of a multicultural team, it is essential to increase awareness of communication patterns and styles (Wheelan, Buzaglo & Tsumura, 1998). Matveev (2002) and Dinges and Lieberman (1989) found a direct relationship between intercultural communication competence and performance. Other studies have found a positive correlation between intercultural competence and work attitudes and motivation, leading to higher performance for team members (Wilczewski, 2015; Zimmermann, 2010). Hmieleski and Sheppard (2019) investigated those attributes whereby employees see themselves as a good fit for their company, enhancing their well-being and leading to higher performance. Studies conducted in Malaysian higher-education institutions (Krishnasamy, Hussein & Dalib 2014, Ismail & Lawrence 2012) confirm the local need to develop intercultural communication competence to overcome the challenges faced by multicultural groups. This study is based on three hypotheses:

H1: Intercultural communication competence has a positive effect on well-being.

H2: Intercultural communication competence has a positive effect on team performance.

H3: Well-being has a positive effect on performance.

2. Methodology

The goal was to investigate how ethnic Malays, Chinese, and Indians perceived intercultural communication competence and to measure its impact on well-being and team performance. Public and private universities with a diverse set of participants (all educators) were chosen.

The data were collected primarily using purposive sampling. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012), purposive sampling allows researchers to "use judgment to select a sample that they believe, based on prior information, is best suited for the research.

The primary data collection was done via an online structured questionnaire. To ensure a satisfactory response rate, the prior consent of participants was obtained by email. All questions were compulsory; respondents could only submit their questionnaire after completing every question.

The questionnaire was pilot tested with a small group of individuals based on the convenience sampling method, designed to include all subgroups from the target population. The questionnaire was administered online to 60 academics from higher-education institutions in Malaysia. Forty-seven completed questionnaires were used to validate the pilot study results. All instruments of study revealed a high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha of more than 0.80. The Cronbach's alpha results for each instrument are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Cronbach's alpha.

Instrument	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
intercultural communication competence	.840	12
well-being	.956	7
team performance	.977	7

The intention of this study was to identify intercultural communication competence constructs and their relationship with well-being and team performance. Educators with the academic positions of tutor, assistant lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor, professor, dean, or director having multicultural work experience were chosen. G*Power results determined the minimum sample size to be 160. The study had 288 respondents.

The well-being indicators suggested by the OECD (2013) guidelines were used. The seven-item indicator tested in this study measures happiness, life satisfaction, positive and negative experience, satisfaction with life, degree of flourishing, and evaluation of the domain. A modified version of Wheelan's (1994, 1990) High-Performance Team Questionnaire was used to evaluate team performance. This likewise seven-item indicator assesses team performance at its highest development stage. A seven-point Likert scale was used, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, as validated by Griffith and colleagues (2016), Peterson and colleagues (2011), Arasaratnam (2009), Goldstein (1999), and others for all areas of intercultural communication competence.

Several intercultural competence models were used to evaluate intercultural communication competence. Models considered for this study were those of Bennett (1993), Byram (1997), King and Baxter Magolda (2005), Deardorff (2009, 2006), and Barrett and colleagues (2013). The operational model for this study closely followed Byram's intercultural communication competence model, adapted to the educational setting. The twelve-item indicator was based on the dimensions of attitude, knowledge, and skills proposed by Barrett and colleagues. Four questions addressed attitude, four knowledge, and four skills, with the questions for each dimension randomly distributed.

The first part of the questionnaire gathered demographic information, including ethnic background. The next three sections inquired into perceptions of communication competence and its influence on respondents' well-being and performance.

Descriptive statistics, reliability tests, correlation analysis, and advanced structural equation modelling were used to analyze the data and address the research hypotheses. Completed questionnaires were scanned for outliers and unengaged data. Construct reliability was examined, and confirmatory factor analysis was conducted.

