

THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: PAST, PRESENT, AND PROMISE

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ABSTRACT

Diversity seen on ethnical, religious, socio-economical, geographical or historical considerations is a reality that has always accompanied the cultural evolution of mankind. Boosted in recent the decades, assumed politically, economically stimulated and socially necessary, intercultural education has made remarkable progress at the beginning of the third millennium. With its entry into the field of research, intercultural education has gradually gained more and more partisans (linguists, sociologists, psychologists, economists, politicians) currently being, ideologically, in the center of the educational systems of some traditional democratic states. Corroborating the contributions of many researchers in the field of education, concerned with defining, explaining and operationalization of the intercultural education aims, we propose in this article to value in a comprehensive theoretical synthesis, the main lines of research that have focused on the conceptualization of intercultural competence.

KEYWORDS: intercultural competence, conceptualization, education, interpretation models.

1. INTRODUCTION

Our society is becoming increasingly complex, migration, proliferation of contacts, loss of net borders, the development of information and communication technology are obvious realities. Countries are becoming increasingly interdependent among each other to obtain or maintain mutual benefits, the distinction between international and domestic is becoming more difficult to accomplish. Several major forces of change exert their influence on actual society. First, there is a tendency to reduce the birth rate in almost all countries. As a result, this leads to the second factor of change: society is becoming increasingly aging. Thirdly, the emigration-immigration waves led to a dramatic transformation of ethnic population in many countries. Diversity has become a major problem that cannot be ignored in the international arena. Fourth, there is a dramatic social change in family life, which gradually moved away from traditional values. These factors have a major impact on the education systems, education programs having to respond to these challenges [1].

This problem can be answered in several ways. For some, there is only one solution - assimilation. For others, a new perspective is offered -

multiculturalism. Replacing own cultural identity with that of the dominant group or affirmation of specific notes, in isolation, in the same horizon of space-time, avoiding possible contamination are, in this context, limited solutions. The most convenient solution lies in the intercultural attitudes that involve simultaneously the affirmation of each culture, with its specific rules, but also the openness to other cultures in the perspective of building a new common civilization.

Currently, a number of arguments support the reconsideration of the the importance of intercultural competence. These arguments are not motivated only socially but also economically and politically. To compete globally, as appreciates The Committee for Economic Development – CED [2], individuals should be equipped with knowledge and skills to mediate appropriate behavior in contacts with different cultures. Inevitably, cultural diversity manifests itself in the global market, making intercultural competence a skill highly valued. Lusting (2005) claims that the ability to relate with people and the ability to adapt to different environments, culturally and ethnically, describe an increasingly important competence both domestically and abroad [3].

With the multiplication of opportunities for employment abroad it has become increasingly pressing for the competitive international business to hire competent personnel from an intercultural perspective, as a manner of ensuring the future of the business. In a study of Japanese industry, poor intercultural communication competence of employees from other countries, led to a loss of 98% of the company's market share. In another study, conducted on 80 U.S. multinational companies found that between 10% and 20% of employees sent to another country have failed, essentially being impossible to effectively perform tasks service abroad [4]. This failure does not only financially harm the business, but it could also damage the public image of the company, resulting in longer-term damage.

In recent decades there has been a significant increase in people traveling abroad. According to the U.S. State Department, for example, over 13 million U.S. passports were issued in 2012 [5]. In 2011, 58.5 million people traveled abroad. Among those who traveled in 2011, 82% did so for leisure and 18% business. Comparing the over 58.5 million passengers in 2011 with the approximately 25.2 million passengers in 2001 [6], we find in a decade that the number of U.S. citizens traveling abroad has doubled.

While the objective necessity for the formation of active, informed citizens, responsible and able to interact in a multicultural context is generally accepted and the role of intercultural education in the formation of such people is almost universally recognized and well known, current data suggest a real difference between the rhetoric about the need for intercultural education, training intercultural competence and what is actually happening in practice. In this context, the concern for intercultural education has increased in the past

decade, becoming necessary to refer to a specific concept: intercultural competence.

At European level, intercultural education is considered a priority of educational reforms. This is seen as an instrument of social cohesion, based on the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Thus, one can say that intercultural education is a learning goal, conducting the educational system by a set of common values such as diversity, pluralism, human rights, social justice, welfare, solidarity [7], [8], [9], [10]. Under changes triggered by globalization – the globalization of politics, the internationalization and the transnationalization, the multilayered and diffused government of public authority [11], and the development directions implied by decisions taken at European level, intercultural competence will become a key in achieving teaching career and a basic component of exercising citizenship by the people who are in different cultural contexts.

Intercultural competence allows a person to work better when relations management is required in a multicultural space. In this respect, intercultural competence cannot be conceived only as a set of factors such as language, geographic origin and ethnicity; it includes elements of cognitive and affective attitudes that affect the very identity of the person, including behaviors and judgments, both in relation to itself and in terms of interaction with others. So look intercultural competence as a valuable and useful attribute of all who interact with people from different cultures.

