

Intercultural competence in professional contexts

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Practical background. As a result of the global economy, the rise in touristic mobility and the rise in global organizational competitiveness, an increasing number of people criss-crosses cultural boundaries, and requires competencies to deal with diversity and interculturality on the job (Brew & Cairns, 2004). In all these contexts people need to know how to approach others in an interculturally appropriate manner. Lists of do's and don'ts for coping with cultural differences - often mentioned in touristic guides and occasionally in academic literature - are no longer sufficient in a professional context (Catteeuw & Coutuer, 2005). Although academic literature refers to a wide range of intercultural instruments, usually developed from international experiences of expatriates and international exchange students (for an overview see Paige, 2004), literature so far does not offer a coherent frame of reference for intercultural competence.

Research background. Despite this absence of a coherent frame of reference for intercultural competence, increasing numbers of actors seem to recognize the importance and the practical relevance of being intercultural competent in professional contexts. As a result, both in the professional and in the educational domain, ways are being sought to assess people's level of acquired intercultural competence. Illustrations of more recent instruments or attempts to develop these competences are for example the competence matrices (Botta and co-workers, 2007; Catteeuw, 2006), or portfolios (Jacobson and co-workers, 1999).

Aims. We intend to develop a professionally sensitive instrument to assess intercultural competence in two specific domains: education and office management in business contexts. Whereas international business and foreign language teaching has a firmly restricted focus, i.e. cultural accommodation of expatriates and acquiring intercultural competence via learning a foreign language, this tool seeks to widen the scope of intercultural competence by integrating all the available insights from research and practice. Complementary to this instrument we aim to develop an adjusted training module that can be offered in educational and business environments respectively.

Main contribution. The instrument and complementary training help to map out the acquired intercultural competence of actors in the educational and business setting. While portfolios follow up the development of a person in the long run, our instrument offers a quick overview of the strengths and weaknesses of a person's intercultural competence. In order to reach this objective, different steps were undertaken.

First, the main conclusions of the literature study were the starting point for the clarification of the followed

definition of interculturality and its relevance to intercultural competence.

Second, in order to adjust the instrument to the expectations and needs of these work fields, interviews were carried out among management assistants and human resource managers. In addition to the interviews, a digital survey was sent to alumni students of the Office Management and Teacher Education programs at the University College of Mechelen, and to management assistants belonging to different professional networks.

Third, based on these clarifications, a general intercultural framework (an intercultural matrix) is developed and concrete indicators to measure people's level of acquired intercultural competence were identified.

Fourth, the instrument will be tested in both work fields. Besides the testing, the tool will be linked to a specially adjusted training offer for actors in the two work fields to improve their intercultural competence.

Introduction

Due to the growing diversity in society (on the street, in institutions and in organizations and companies), and in international mobility (tourism and professional goals) people from all over the world get in contact with people with more and more diverse (cultural) backgrounds. Much of what we know about the coping strategies to approach intercultural situations, can be traced back to the experiences of people who crossed the borders (expats in international business life, students in exchange programs). For a long time, literature on interculturality was almost exclusively focused on internationalization processes. Today, we notice a growing recognition of domestic intercultural experiences as a result of ongoing migration dynamics within the national borders.

Due to growing contacts and confrontations with intercultural situations the question can be raised to what extent people have the capacity to deal with diversity and interculturality on the job and in everyday life (Brew & Cairns, 2004)? In all these contexts people need to know how to approach others in an interculturally appropriate manner. Lists of do's and don'ts for coping with cultural differences - often mentioned in touristic guides and occasionally in academic literature - are no longer sufficient in a professional context (Catteeuw & Coutuer, 2005). Due to the fact that literature reveals many approaches to intercultural competence (Foreign Language Teaching, business life, social sector, etc), it also lacks a coherent frame of reference for intercultural competence.

Despite this absence of a coherent frame of reference, increasing numbers of actors seem to recognize the importance and the practical relevance of being intercultural competent in professional contexts. As a result, both in the professional and in the educational domain, ways are being sought to assess people's level of acquired intercultural competence. An extensive overview of intercultural instruments, mostly developed from international experiences of expatriates and international exchange students and in Anglo-Saxon contexts is given by Paige (2004). Other illustrations of instruments are for example the competence matrices (Botta and co-workers, 2007; Catteeuw, 2006), or portfolios (Jacobson and co-workers, 1999).

