



The Developmental paradigm for intercultural competence research



Mitchell R. Hammer¹

American University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 19 March 2015

The opportunity to offer a short, “reflective” article of the broad field of intercultural relations/communication over the past 25 years is certainly a daunting task! I therefore decided to cast my reflections and observations largely from the vantage point of my own experience – with specific focus on the state of research and theory vis-à-vis intercultural competence in terms of the struggle between the mainstream “Cognitive/Affective/Behavioral paradigm” (hereafter referred to as the CAB paradigm) and the alternative, “Developmental paradigm”.

1. The CAB paradigm

The CAB paradigm is essentially compositional, with research focused on identifying personal characteristic components of intercultural competence. Various personal characteristics are examined largely through the lens of cognitive, affective, and behavioral (CAB) dimensions. This paradigmatic approach focuses attention on such personal variables as tolerance of ambiguity, open-mindedness, and behavioral flexibility. Personal characteristics have taken definitional root in both theorizing about intercultural competence as well as the variable-analytic foundation of research on intercultural competence that has taken place over the past 50 years. With its focus on individual characteristics, this traditional, dominant paradigm has paid less attention to integrating personal characteristic research findings with broader cultural patterns of difference, such as individualism/collectivism or power distance as identified by Hofstede (2001). This is not to imply that intercultural research has not deeply examined broader, cultural difference dimensions, only that examination of personal characteristics has tended to not fully articulate relationships between specific personal characteristics and culture-general (or culture-specific) patterns of difference. This mainstream CAB paradigm most essentially asks the question, “*What are the personal characteristic factors that comprise intercultural competence?*”

My own research, from 1977 through 1989 was conducted squarely within the CAB paradigm; that is, designed to identify those cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence. My work, for example, has variously examined such intercultural competence dimensions as expectations, initiative/self confidence, intercultural skills, non-verbal behaviors (e.g., direct/indirect eye contact), conversational management behaviors (e.g., asking questions), abilities in managing stress, communicating effectively and developing relationships in a foreign culture, cross-cultural attitude, cultural understanding, and uncertainty and anxiety reduction strategies.

This traditional CAB paradigm is both widespread and the dominant approach taken to understanding the complex phenomena of intercultural competence among researchers and practitioners in the intercultural field. As a result, its efficacy

E-mail address: MHammer@idiinventory.com

¹ Dr. Hammer is Professor Emeritus from the American University in Washington D.C. and Principal of IDI, LLC.

is rarely questioned. Recently, however, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) asked some tough questions concerning the contribution the mainstream CAB paradigm has made to our understanding of intercultural competence. In their exhaustive meta-analysis of 50 years of intercultural competence research, the authors identified 264 components of intercultural competence, noting 64 cognitive/personality traits, 77 affective/attitudinal dimensions and 127 behavioral/skill factors. The authors were not able, however, to identify significant findings across this laundry list of personal characteristics. Specifically, their review found (1) conceptual inconsistency and overlap among the long list of factors, (2) few efforts to test the validity and cross-cultural generalizability of these component models, and (3) lack of clarity on how these CAB dimensions are related to a host of important cross-cultural outcomes.

2. The Developmental paradigm

The Developmental paradigm emerged roughly post 1989. This more constructivist-grounded approach was most directly articulated within the intercultural arena by Bennett (1986), in his conceptual model termed the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The Developmental paradigm more generally (and the DMIS specifically) draws attention to the varying ways individuals engage cultural difference in a more holistic, sense making/sense acting framework. Further, this approach focuses on the developmental progression individuals make in moving from less to greater levels of intercultural competence, i.e., to a more complex way of understanding and responding to patterns of cultural difference between self and other. The Developmental paradigm views gains in intercultural competence as a function of the extent and quality of the individual's engagement with cultural difference. As such, the Developmental paradigm is grounded more in the dynamic interaction that arises between individuals rather than more static, personal characteristics. The Developmental paradigm most essentially asks the question, "How do individuals experience cultural difference"? This focus on the "experience of difference" as a stance for theorizing and measuring intercultural competence is not compatible with the compositional, CAB paradigm of more discreet, personal characteristics.

After 1989, my own research agenda changed dramatically to a distinctly Developmental paradigm – based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. This resulted in the creation of the Intercultural Development Inventory® or (IDI®), a cross-culturally valid assessment of the DMIS model (Hammer, 2011).

Since 1998, extensive research has been conducted within the Developmental paradigm with the IDI that has resulted in comparative analysis of intercultural competence that is both theoretically informed and methodologically coherent. Unlike the buffet of (CAB paradigm) conceptualizations of cognitive, affective and behavioral factors and inconsistent measurements of these various dimensions, the DMIS theory and the IDI assessment provide consistent, field-building knowledge about intercultural competence development. This is evidenced in over 70 Ph.D. research dissertations and more than 60 published articles to date. Further, this developmentally oriented research has led to direct, practical outcomes. For example, IDI based research findings have infused international education with targeted study abroad program designs that are significantly increasing the intercultural competence of students (see Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012). This research has delineated key insights regarding the important role of the cultural mentor, the kinds of in-person and on-line facilitated learning activities, and the types of intercultural experiences students have while abroad that most impact their development of intercultural competence.

With this in mind, I offer two modest recommendations. First, intercultural researchers need to take a hard look at the contributions made by over 50 years of CAB paradigm research. Specifically, I urge the cross-cultural research and practice community to examine (1) the general lack of consistency in CAB results, (2) the conceptual confusion and lack of agreement of CAB concepts (e.g., Tolerance of Ambiguity has been variously defined as a cognition, an attitude and a behavior), (3) the need to draw more cautious conclusions based on research that has examined CAB variables oftentimes with non-culturally generalizable, incompatible measures, and (4) the generally weak demonstrated practical applications in improving the capabilities of students, teachers, professionals, managers and others to more effectively navigate the waters of cultural differences in values, perceptions and practices that characterize our global community.

Second, it is time for the CAB dominated research community to embrace Developmental paradigm research and theorizing as conceptually equal to, but distinct from, traditional CAB frameworks. Developmental paradigm theories and assessment tools cannot be "force fit" into existing cognitive, affective or behavioral compositional models; they have their own assumptive grounding and theoretical stance which is paradigmatically different from traditional CAB research frameworks. Hopefully, this second, special issue of IJIR will include, from the perspective of Developmental paradigm researchers, the substantial contributions this alternative approach is already making to our deeper understanding of the global phenomena of intercultural competence.

References

- Bennett, M. J. (1986). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Cross-cultural orientation: New conceptualizations and applications* (pp. 27–70). New York: University Press of America.
- Hammer, M. R. (2011). Additional cross-cultural validity testing of the Intercultural Development Inventory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35, 474–487.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Cultures consequences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Changnon, G. (2009). Conceptualizing intercultural competence. In D. Deardorf (Ed.), *The sage handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 1–52). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vande Berg, M., Paige, R. M., & Lou, K. (2012). *Student learning abroad*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publications.