Education's responsibility in this matter is essential, but also problematic because the concept of identity can be interpreted in two ways: asserting own identity, rediscovering own cultural roots and reinforcing group solidarity can be a positive and liberating experience for each individual, but if poorly understood, may impair or even thwart dialogue and contact. Therefore, education should make individuals aware of their own roots, so they can have reference points to find a place in the world, but should support understanding and promote respect for other cultures as well as critically interpret own culture. Global interdependence of economic, scientific, cultural and political world, dictated by opening, under the pressure of free trade, which have as a result the opening of economic and cultural borders aided by the new information technologies becomes a reality [12].

2. THE CONCEPT OF COMPETENCE IN EDUCATION

The concept of competence is rooted in taylorism, faithfully reflecting, at that time, the principles of work organization in the industry. In this sense, the approach through skills entered the school system in North America by the late '60s. The approach through skills expanded in Canada, Australia and, in the late 80s, in Europe, in Switzerland, England and Belgium and then in most of

the other European countries [13]. A long time, the very concept of competence was one intensely criticized by the scientific literature. Its multiple meanings that surfaced from this dispute were both defended and criticized [14], [15], [16]. Despite these problems, any attempt to conceptualize competence is considered relevant if it takes account of the process of interaction management in ways likely to deliver individual, group or institutional effective and appropriate results in a given context. The concept of competence is polysemantic, with meanings that vary by area and the context in which it is used. Its meanings have varied and changed with the expansion of its use in psychology, in psycholinguistics, sociology and pedagogy.

Actual meaning of the term competence bears the imprint of psycholinguistic research with explicit reference to Noam Chomsky's contributions. The author makes a distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Linguistic competence means an internal capacity, which refers to the mental structures and mechanisms with real elements, manifest as well as latent, potential elements. Performance is an update of competence; it is competence in action [17]. According to Philippe Perrenoud, competence refers to the action, "is the ability to act in a class of similar situations" [18]. Competence is more than one capacity or skill that is related to a specific operation. Competence is what allows global control of a class of complex situations by the mobilization of various resources - knowledge, practical skills, scheme operators, social representations, values and attitudes. In view of Jacques Tardif (2003) competence refers to a complex capacity of action that relies on the mobilization and effective use of a variety of resources. In this sense, a competence is not an algorithm, but a flexible capacity and adaptable to different contexts and problematic situations [19]. Four features are specific for competence [20]: (1) reference to tasks, to human activities or to solving problems in a specific context; (2) expected effectiveness from individuals or groups when those tasks, activities or problems are to be solved or executed; (3) the structured nature of processes to mobilize knowledge, skills and behavioral attitudes which ensure effectiveness; (4) the ability to make predictions about the effectiveness. Florin Voiculescu (2011) synthetically formulated the following definition: "competence is an individual or a collective ability attached to the possibility to mobilize and put into action in an effective manner in a given context a set of knowledge, skills and behavioral attitudes" [21].

Analyzing the structure of competence are two interrelated substructures: internal structure [22], which contains the components and relationships that make up the competence regarded as potentiality or availability of individual or group to act competently and external structure that contains the components and relationships that make up the frame where competence is manifested [23].

In terms of internal structure, competence is a functional system comprising three components: knowledge, skills and attitudes. In terms of external structure, we can distinguish three components: task, situation and context. The two structures are interrelated; they condition each other, so they must be treated in an integrative manner, forming what we can call an integrative model of competence.

3. THE CONCEPT OF COMPETENCE IN EDUCATION

From a historically point of view, the concept of intercultural competence arose from studies, covering the experiences of those who have worked abroad (eg. Peace Corp volunteers) in the 50's, 60's and early 70's. These studies have been driven by problems of communication and low collaboration between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Many practitioners and scientists were concerned with strengthening and expanding the list of needed features for Peace Corp volunteers for success in peacekeeping missions in various parts of the world. Harris (1977) summed these features to a total of 24 variables which differentiated the success from failure among the volunteers involved in the peace mission in Tonga. Many of these features were, to some extent, specific for teaching career (covering content, teaching skills, and classroom management) and others are relevant to intercultural competence in general, including: knowledge of the host language, adaptability, responsibility, and cultural sensitivity, realism in objectives, inner strength, self-confidence, tolerance, perseverance, and initiative, reasoning ability, courtesy, cooperation ability or degree of maturity [24]. In the late 80s the research in intercultural competence has expanded including studies abroad, international business, intercultural training, expatriates who live outside the country and acculturation of immigrants [25]. Terms as intercultural effectiveness or intercultural adaptation can be found in literature since 1970 [26], [27]. The term intercultural competence has its origins in Geertz's semiotic vision and has established itself in the late '80s as an attempt to define new targets for language learning [28].