Since the current attempts to develop intercultural measure instruments are mostly developed in an Anglo-Saxon context, this research project examines the significance of intercultural competence in the Flemish Higher Educational field of Business Education and Teacher Education.

Therefore we explore first the literature concerning intercultural competence in higher education and intercultural theory from an eclectic point of view. Further we explore the stance towards intercultural competence within the business world. We will develop an instrument that proves its practical and context sensitive value. This intercultural measure instrument gives a quick but thorough scan of one's intercultural competence. What are the strengths and weaknesses, where is growth desirable? The results of this instrument form the starting point for an adjusted training offer to ameliorate one's level of intercultural competence.

An incoherent intercultural competence frame of reference

Context of competences

The role and importance of competences was firstly emphasized within business life. Due to the current trends of internationalization, labour mobility and growing technological changes companies are no longer looking for employees with ready steady knowledge, but they need employees who can cope with knowledge in a flexible and creative way. In order to meet the new demands of the labour market higher education has to prepare her students to be flexible in fast changing labour environments. To meet these challenges, changes on the labour market and in organizations should get a central place in education. Education should pay more attention to skills and attitudes that allow students to adapt flexible to new labour situations.

Definition of competence. Generally, competences enclose three main elements: the result or the product that must be achieved, the description of the quality of the result or the product, and the professional situation where the competence should be shown (Grit et al., 2008). Therefore, competences should be concretized in behavioural indicators; concrete behaviour that indicated the acquired competence. One behavioural indicator is not

enough, a combination of behavioural indicators should be formulated (Danckaert, 2008). Though behavioural indicators are relevant, not all aspects of competences are strictly visible in behaviour. As with an iceberg only the top is visible.

Measurement of competence. Competences can be described with the help of a competence matrix that encloses professional specific and general competences. Such a matrix is a structured overview of the growing line in the competences that runs as a central thread throughout the curriculum of the education. This growing line can be structured in different levels: explorative, comprehensive, integrative, or expert level. The evaluation of competences can be done by means of behavioural indicators. It is not necessary, however, to formulate an indicator for each element of the competence (knowledge, skills and attitudes), since competences are integrated wholes of these element, complex and not always visible in behaviour. Invisible and more subjective aspects of competences, such as motivation, norms and values also play a role (Hermans, 2007; Simons, 2003).

The acquirement of competences should be followed-up closely and in a systematic way. So students can examine how competent they are, and what competences they want to ameliorate. A tool to explore competences is a Personal Development Plan which poses the following questions: who am I, what are my abilities, where do I fit in, what do I want to become, and what do I have to do for that? In competence focused education students play a more active and autonomous role; they are more involved in the learning process and more responsible for their own development. Despite the growing responsibility of the student, teachers have to maintain to fulfill their role as experts and coaches (Danckaert, 2008; Hermans, 2008; Simons, 2000).

Intercultural Competence

As is broadly known, this research field on interculturality is highly characterized by its multidisciplinary approach. Defining what intercultural competence is about, starts with the many attempts in literature that are undertaken to map out what culture, cultural differences and the impact of culture on interaction is. In addition to this knowledge, many authors described which characteristics, skills, knowledge and attitudes one has to show to manage intercultural encounters effectively.

The impact of culture on interaction. Since several decades authors tried to lay bare the role of culture in encounters between people with different cultural backgrounds. In the first place international experiences led to the development of countless lists of cultural do's and don'ts. As a reaction to this ad hoc lists for each country, some authors tried to identify more fundamental cultural structures; the main dimensions on which culture differ from each other (Strodtbeck & Kluckhohn, 1961; Hofstede, 1999; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1999; Pinto, 2000). Others tried to figure out the cultural aspect in intercultural (interpersonal) communication (Hoffman, 2002; Oomkes, 1991 ; Shadid, 1998). And many Anglo-Saxon authors have tried to map out the required skills, attitude and knowledge to cope and manage intercultural relations. These attempts result into several

concepts referring to intercultural competence (intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, cross-cultural communicative competence, etc).

Intercultural Competence. In the latest decennia the different concepts converge to the concept of 'intercultural competence'; such as intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Shadid, 2003), intercultural competence (Fantini, 2000), generic cultural competence (Choi, 1995). Not only the concepts but also their content seem to show similarities. At the same time the different backgrounds of the authors (Foreign Language Teaching, business life, social sector, etc.) lead to a different focus on the central features of their approach to intercultural competence. Beamer (1992) and Yunxia (2000) emphasize the cognitive aspect of intercultural competence. Van Endt-Meijling (2003) underline the affective side. Shadid (1998) and Stier (2003) focus on the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and Kealey et al. (2003) and Vulpe et al. (2001) formulated intercultural competence in terms of behavioural indicators.

