THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: AREAS OF INTEREST, DEVELOPMENT, AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: *In an ever changing and evolving world, where we witness a socio-economic revolution and where the geographical borders are no longer an obstacle for human interactions, the need for demonstrating new and particular abilities for interacting with culturaly diverse individuals is more and more obvious. Therefore, intercultural competence (IC) was studied from different perspectives, there are also attempts of finding a general accepted definition of it and there are several procedures for evaluating and measuring it. Although measuring IC is becoming a more precise process as the years pass, the biggest problem in assessing its levels seems to be the dependence on the autoevaluation that it emplies. By reviewing specialty literature on IC and its components, this article aims to point out future research directions on this topic. To do so, we have put together the most important elements highlighted by previous research, like: environmental influences, components, the domains where it's most needed, the obstacles needed to be overcomed for developing it, along with proposals and results obtained by applying different programs that aim to develop IC.*

Keywords: *intercultural interaction; intercultural competence; culture; cultural diversity*

1. Introduction

Globalization is "the word most often used and developed, most often defined and probably the most misunderstood, nebulous and politically spectacular in recent and future years" (Beck, 2003, p. 37).

The whole world is under the sign of globalization, of the process of individual or collective transformation, and in order to keep up with this process that occupies us, it is essential to develop new skills that until now have not been so important. Throughout the process of globalization, a key element and an essential component of citizenship application by people who are in diverse cultural contexts is IC. The large companies around the world want to expand, evolve and achieve their goals in an efficient way, and in order for managers' interactions with people from different cultures to have a positive impact, there has been observed the need to pay special attention to IC training. Studies that address and debate the subject of IC have emerged. The year 2007 is a remarkable year for the study of IC, since it constitutes a starting point for the research in the field and interest in research increased significantly (Peng, Zhu, & Wu, 2020). Countries such as the United States, China, Australia, Spain and the United Kingdom are investing in developing and addressing the concept of IC. In an age where the main obsession and concern has become the access to knowledge, due to the belief that information means power and that it constitutes an advantage, the development of IC becomes one of the main goals worldwide.

IC can not be seen only as a set of factors such as language, ethnicity, culture, but it also includes elements of cognitive, affective, attitudinal nature, that determine a person's identity, includes behaviors, values manifested at a intrapersonal but also at a interpersonal level. In other words, this competence is an essential, valuable element for those who interact with individuals from different cultures; it is a value that must be assimilated, maintained and enriched throughout life and, of course, practiced. The level of complexity shown by

individual IC enhanced by the individual differences and characteristics added to the cultural differences.

Alongside with the increasing study of IC, a multitude of derived terms and / or components of the concept appeared. On one hand because this competence sums up many aspects related to the individual, on the other hand because all the cultural aspects that the individuals of a culture internalize contribute to the complexity of IC. We will try to clarify the terms used in the field of IC, encountered in the present article to create the clearest possible picture of the concept.

Intercultural communication is the ability of individuals to adapt and communicate with individuals of another culture, to successfully manage and resolve situations of intercultural exchange (Peng et al., 2020). It is one of the key elements when we talk about the concept of IC.

Intercultural friendship as defined by Schwarzenthal, Juang, Schachner, & van de Vijver (2019) is a strong form of contact between groups to reduce prejudice. Intercultural friendship is one in which the friend is perceived as having different cultural affiliations than the others.

Intercultural awareness refers to understanding the cultural practices that influence the way in which individuals interpret things but also the way they behave (Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

2. Areas of interest in the field of IC

The complexity of IC is highlighted by the presence of multiple components that are studied, evaluated and developed in the studies that are the subject of our review. Next, we will present those that have stood out.

