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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### EDUCATION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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#### ABSTRACT

Since globalization requires people from diverse cultural backgrounds to communicate effectively, the concept of intercultural communication competence has received increasing attention from researchers. Higher education is a prominent setting in which intercultural interactions take place frequently. Given the increasingly diverse nature of the world, intercultural competence is a logical goal for schools. Students must be prepared to adequately understand the nature of their own cultural beliefs and to appreciate and respect cultural differences by developing their intercultural competence.

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## INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a prominent setting in which intercultural interactions take place frequently. There is a constant need for respect and awareness of cultural similarities and differences in higher education. So, improving students' understanding of cultural, religious, and ethnic differences is relevant to the general education of university students. To succeed in a diverse world, students should be able to communicate and negotiate among diverse cultures (Banks, 2001). Hammer et al. (2003) term this "ability to think and act in culturally appropriate ways" (p.2) as intercultural competence. Students need to have intercultural competence, which is the capacity to change one's attitudes, values, and behavior to be open to and flexible with other cultural, religious and ethnic groups. This skill is increasingly crucial for individuals to survive in our globalized society (ibid). This means that many students attending universities are likely to encounter students from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. To successfully interact, students require some level of awareness and understanding of each other's cultural backgrounds and differences. Such awareness may influence their behavior, interaction, style, and produce positive outcomes for all culturally distinct individuals.

In the 21st century, higher education must answer the demands of the work world, i.e. prepare university students for employability by training them to collaborate. Students need qualifications like the ability to work in other languages and cultures to become more employable (Mason, 1994). Because of the increasingly intercultural nature of the workplace and community, goals related to personal development are important for graduates who will need skills to communicate effectively with people from all diverse backgrounds. Since the graduates are supposed to lead our societies in the future, they should be educated and trained in the ideology of intercultural communication. According to Jansen (2004), universities face the challenges of an increasingly diverse student population. Hence, educational policymakers should acknowledge that schools are established to serve not only individuals but the larger society. Tye and Tye (1992) argue that education must be aimed toward global citizenship where all students are engaged in "the study of themselves as members of the human species, as inhabitants of planet earth, and as participants in the global social order" (xvii). This great purpose of education means that all students must learn the knowledge and skills that will enable them to interact with others from diverse backgrounds and to take responsibility for making their society more congruent with democratic ideals.

Schools represent a rich multicultural context to promote equal human relations. Students should develop their intercultural competencies to efficiently intercultural communication. In a diverse and multicultural society, it is inevitably to avoid the contact among people who do not necessarily share their beliefs, values, lifestyles, etc. Developing the conscious effort for understanding and establishing pacific coexistence has always been a challenge of the universities. Guo-Ming & Strasota (1998) state that academic exposure to the multicultural environment will provide students with the skills to excel in the real world. Because students ultimately return to a world outside the school, the more fully they learn to recognize and to respect differences in the beliefs, values and worldviews of people of varying cultural extraction the more effectively will they promote a multicultural society beyond the classroom. Hence, students should be made aware of intercultural communication competence and its value to particularly prepare them for the workplace. (p. 226) This means that the daily interactions on university campus are certainly affected by cultural differences. These differences can be challenging because students interact with others who come from culturally diverse backgrounds and have different values, traditions, and ideologies. Studying at the university can be considered a developmental phase in the sense that students undergo important shifts in knowing themselves and community. These two areas influence their learning process and experiences, and their cultural interaction with other individuals and societies. In higher education, students try to build and shape their identity because they face new responsibilities and freedom. By going through these transformations, students can understand the interdependence of self and society, the interaction with others, and work on a shared action that benefits the common goal. Issues related to diversity have been frequent topics of discussion among educational policymakers in the hope of bridging the academic gap that exists between ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students. Students' academic achievement is an important goal of schools and poses great challenges to educators during the drastic demographic changes. Higher education needs to reevaluate curriculum, instruction, and assessment to ensure that all aspects of educational practice capitalize on all students' cultural backgrounds. Hence, the development of intercultural communication competency needs to be fostered.

**Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC):** Intercultural communication competence is a significant variable that should be considered at any intercultural context or interaction. ICC can be conceptualized as the individuals' ability to achieve their communication goal while effectively and appropriately utilizing communication behaviors to negotiate between the different identities present within a culturally diverse environment (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). In other words, intercultural diversity requires culturally sensitive knowledge, using specific skills to understand and appreciate other cultures. ICC is also defined as the acquiring of the "knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman, 2002, p.192). Understanding intercultural diversity has gained increasing interest in both the educational and business sectors because employers and educators believe that employees and learners should be intercultural better trained to work in multicultural environments (Sercu, 2004).

To understand the concept of intercultural communication competence (ICC), it is important to define culture because it is the shared beliefs and value systems by a cultural group which shape its behavior during an intercultural interaction at university.

**Culture:** The existing literature review on culture reveals that the concept has been broadly studied and that it is complex and difficult to describe or define. However, the literature identifies some classic definitions of culture that are agreed upon and are widely accepted. For clarity of the term, the researcher is giving an overview of the definitions and dimensions of culture. It is noteworthy to mention that since most of the existing ICC theories were advanced and developed by American and European scholars, the reader should be aware that the dominant studies of ICC are close to the Western world views (Miike, 2012). The word 'culture' is derived from the Latin word 'colere', which means 'to build', 'to care for' or 'to cultivate' as taken from this link <http://www.etymonline.com>. Therefore, 'culture' often refers to something that is derived from, or advanced by the intervention of humans. Having said so, the word 'culture' is usually used to describe something refined, or to define the concept of selected, valuable, and cultivated artefacts of a society (Dahl, 1998, 2000) which all together form the culture. Since 'Culture' is conceived of as a value in itself and justified as an inherited 'tradition' (Bennett, 2001), the notion of cultural diversity was given international political legitimacy by the World Commission on Culture and Development in a report entitled *Our Creative Diversity* (UNESCO, 1996).

In relation to intercultural communication competence, researchers define culture as a body of knowledge that help people to understand how to communicate with others from diverse cultural settings and how to read their behaviors (Gudykunst, 2004; Hall, 1976). Also, according to Miike (2010), it is important for researchers to acknowledge the significance of culture as a theory in intercultural communication studies. Culture, certainly, influences the development of ICC and how people construct it while they communicate. Following this stream, culture influences communication and vice versa; and it is helpful in transmitting a culture. This idea is supported by Hall (1959) who says that "culture is communication and communication is culture" (p. 186). Culture is related to individuals' identity and is, essentially, about belonging to a group. It is taken for granted as the natural way to behave or think. That is, individuals cannot be aware of another culture unless they are confronted with something different which makes them able to see culture in operation. In other words, individuals do not always admit that their behaviors and thoughts are influenced by their different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, culture can be compared to water in which individuals swim and, just like fish, individuals don't know what water is until it is put on dry land. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), culture is seen "as an essential component of the effort of human beings to survive and thrive in their particular environment" (p.12). She says:

Culture serves as the 'safety net' in which individuals seek to satisfy their needs for identity, inclusion, boundary regulation, adaptation, and communication coordination. Culture facilitates and enhances individuals' adaptation processes in their natural cultural habitats.

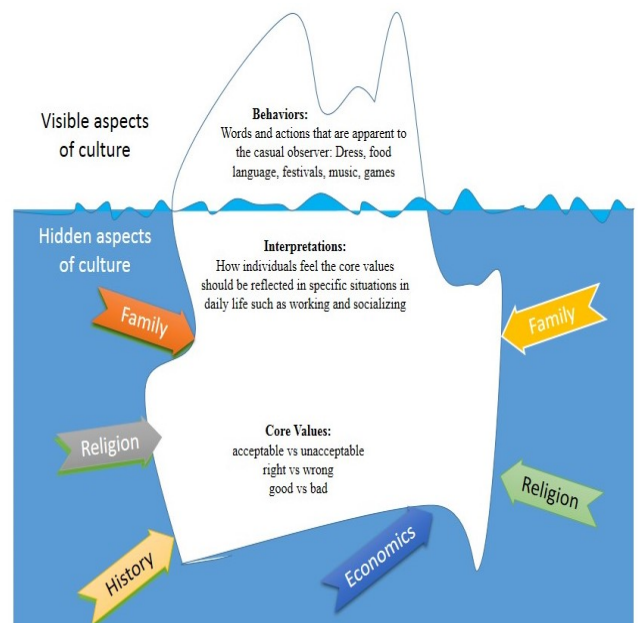
Communication, in essence, serves as the major means of linking these diverse needs together. (p.15). This means that individuals are active recipients of the culture in which they live within, and they do not conceive it as an abstract object to be observed. Therefore, culture is built by the social interactions between a group and its environment, i.e., individuals become co-creators of culture (Segall, et al., 1998). Culture is acquired and taught, from the time of an individual's birth, through interaction with people surrounding individuals such as family members, friends, neighbors and teachers.