Business field enquired

Mapping out different definitions of and views on intercultural competence, gave us a first orientation towards measuring intercultural competence. Next to the literature we also needed to explore the work field itself, if we aim to an instrument that proves its practical and context sensitive value.

Research question

During introductory talks with actors of the educational field and the business context, the relevance of an intercultural competence measure instrument was questioned. On the one hand intercultural competence is recognized as an important asset to cope with the growing diversity and interculturality on the work floor. On the other hand, however, one is skeptic whether potential employees should also be selected on the basis of their level of intercultural competence. Most actors believe that intercultural competence is learnt by 'doing' on the job. In further discussions, however, no profound answers were given to the specific content of this 'intercultural factor'.

This finding led to the following questions: (1) what role does intercultural competence play in the daily functioning of companies, and (2) which personal interpretation is given to intercultural competence? More concrete, two central questions were formulated: (1) how do the actors define the central concepts of the literature study (intercultural competence, intercultural differences, and intercultural conflict), and (2) what role do these concepts play in the daily functioning on the work floor?

Study 1

Methodology. In an exploratory field research the intercultural competence in the business life is examined via interviews and a digital survey. An interview guideline composing of eleven questions (open as well as closed questions) was developed. Interviews were carried out

among management assistants and Human Resource managers.

Results. In line with literature, the concept of "intercultural competence" calls for a wide range of associations. This wealth could be reduced to three main categories. The first category referred to the unfamiliarity with the concept (never heard of it, no idea, don't know). A second category refers to answers that gave a partial meaning to the concept, e.g. referral to a description of basic competences, the equation of diversity or interculturality. Or the added value instead of a description of the concept itself. A third category refers to definitions, as found in literature. These definitions include elements such as coping with, living together or communicating with people of different cultures:

"An intercultural competence is something a leading person should have, the competence to cope with different cultures. He must pay attention to differences in culture, detect them and react on them in an adequate way on the daily work floor."

80% of the respondents indicate that coping with intercultural differences is a phenomenon with which they are confronted on a daily basis. For most respondents (70%), however, coping with these differences is not restricted to coping with people of different cultures and countries. Intercultural differences refer to difference between cultures, countries, regions, nationalities and race, but also to differences between people in terms of behaviour, education, belief, language, etc.

What role do these intercultural differences play in companies? Half of the companies is convinced to have a policy to cope with intercultural differences or to have a corporate code to cope with them. The other half does not have a specific policy, but nevertheless emphasize the presence of values, such as respect, motivation and effort of employees within the company. When taking decisions concerning careers, division of work, etc. organizations tend to take into account a wide range of factors, such as person bound characteristics (personality, competences, motivation, efforts, etc.), and external characteristics (such as the culture of the client, the diversity of the team, law, etc.), whereas, differences in race, age and origin are not taken into account.

Most employees consider intercultural differences as a strong added-value, because they allow to learn from each other and to approach situations from multiple perspectives. Differences can lead to personal enrichment and mutual respect. Organizations can also benefit from them: differences stimulate innovation, creativity, a broader view or they function as a removal of barriers.

Further, most respondents conclude that intercultural competence is necessary for their company. They refer to the international character of their company, the advantages for the company, and the nuclear competences of each employee. Though not all companies are convinced of the specific need for intercultural competence. They rather refer to the basic level of courtesy and to cope with each other in a respectful manner.

When respondents defined being intercultural competent a wide range of components were mentioned. We clustered them in 8 categories that refer to attitudes ('open mindedness', autonomy), social and communicative skills (cooperation, social skills, capacity for dialogue), cognitive skills (analytic ability, learning to understand the existence of differences), affective skills (the ability to cope with emotions that play a role in intercultural situations: empathy, dear to open one's mind), culture knowledge and culture curiosity (knowledge of history, knowing the own history), self knowledge (be able to keep an eye on the own borders), skills related to specific organizational contexts and values (tolerance, respect, mutual understanding).

Study 2

Methodology. In the second study intercultural competence was measured by the alumni of the education Office Management of the Catholic University College. All alumni received the survey electronically. 174 alumni filled in the survey, 5 alumni undertook efforts with a blanco result, and 17 alumni gave up reasons for their non-response: retired, housewife, employed in education, being a student, another job and the survey was unreadable.