3. Results

Participants were 58.3% female and 41.7% male; 36.1% Malay, 33.7% Chinese, and 30.2% Indian. Fifty-eight percent worked at private Malaysian universities, 27.4% at public Malaysian universities, and 14.6% at foreign universities. Lecturers accounted for 45.1% of the sample, senior lecturers 28.1%, associate professors 10.1%, professors 4.2%, assistant lecturers 3.5%, tutors 3.5%, deans and directors 3.1%, and deputy deans/deputy directors 2.4%. Just over a third had 0-5 years' experience (36.8%); 16% had 6-10 years, 20.1% 11-15 years, 9.7% 16-20 years, and 17.4% over 20 years.

Structural equation modelling was used to understand the multivariate data relationships for the three hypotheses, testing the measurement model to establish its convergent validity and discriminant validity. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to study the relationships between the measured indicators of the reflective construct (outer loadings).

First, the outer loadings and the relationships between the latent variables (path coefficients) were estimated in the structural model using the PLS-SEM algorithm. The three main assessment criteria to be met were internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Several threshold values were acceptable; but, for this study, loading values equal to or greater than 0.6 were accepted provided the summation resulted in high loading values and AVE scores of 0.6 (Byrne 2013).

Next, convergent validity was assessed to examine the degree that individual indicators reflect a converging construct compared to other indicators measuring other constructs (Urbach & Ahlemann 2010). The threshold value for AVE was 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi 1988, Fornell & Larcker 1981, Hair et al. 2017). According to the discriminant validity for Fornell and Larcker's criterion, the square root of AVE of a construct should be larger than the correlation between that construct and other constructs in the model. The discriminant validity for the *heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations* (HTMT) is achieved when the 90% bootstrap confidence level of HTMT does not include the value of 1.

Table 2: Measurement model.

Construct	Items	Loadings	Consistency reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
attitude	ATT1	0.873	0.848	0.652
	ATT2	0.813		
	ATT3	0.730		
knowledge	KNOW2	0.884	0.853	0.660
	KNOW3	0.818		
	KNOW4	0.728		
skill	SKIL2	0.916	0.881	0.713
	SKIL3	0.757		
	SKIL4	0.850		
team performance	TP1	0.856	0.950	0.730
	TP2	0.861		

	TP3	0.892		
	TP4	0.849		
	TP5	0.802		
	TP6	0.830		
	TP7	0.887		
well-being	WB1	0.893	0.953	0.743
	WB2	0.842		
	WB3	0.861		
	WB4	0.845		
	WB5	0.856		
	WB6	0.911		
	WB7	0.822		

Table 3: Discriminant validity using Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Items	ATT	KNOW	SKIL	TP	WB
ATT	0.808				
KNOW	0.209	0.812			
SKIL	0.334	0.673	0.844		
TP	0.293	0.417	0.493	0.854	
WB	0.168	0.371	0.307	0.515	0.862

Table 4: Discriminant validity using the HTMT criterion.

Items	ATT	KNOW	SKIL	TP	WB
ATT					
KNOW	0.235				
SKIL	0.410	0.885			
TP	0.217	0.498	0.570		
WB	0.192	0.414	0.338	0.538	

The consistency reliability (CR) of all indicators (attitude, knowledge, skill, performance, well-being) and their loading values is more than 0.730 after the deletion of items ATT4, KNOW1 and SKIL1. These indicators were deleted because they failed to satisfy the threshold factor loading of 0.5.

Based on the results presented in Table 2, the convergent validity of the model was verified by the average variance extracted (AVE) with a minimum value of 0.652, and construct reliability (CR) of 0.848 (Hair et al. 2017). Next, the Fornell and Larcker criterion (Fornell 1981) and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) were used to check the discriminant validity. For the Fornell and Larker criterion (Table 3), the square root of each construct's AVE should be higher than its highest correlation with any other construct (Fornell 1981).

The results show that this study achieved discriminant validity for all constructs. An acceptable value for HTMT must be lower than 0.9 (Table 4). According to Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015), HTMT values should not exceed 0.85 for the constructs that are conceptually most distinct. The results again show that discriminant validity is achieved for all constructs.