The complexity of culture is reflected in its different definitions and interpretations. Cognitively speaking, for Hofstede (1984) "Culture is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture, in this sense, is a system of collectively held values" (p. 51). In the same context, Erickson (as cited in Banks & Banks, 2007) compared culture to the software system of a computer:

Culture can be considered as the software - the coding system for doing meaning and executing sequences of work - by which our human physiological and cognitive hardware is able to operate so that we can make sense and take action with others in daily life. Culture structures the 'default' conditions of the everyday practices of being human. (p. 33). An influential definition of culture is that of the anthropologist, E.B. Tyler who describes culture as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (in Banks, 2006, p. 70). More profound concepts, such as Hall and Hofstede, are required to allow for a more detailed analysis of culture at a different level. Cultural interaction creates, evidently, cultural differences between two culturally distinct groups as discussed in the following section.

**Cultural Diversity:** Individuals are not alike and have divergent backgrounds and traits. Individuals coming from different cultures are more likely to feel deep differences when interacting in a new learning or working setting which means that cultural difference clashes may arise. Therefore, understanding individuals' own behavior is recommended to be able to evaluate how it is seen from different culture's perspectives and to try to find positive things in norms that individual does not like. For example, when Western tourists visit Morocco for the first time, they may not feel comfortable when someone stands closer to them. However, once they understand that it is a way through which Moroccans express their connection and extend warmth and not an invasion of other's space, they understand this behavior. This means that people should increase their awareness and knowledge about other cultural norms to figure out behavior and to decipher situations, i.e., to be aware of diversity existence, people should be able to adapt to other cultures in intercultural communication to avoid misinterpreted behavior and to reduce misunderstanding and communication breakdowns. This predictability and accurate attributions can be reached by knowing cultural values, identities, and attitudes because it helps to well understand the internal logic and behavior of another culture, which might be considered a first best guess (Adler, 2002) about that behavior. Higher education also presents an important opportunity for students to engage with

others from cultures around the country or the world. This cultural interaction constitutes cultural diversity and can be an excellent educational experience that a person has in an academic setting. As the proverb says, "a man who has never travelled thinks his mama's cooking is the best." The difference is not seen until individuals venture elsewhere and feel the change in culture. Cultural differences are either observable or hidden. Visible cultures include artefacts, symbols, and practices (art and architecture), language, color and dress, and traditions. These cultural differences make up only ten percent of our cultural identities, and ninety are unseen. Culture is compared to an iceberg or an onion because so much goes undiscovered and because culture consists of various levels. According to Hall's cultural distinctions, culture communicates. In 1976, the anthropologist Edward T. Hall developed the iceberg model to well understand culture (see figure 1 below). He used iceberg as a metaphor to illustrate the complexity of culture. This metaphor illustrates the social presence of culture and the ways for re-creating levels of cultural development. He (1959) says that "Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants" (p.55). The surface level of the iceberg is visible and tangible (conscious) while the below or the deep level beneath the surface part of culture is invisible (subconscious) and it is many times bigger than the tangible surface. Therefore, to understand a culture, individuals must dive deep and get close to it.