Results. Based on the literature review and the results of study 1 we described intercultural competence, on the one hand as 'coping with, working together, living together and communicating with people with another cultural background', and on the other hand as 'recognizing, acknowledging, sensing of cultural differences, and reacting on them in an adequate way'. All elements of these descriptions were presented. Over 90% of the respondent agreed on these descriptions and their sub aspects.

As in the first study, the selection of employees seem to be based on personality factors, knowledge, competence and communication skills. Few organizations seem to take into account ethnic origin, cultural differences and religion.

Intercultural differences seem to refer mostly to differences between 'cultures, countries and regions' and differences between people in their behaviour, education, belief, contact, language, values, etc.' According to almost 25% of the respondents intercultural differences refer to differences in race. Most respondents pointed out the added-value of intercultural differences; such as the possibility to look at situations from several perspectives, to learn from each other, or to grow personally.

The most important competences to cope with intercultural differences are open mindedness, respect, adaptability, flexibility, listening skill, tolerance, empathy, and also good communication skills.

Most respondents describe their own organization as intercultural competent. By far the most mentioned reason is the multinational or international character of their company, which employs many different nationalities. As a result, people are assumed to be in contact, to work together with people from different countries, to learn from each other, to practice intercultural cooperation, and to adapt to each other. Other reasons mentioned are: a training offer about interculturality, a motivation policy to

send employees abroad, an expatriate program to receive and guide international employees, the open, respectful and tolerant character of the company, the absence of intercultural tensions within the organization, and the specific attention the organization pays to certain cultural aspects.

Measurement of Intercultural Competence

Desk research and field research are essential steps towards the development of an instrument. In this paragraph we will focus on the choices we have to made concerning the characteristics of our instrument: what are the pitfalls, what do we want to measure, and how will we measure intercultural competence?

Measurement approaches

An intercultural instrument is defined as a measurement instrument that identifies, describes, measures, categorizes and evaluates cultural features of individuals, groups and organizations (Paige, 2004; Reddin, 1994). Intercultural competence can be 'measured' in different ways.

A more qualitative approach to measure intercultural competence embraces three main forms of assessment: : 1° direct observation of behaviour (behavioural indicators) (Vulpe et al., 2001), 2° analyses of cases (scenario based cases/critical incidents) (Pinto, 2000), and 3° portfolio (Personal Development Plan; a collection of evidences of the formerly acquired competences) (Grit et al., 2008). A portfolio reflects the student's reflections on the learning experience, the self awareness of the learner and the use of what is learnt in different learning and social situations. Since intercultural competence is always dependent on the context, it offers the possibility to map out the process as well as the outcomes in intercultural learning contexts.

A more quantitative approach to measurement intercultural competence concerns self evaluation instruments that require the involvement of an expert. He/she is responsible for holding and scoring the test, and for interpreting and giving feedback on the results. An elaborate literature overview by Paige (2004) shows a vast amount of measure instruments in the field of diversity and interculturality, which can be structured on two levels. On the organizational level instruments are developed to map out the organizational climate or the 'Equal Chances' climate. On the Individual level instruments measure intercultural development, cultural values and orientations, cultural identity, learning styles, global awareness and 'Worldmindedness', cultural adaptation, culture shock and cultural adaptation, personality characteristics, intercultural and multicultural competence or prejudices and racism. The current measure instruments, however, seem to measure intercultural competence only partially or measures only a related aspect. Most of these measurements are developed in Anglo-Saxon countries, and are adapted to a specific socio-political context with a strong emphasis on ethnicity and race.

Measurement pitfalls

Developing an instrument requires a critical enquiring of what the instrument intends to measure and how? With reference to the existent measure instruments we will examine what standards our instrument has to meet.

Object of measurement. In the first place the precise object of measurement has to be decided. One could say, for example, that the IDI of Bennett (1986,1993) measures intercultural competence, while in fact it only measures intercultural sensitivity ('the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences'). Although intercultural sensitivity is considered as a crucial predictor of a successful international life, it does not correspond with intercultural competence ('the ability to think and act in intercultural adequate ways'). Intercultural sensitivity is an important condition for the development of intercultural competence; high intercultural sensitivity will probably go along with a higher potential for intercultural competence.

Neutrality of the instrument. Second, is it possible to develop an instrument independently of the social political and cultural context? Some measure instruments (e.g. IDI) choose for a test neutral approach where the test will deliver the same quantitative results, independent of culture, social and political context where respondents are situated in. Moreover, a quantitative approach gives the test also an aura of objectivity and neutrality.