2.1. Global citizenship – a step towards a common consciousness

In a globalized world, cultural differences are the main sources of confrontation. Cultural diversity is an inevitable reality even in remote places. The ability to cope with and address this diversity in an optimal manner should become one of the essential characteristics of every citizen. Every individual should imagine a common future with interractions across borders and cultures. It would be ideal to look beyond barriers, to see a future for all, regardless of culture, ethnicity, religion. The study conducted by Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin (2017) presents it as a defining element in educating global citizenship. They also look at whether renewed conceptions of the future could enhance intercultural relations. Cultural diversity is beneficial for the development of IC. The more different we are, the more we develop our IC. The concept of global citizenship is the step towards a common consciousness. In their studies, Holmes & Neill (2012), Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin (2017) have shown that if people, especially young people from different cultures are invited to explore the future together, they become more sensitive, more friendly and start to develop more harmoniously. Through their interaction and communication in discovering the same common future, they forget about barriers and open the boundaries of mutual discovery. Thus, their consciousness becomes a common one, they look to the future through the same eyes. The more different the members of a group, the more their IC develops through their direct and active interaction and contact.

2.2. Intercultural competence – a reality of postmodernism

As mentioned in the introduction, concerns about interculturality in the academical zone, determined by changes and turmoil in the economic and social spheres and the increasing "contact" of different cultures, make it necessary to outline, define, deepen and measure a competence whose need becomes increasingly pronounced, IC. The multitude of

names, the multiple theories that try to complete as accurately as possible the concept, the effort to identify the elements that compose it, the efforts to build measuring instruments as accurate as possible, but especially the impossibility, so far, to reach a general accepted definition of IC make out of this aptitude a new field of research with multiple theoretical and practical development possibilities.

When we say IC, we refer to linguistic competences, related to verbal communication, to those aimed at cultural sensitivity and understanding, to those of accepting cultural differences, but also to those of adapting to a new environment from a cultural point of view (Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin, 2017).

According to the meta-analysis conducted by Peng, Zhu, & Wu (2020), the "hot spot" of intercultural research in the last 20 years revolves around the terms of blog posts, especially in the area of foreign language learning where pupils and students are encouraged to get in touch with the culture and language they are studying through direct access to native speakers' blogs. The same authors nominate other points of maximum interest, such as the area of academic expats that become, in the current conditions, a valuable resource for the study of multiculturalism; "Medical students" are some of the key words that revolve around IC because they are part of the "front line" of those who need the ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures and who need to treat them, heal them, guide them. Not the last on the "hot" list of areas of interest for the development of IC are global management skills; the obvious field of global expansion and process efficiency is the economic field in which companies with multinational potential are increasingly interested in interculturality and overcoming the barriers raised by poorly developed IC (Peng et al., 2020). These findings, summarized in the cited meta-analysis, highlight the fact that interculturality and the development of IC are points of maximum interest in the reorganization of the world; post-modernity, along and with technological progress, are practically removing the borders and geographical distances between people. This leads to the creation of a global community that is going through a tumultuous process of accommodation to which specialists seem to have found a solution: the development of IC.

2.3. Intercultural communication - the core element of intercultural competence

An essential component of IC is intercultural communication. This concept has been widely addressed in specialized studies. Authors such as Holmes & Neill (2012) or Nadeem, Mohammed & Dalib (2020) treat and highlight the concept of intercultural communication. The studies mentioned above capture the role of intercultural communication but also its development, they also highlight the fact that intercultural communication captures only those elements of cultures that influence the interactions between members of two or even more cultures, when individuals communicate. In order to communicate effectively with members of a culture, the authors mentioned above argue that individuals need to develop this intercultural communication skill. Through it, they can see beyond the obvious, they can understand feelings and emotions. It is also highlighted the fact that through intercultural communication people understand how important it is to respect each other and thus become more sensitive and discover themselves in the true sense of the word.

However, an important issue to be clarified is that of communication beyond its verbal component. Verbal communication, so often used to reinforce, clarify, convey complex and important messages, in the case of intercultural communication is conditioned by knowledge of a common language. This is a point in which language barrier may interfere; language barriers that also have cultural roots and are dependent on the level of proficiency in the foreign language that the individual involved in communication has. If in many communication situations the lack of verbal communication is perceived as a difficult barrier to overcome, in the case of IC this barrier in intercultural verbal communication, in a

language other than the native one, is high. It requires a further strengthening using the other components of communication. Moreover, studies have shown that one of the most effective ways to increase interest in learning a language and sustained activity - active participation in language learning courses - are pedagogical programs addressing topics that introduce students to the culture of that language (Valeev & Kondrat'eva, 2015). This not only enriches the general culture of the individual but helps, in subsequent interactions, in establishing fruitful intercultural communication relationships. So, we can not talk about intercultural interaction without intercultural communication with all that it entails.