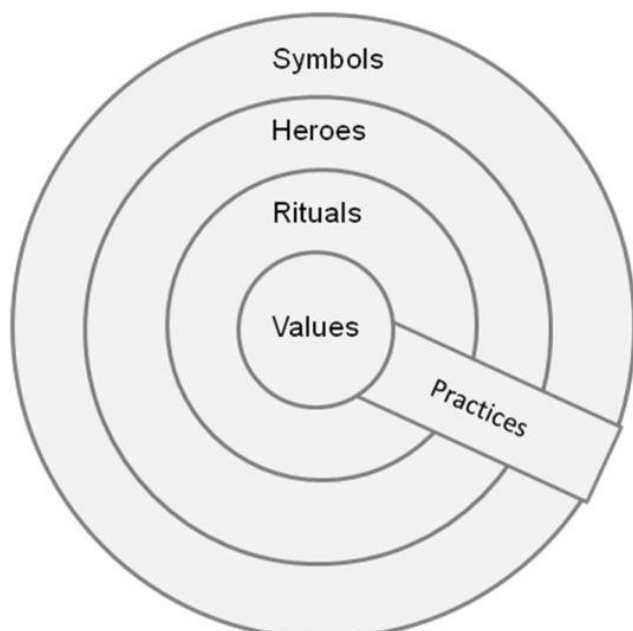


Source: Adapted and inspired from (Hall, 1976)

**Figure 1. Iceberg culture concept**

There is another way to explain the concept of culture which is the onion model (see figure 2 below). Hofstede has suggested the onion metaphor to describe cultural phenomenon. The onion theory was first unveiled in Hofstede's (1980) book *Culture's Consequences*. While Hofstede established and lead the human resources research department of IBM Europe between 1965 and 1971, he was able to collect data that would serve as the empirical foundation of cultural dimensions' theory. The concept illustrates the level of depth in which cultural phenomena are rooted in people's minds.

Like an onion, people can “peel” culture and strip down its layers. This kind of analogy shows that culture is the deep inner core of abstract ideas that manifest as increasingly tangible outer layers. The inner core is similar to the submerged base of the iceberg: Values and assumptions. Individuals cannot know how the inside is, no matter how the color of the onion is, unless they peel off layer by layer. Within interaction, individuals may judge other cultural groups by external factors, but if they take time to talk and exchange deeper experiences, they get to know each other better. Definitely, some identities can be easily detected while others usually need interaction to penetrate deeper layers.



Source: Hofstede et al., 1990

**Figure 2. Culture as an onion – Hofstede Manifestations of culture at different levels of depth**

Hofstede (1991) explains culture in terms of an onion which can be peeled, layer by layer, to uncover the content and to discover the various levels which influence culture in a society. According to the same researcher (1993), symbols are the upper part of culture while the deepest level is the core value. The layers present various levels of any culture according to Hofstede’s concept. Both iceberg and onion models focus on the importance of the hidden components of culture. In other words, problems arising from cultural differences cannot be resolved at the surface. In addition, it is necessary to bridge cultural differences in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts by understanding the values, the assumptions, and the beliefs of a cultural group and not only by emphasizing the visible part of the culture. Hence for an effective problem- solving, people from different cultural backgrounds have to discover and explore elements beneath the surface and peel away the outer layers to reach or reveal the core values which are invisible and subconscious and often overlooked.

According to Hofstede (1984), “Culture is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values” (p. 51).

This means that culture is a collective mental programming and a software of the mind. According to Hofstede (1998), the complexity of the human mind regarding culture is identified through three levels of mental programming (human nature, culture, and personality). In 1980, Hofstede proposed four dimensions, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism and masculinity vs. femininity. In 1987 and after conducting independent studies in Hong Kong, he added the fifth dimension, long-term vs. short-term orientation, to describe value aspects that were not a part of his original theory. The sixth dimension, indulgence vs. self-restraint was devised in 2010 by Hofstede and the co-author Michael Minkov in an edition of *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. This index deals with the degree to which societies can exercise control over their impulses and desires; and focuses on happiness. According to Hofstede and Minkov (2010), a society that practices indulgence makes room for the comparatively free gratification of natural and basic human drives pertaining to indulging in fun and enjoying life. The quality of restraint describes a society that holds back gratification and tries to control it through stringent social norms.

Hofstede describes culture as a shared set of basic assumptions and values which lead to behavioral norms and attitudes which manifest themselves in systems and institutions, and that culture is not genetic or inheritable but is learnable. Like Hall, who describes culture as an iceberg with surface and deeper parts, Hofstede compares culture to an onion composed of both visible and invisible layers which can be measured by the culture dimensions. So, culture is influenced partly by the human nature and partly by the individual personality, i.e. even if culture is shared between members of one group or society, individuals participate in modifying the expressions of culture-resultant behavior. Certainly, the study of cultural dimensions has been of significant help in reaching a deeper understanding of the situations in which students learn in unfamiliar cultural settings. Therefore, there was a necessity to find out the best way to understand and implement the dimension approach to intercultural competence. This competence can be applied to university environment. Consequently, researchers such as Earley and Ang(2003) and Thomas and Inkson(2004) presented a new perspective in effectively intercultural communication differences that is called the cultural intelligence (CQ)