Other instruments start from the conviction that it is impossible to develop an instrument independent of the actual and political context. Lively debates about intercultural sensitive themes (such as the veil, knowledge of language, or racism), and dominant value orientations and attitudes towards civil phenomena in a region of origin could influence the answers to the test (Okoro, Cardon & Marshal, 2008; Rosenfeld, Newell & Le, 1993). Therefore, when developing a measure instrument, the specific cultural background - 'cultural orientation profile' - of the respondent should be taken into account.

These two approaches are only two extremes on the same continuum. Most instruments acknowledge the impossibility to develop an exclusive neutral test. Also quantitative enquiry includes, for example a qualitative feedback conversation. Next to closed questions, some instruments also include open questions to reveal experiences with intercultural differences. The quantitative scores are linked with specific experiences with intercultural differences, answered in the open questions. These experiences are a framework for a feedback session where the scores are interpreted.

The impact of cultural differences of the respondents can also be identified in terms of form and style of the questions. On the one hand one poses that questions should be acceptable and accessible, irrespective of culture differences. Possible points of attention are the use of color and iconography. If questions refer to behaviour they should be formulated as context specific as possible. Every context has its own language, atmosphere, etc. This means perhaps that tests should be differentiated for different target groups that operate in different contexts. For cultural differences can also refer to different differences in the 'professional culture'. On the other hand

one can choose for as much 'neutrality and image and language use, but is 'neutral' or 'universal' use of language desirable (Denman & Maier, 2004)? From a pragmatic point of view one can chose for a short glossary and simple language use, without academic terminology.

A first attempt

In the former paragraphs we list some critical remarks that have to be taken into account while developing the instrument. This means that we will have to make choices towards the instrument we want to develop. What will be the object and the nature of the instrument? And, once the instrument is developed, how will the instrument be validated?

We aim to develop a psycho-metric instrument that gives a quick scan of one's intercultural competence. A quantitative result, in terms of an individual or a group profile, will lay open the strengths and weaknesses in different aspects of intercultural competence. These different aspects of intercultural competence will be formulated on different levels: explorative, advanced and expert (Hermans, 2007).

While developing the instrument attention will be paid to the above mentioned critical pitfalls and the instrument will be validated in multiple phases: development of the initial scale, testing the instrument, refining and reducing the items, testing the final instrument in different studies.

Conclusions

Intercultural competence, in terms of behavioural indicators, as an integrated whole of knowledge, attitudes and skills fits into a larger framework of competence discourse in business life, and in the context of higher education.

Intercultural competence linked to the business life delivers an ambiguous image of the stance of actors in the business life. Literature reveals a growing importance of intercultural competence in companies, due to a growing diversity and globalization, but some actors in the business field did not seem to be convinced of the necessity to measure it. Intercultural competence is important but will be learnt on the job. Nevertheless, they do not seem to be able to point out the learnt 'intercultural factor' on the job. Two studies, using different enquiry methodologies, were carried out. The results seem to reinforce each other.

Coping with intercultural differences is not obvious, as it asks some necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes. A major paradox can be observed in the stance of actors in the business field towards the weight given to intercultural differences. On the one hand intercultural differences seem to play no role when employees are recruited or during the further development of careers. Other differences, such as personality characteristics, motivation or skills play the most important role. These results are not in line with our expectations and the findings of the literature review. Figures show problematic inflow and through flow on the labour market for people of different ethnic-cultural background. On the other hand employees

and organizations consider intercultural differences as a strong added-value. They allow to learn from each other and to approach situations from multiple perspectives, and contribute to the intercultural competence image of the organization. Though these elements can contribute to intercultural competence, they do not necessarily lead to intercultural competent organizations (Shadid, 1998). Coping with differences is too much reduced to working with lists of do's and don'ts' of cultures (Catteeuw & Coutuer, 2005), instead of recognizing, acknowledging differences, and reacting in an adequate way on them.

These studies are an important barometer of the openness within business life to step into a learning process to acquire intercultural competence on all levels of the organization. Our findings indicate little openness towards the use of an intercultural measurement, and to ameliorate intercultural competence since most organizations seem to be convinced of their acquired level of intercultural competence. Given this restricted openness in the work field we opt for an instrument with a more quantitative approach. We aim to develop a psycho-metric instrument that gives a quick scan of one's intercultural competence.

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Biographies

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