Table 5: Hypothesis testing – partial least squares

Hypothesis	Relation	Std. beta	Std. error	t-value	Decision	R2	Q2	F2	VIF
H1	ATT→WB	0.086	0.073	1.695	supported	0.236	.0130	0.006	1.514
	KNOW→WB	0.299	0.312	3.379	supported			0.050	2.532
	SKIL→WB	0.075	0.100	1.961	supported			0.016	2.434
H2	ATT→TP	0.047	0.038	2.150	supported	0.303	0.180	0.006	1.514
	KNOW→TP	0.154	0.045	3.450	supported			0.050	2.532
	SKIL→TP	0.095	0.055	1.760	supported			0.016	2.434
H3	WB→TP	0.515	0.060	8.570	supported	0.303	0.180	0.361	1.000

For Hypothesis 1, Table 5 shows the relationship between the three intercultural communication competence constructs and the independent variable, well-being, with its t-value ≥ 1.645, significant at the 0.05 level. This explains 23.6% of the variance in well-being.

For Hypothesis 2, the table shows the relationship between the three intercultural communication competence constructs and the independent variable, team performance, with its t-value ≥ 1.645, significant at the 0.05 level. This explains 30.3% of the variance in team performance.

For Hypothesis 3, the table shows the relationship between well-being and the independent variable, team performance, with its t-value 8.570, significant at the 0.05 level. This explains 30.3% of the variance in team performance. All three hypotheses stand supported.

In conclusion, the findings show that well-being and team performance increase with an increase in intercultural communication competence, while well-being shows a substantial positive correlation with team performance. Therefore, these factors can be used as predictive factors to assess intercultural communication competence.

The VIF values were found to be below the threshold values of 5 (Hair et al. 2017) and 3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw 2006). This means that the collinearity values are far below the critical levels, and again, this model can be used for estimating intercultural communication competence.

4. Discussion

The study is intended to develop intercultural communication competence among local Malaysian educators as recommended by Krishnasamy, Hussein, and Dalib (2014), helping them to prevail over the challenges of communication in a multicultural environment that directly affects their well-being and team performance (Ismail & Lawrence, 2012). Pandian (2008) reports the perception of internationals who believe that Malaysians lack intercultural communication competence and believe that higher-education institutions do little to promote it.

The findings of this study support those of previous studies that culture influences communication and perception of communication (e.g., Brooks, Bloomer, & Manias, 2018; Chung, 2019). Intercultural communication competence facilitates cooperation among multicultural team members by promoting understanding (Korzenny & Griffs-Korzenny, 1984), thereby reducing anxiety, discomfort, and uncertainty (Neuliep, 2019); while team members adopting differing communication styles lead to bias and misunderstanding (Lewis, 1998).

The findings of this study are likewise in accordance with those of Yeasmin, Koivurova, and Heikkilä (2019), who found that intercultural communication competence positively affects well-being by promoting a feeling of trust and fairness. Intercultural communication competence emerges as an important predictor of satisfaction and happiness.

Like the studies of Matveev (2002), Wilczewski (2015), and Zimmermann (2010), this study found a direct positive correlation between intercultural communication competence and the performance of multicultural teams. Likewise, this study found a positive correlation between well-being and team performance, in keeping with previous studies (Athota, Budhwar & Malik 2019; Cooper et al. 2019; Guest 2017; Hmieleski & Sheppard 2019).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The results of this study confirm that communication is contextual in nature. The results add to existing knowledge of intercultural understanding among ethnic groups. The instruments used in this study can be replicated in any multiracial workplace. This study hopes to trigger research interest in intercultural communication as researchers come to understand better the influence of culture on communication competence, well-being and work performance.

The authors recommend that future researchers observe real-life situations to understand the dynamic nature of intercultural communication competence. Researchers should bear in mind that intercultural competence is not limited to communication but can be applied to all areas of interaction.

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