2.4. Direct and active interaction with representatives of other cultures

Culture is another key factor in the development of IC. The specialized literature (Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin 2017; Schwarzenthal et al., 2019) argues that cultural elements are the key in developing this skill. Studies over the years have shown that it is extremely important to create reciprocal connections between cultures. This is supported by Nadeem, Mohammed & Dalib (2020), who conducted a study on the Malaysian environment and culture. Also, another study pointed out that inviting young people from diverse cultural backgrounds to explore the future together leads to the development of sensitivity and the enrichment of IC (Lianaki-Dedouli & Plouin, 2017).

The best way to develop your IC is through a direct and active interaction with representatives from other cultures. Through intercultural communication, you develop, you try to see beyond appearances, you try to understand the interlocutor from the point of view of his culture. Studies have shown that the more culturally different people are, the more competence they develop. Another research that emphasizes the role of the cultural environment is that of Schwarzenthal and his collaborators (2019). He believes that adolescents can acquire important skills, such as IC, through intercultural friendships only if the social differences between members are discussed in the socialization of these groups. Here are presented the advantages of schools with cultural diversity of students as a conducive environment for making friends between members of different cultures. Thus, we can conclude, as others have done before us, that "language fluency cannot be separated from IC" (Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

2.5. Intercultural competence a "skill" that is maintained and developed throughout life

As we can see from the research conducted so far, IC is formed and developed through study programs abroad, internships or exchanges of experience. Through these activities the foundations are laid for what will later mean IC. But it is not enough to spend time abroad to develop interculturally. Behrnd & Porzelt (2012) claim that you can acquire this IC only if you spend at least a year abroad, of course actively participating in exchanges between cultures, partnerships, internships because only through direct interaction you acquire and grow your IC.

Once mastered, this skill must be maintained and developed throughout life. It is not enough to spend a year in another environment to say that you have fully acquired IC. It must be practiced and maintained constantly, both among students and teachers. He, Lundgren & Pynes (2017) highlight the fact that you develop faster interculturally through courses. All the intercultural programs made available offer a unique opportunity for both teachers and students to actively develop their IC. Of course, this competence, once planted, must be maintained and made the most of, because it is essential in today's society.

Not only the exchange of experience can help you keep your IC alive. There are other activities such as reading, or watching documentaries about different cultures that have totally different customs and traditions from yours. By watching these materials, the awareness and understanding towards the respective cultures increases, and when you come

in contact with them, there is no longer that reluctance, because the cultural knowledge has been enriched and deepened more. Acquiring IC is a lifelong process. You do not become intercultural competent only if you travel in different environments or if you participate in scattered training courses.

3. Instruments for measuring intercultural competence – between precision and subjectivity

One of the reasons of uncertainty in IC research is the multitude of tools used to measure its level. The most used tools are questionnaires, self-assessment scales, previously validated or not (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). Self-assesment itself is another problemin what concerns the precision of the scales used, because subjective ratings are more likely to be made evaluating oneself. Therefore, the subjective perception of individuals regarding their or others' attitudes, skills and behaviors in relation to interculturality may, to a greater or lesser extent, be a disruptive factor in assessing the level of development of IC they have (Smith & Paracka, 2018).

Alternatives are also beginning to emerge given the fact that situation tests are being developed, to which the answers can be assessed with a higher degree of objectivity, the combination of the two types of tools can be considered the optimal way to determine the level of development of IC of the individual (Schwarzenthal et al., 2019).

Of course, the multitude of tests and scales will continue to increase, and that would be positive trend because the adaptation of these measuring instruments to the cultural differences of the populations included in the studies should be taken into account. Another source of diversification of IC measurement tools is the IC models that fragment it into subcomponents such as, for example, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural ability (Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

4. Types of intervention for intercultural development and their effectiveness

It is normal that along with studies that include the evaluation of IC, experimental or observational activities should be developed to measure the effectiveness of various programs in the development of this competence. Studies that focus on methods, programs and activities that contribute to the development of IC focus on the practical applications of the concept; they are, in practice, the result of the turmoil and concerns in the field.