**Impact of Culture Diversity on Education:** Willard Waller (1932) says that “Schools have a culture that is definitely their own” (p. 96) while Deal and Peterson (1999) point out that “organizations usually have clearly distinguishable identities manifested in organizational members’ patterns of behavior, thought, and norms. The concept of culture helps us understand these varied patterns...” (p. 3). This means that every school and organization has its unwritten culture rules traditions, and norms that are manifested in its daily life such as the way people act, and what they should talk about or what is not permitted as Deal and Peterson (1999) point out below: This invisible, taken-for-granted flow of beliefs and assumptions gives meaning to what people say and do. It shapes how they interpret hundreds of daily transactions. This deeper structure of life in organizations is reflected and transmitted through symbolic language and expressive action. Culture consists of the stable, underlying social meanings that

shape beliefs and behavior over time. (p. 7). Organizations such as schools, as well as individuals, have their own cultures. In relations to education and to the learning process, Ting-Toomey (1999) defines five functions of culture to explain the cultural interactions between teachers and students. These functions are identity meaning, group inclusion, intergroup boundary regulation, ecological adaptation, and cultural communication function.

- Identity meaning: A group is identified through its culture which provides the frame of
- reference in the form of values, beliefs, and norms by which both teachers and students
- identify themselves.
- Group inclusion means that individuals should feel the inclusion and belonging to a group. This can be seen on immigrant students who are trying to adapt themselves and feel secure within a new school environment because they bring, to classes, different values and beliefs different than that of their teachers.
- Intergroup boundary regulation means that individuals tend to be more ethnocentric because their culture influences their behavior which may likely be the relationship between teachers and their students who come from different cultural backgrounds. In this respect, Ting-Toomey (1999) states that “Culture helps us to form evaluative attitudes [positive or negative] toward in-group and out-group interactions” (p. 13).
- The function of ecological adaptation means that people adapt themselves, accordingly, to their needs to do things in response to the environmental factors; hence changes in culture occur. Ting-Toomey (1999) explains that culture “facilitates the adaptation processes among the self, the cultural community, and the larger environment” while Triandis (1994) says that the “realities of the environment create conditions for the development of particular cultural, socialization, and behavioral patterns” (p. 23). In other words, culture encourages behaviors that are compatible with its ecology and disregards those that are not.
- Cultural communication function considers culture as a body of knowledge which helps individuals to communicate and interpret their behaviors effectively though both groups who are from different cultures (Gudykunst, 2004; Hall, 1976). So, culture and communication, in this sense, are influencing each other. Students and teachers who are coming from distinct cultural settings and lack the system of knowledge that informs them of the norms that govern interaction within each other’s group may face difficulties in understanding each other during their interaction.

Overall, Ting-Toomey (1999) explains that culture plays these different functions “as an essential component of the effort of human beings to survive and thrive in their particular environment” and she summarizes:

Culture serves as the ‘safety net’ in which individuals seek to satisfy their needs for identity, inclusion, boundary regulation, adaptation, and communication coordination. Culture facilitates and enhances individuals’ adaptation processes in their natural cultural habitats. Communication, in essence, serves as the major means of linking these diverse needs together. (p.15)

The most important challenge of diversity is overcoming personal biases, i.e., the tending to prefer one thing over another. So, experience with cultural diversity is expected to help students to see their own culture from a distinct perspective and ways and become more creative, effective communicators, and critical thinkers when a different culture faces them. University campuses are growing more diverse, and it is becoming evident that students need to understand cultural differences to communicate effectively with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. So, students need to develop their cultural diversity awareness because culture plays a significant role in intercultural settings while interacting and communicating with others who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. In addition, intercultural communication is needed and required to succeed in today’s diverse society. Hinner (1998) defines the concept of intercultural communication as the ability to communicate verbally and nonverbally with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, and in a way that messages are conveyed with no huge interpretations. So, communication is a highly recommended skill to develop by students to succeed in today’s increasingly competitive markets since it includes involving the relationships between people using verbal and nonverbal codes.

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