It was found that the practices that contribute to the development of IC can be divided into 2 main categories: experience gained through direct contact with foreign culture through various mentoring programs, practice, exchanges of experience, studies, etc.; pedagogical intervention programs aimed at developing IC (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). Zhang & Zhou (2019) indicate the clearly superior results in the development of IC obtained by participants in programs that involve direct contact, but conditioned to be an active one, with another culture. However, this result can also be mediated by the selection methods of the participants in the programs, usually, the selected participants are those who know either the language spoken in the destination country or those that know at an advanced level an international language. But even in the case of fluency in the foreign languages needed for interaction one can see and study the differences between representatives of different cultures.

In the case of pedagogical intervention - programs aiming the development of IC - we can list actions such as: making available to students authentic study materials from the studied culture – films, literature; experiential activities in which they use methods such as role play or interviews with people from different cultures; long-term intercultural specialization programs (Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

Most of the studies and the interventions referred to in this study focus on students studing for their bachelor's degree or master's degree, but there are a few that focus on the

evaluation and development of IC in primary, secondary and even high school students and teachers.

The results for middle school students are encouraging, their exposure to intercultural development programs having positive results in the development of IC (Puente-Maxera, Méndez-Giménez, & Martínez de Ojeda, 2020).

High school students, through cultural exposure in groups of friends, show an increased development of IC compared to those who do not have a culturally diverse group of friends (Schwarzenthal et al., 2019). The fact that the school, which includes students from different cultures, can be seen as an opportunity to develop IC and thus shape future programs and studies in the field for a better understanding of the phenomenon of increasing individual intercultural potential, is a gain for global communities facing the migrations of the contemporary world (Schwarzenthal, Juang, Schachner, & van de Vijver, 2019).

4. Conclusions

IC is not a phenomenon, aptitude, a concept that can be easily explained, mainly due to the complexity it implies. Understanding and establishing the clearest possible coordinates of its composition is a theoretical goal as, in practical terms, the concomitant goal is to develop effective strategies and programs for individual intercultural development. To do this we can focus our research efforts on different future research directions. We further list possible variants following the study of the specialized literature so far.

Studies in the field of IC focus mainly on individuals who participate in programs in which they are involved either academically or professionally. A direction that may be just as effective in terms of research results could even be the study in communities where there is an increased cultural diversity. Many western countries, desirable for immigrants, already have strong cultural minority communities that can provide important and diverse information about IC, its development, and customized methods of intervention.

Although studies show that age is a strong mediator of the level of development of IC, with clearly increased results for individuals at high levels of education, preparing preschool and school children for later acquisitions that contribute to their intercultural development should be welcomed; such educational interventions can develop and prepare children for the subsequent formation of an attitude of acceptance and respect for cultural differences.

By aligning and studying as much research results as possible in the field of IC, the concept can be clarified, theories that contribute in detailing the same construct in various ways, can be unified.

The elaboration and adaptation of the instruments through which the development of the IC is measured, to the cultural particularities of the poultry targeted can be further refined; that would further contribute to the aquracy of the data collected and would also indicate the particularities that need to be considered when interreting the data collected.

As in any field, the field of interculturality is very wide and IC depends on countless variables, one of them being the whole life experience of the individual. Therefore, the impact of an intervention aiming at the development of IC should also be assessed in longitudinal studies, so that long-term effects can be taken into account.

Background, voluntary or implicit interaction with another culture, exposure to various cultural interactions at an early age, positive or negative experiences with representatives of other cultures, religion, socio-economic level, the number of languages spoken and many other variables that can positively or negatively influence the development of IC must be taken into account in order to complete the image of interculturality and to clarify what IC is and how it is acquired.

So, targeted intervention programs that take into account the diversity and the distinctive factors that shape different cultures would constitute a big step forward in inding more about interculturality.

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