The concept of intercultural competence is also characterized by a certain ambiguity. In the specialized literature, researchers and theorists use another number of terms more or less close to the concept of intercultural competence: *transcultural communication*, *cross-cultural communication*, *international competence*, *cross-cultural awareness*, *global competitive intelligence*, *global competence*, *cross-cultural adaptation*, *intercultural interaction*, *intercultural sensitivity*, *intercultural cooperation*, *cultural sensitivity*, *cultural competence*, *ethnorelativity*, *effective inter-group communication* [29].

We find that most of these concepts are, in fact, subsumed to the concept of intercultural competence, being only parts of it (transcultural communication, cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural awareness, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural interaction, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural cooperation, cultural sensitivity) or somewhat synonymous to the concept (global competitive intelligence, global competence, cultural competence).

3.1. Defining intercultural competence

In the broadest sense, intercultural competence by Alvino Fantini is defined as "a set of necessary skills to perform effectively and appropriately in interactions with others linguistically and culturally different from themselves" [30].

In terms of its function, "intercultural competence is the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute appropriately effective communication behaviors that recognize the interactants' multiple identities in a specific environment" [31] and implies "the ability to mobilize knowledge, methods of action, but also feelings, positive attitude in dealing with situations of intercultural interaction " [32].

The current sense of the term intercultural competence has exceeded the initial foreshadowed limited vision of linguists of 'intercultural communicative competence'. Intercultural competence is "a set of intercultural beliefs and behaviors specific advocating openness, empathy, communication, understanding and valuing logic of each culture, closer and further, for the collection and enforcement in its entirety differentiating otherness" [33]. In this definition we recognize the key components of competence: knowledge including the cognitive part of values "a set of beliefs" capabilities, skills, fundamental knowledge with functional values and expressed in conducts "specific intercultural conducts" and attitudes, based also on the uptake of values and transforming them into vectors of action "openness, empathy, communication, understanding and valuing logic of each culture, closer and further, for perceiving and respecting alteration in all its differentiating elements."

Summarizing previous definitions, intercultural competence requires proper management and effective interaction between people who in a lesser or greater degree, are different not only culturally, but also emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally.

3.2. Interpretation models of intercultural competence

Due to explanatory reasons, according to classification made by the Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), we divided the models and the theories of intercultural competence in the following five main categories [34]: structural

models, interaction models, development models, models of adaptation and causal models.

Structural models identify assumed components of intercultural competence, without specifying clearly the relationships between components. They most often take the form of lists of possible features and relevant features and abilities, which are supposed to feed the intercultural competence. Interaction models are models dedicated to conceptualizing intercultural competence and aim to explain behavior in relation to the interaction of people who are culturally different. These models share many of the characteristics of other types of models, but focus on reciprocity in interaction and on the existence of a common repertoire.

Development models place in their center the temporal dimension of intercultural interaction, indicating the stages of progress or maturation stages through which intercultural competence is meant to develop. These models too can share components of other categories, but emphasize the formation and development process of intercultural competence. Adaptive models tend to have two distinct characteristics: first, they are based on the presumption of the existence of several interacting actors, and secondly, they emphasize the interdependence between them, resulting in time their modeling and adjusting for each other. The emphasis is on modifying mutual actions, attitudes and understanding each other. Adapting in itself is considered the most appropriate unit of measure in assessing intercultural competence. Finally, causal models aim to capture the interdependence of the components of intercultural competence. They have generated hypotheses easier to implement and experimentally verify.

These five types of models are not mutually exclusive and, with no doubt, alternative classification criteria can be used. It best serves our approach, namely, identifying the defining characteristics of intercultural competence. We further present one representative model for each category.

3.2.1. Bennett's model of intercultural sensitivity development

Based on own research, Bennett (1998) developed a dynamic model that explains the individual response to the cultural differences and the evolution of these responses over time. Bennett defines intercultural sensitivity in terms of stages of personal growth [35]. The fundamental concept of the model is the differentiation. Differentiation refers to two phenomena: first - people see the same thing in a variety of ways and second - cultures differ from one another in how they retain their differentiating notes. In Bennett's view, cultures offer ways to interpret reality in a differently manner. Training and developing intercultural sensitivity is essentially learning to recognize and deal with the fundamental differences between cultures in terms of perceiving the world. Developing intercultural sensitivity is the following of two stages (see figure

no. 2) [36]: one that is ethno relative and an ethnocentric stage, each stage having three sub stages.

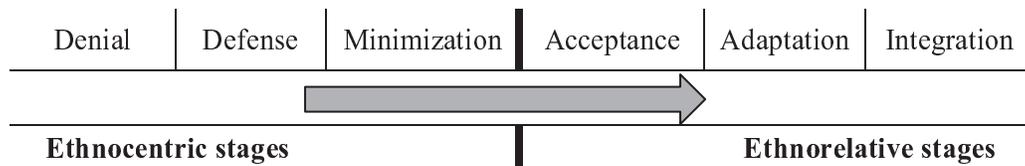


Figure 1. Developmental intercultural competence model (Bennett, 2007)

Ethnocentric stage involves the following steps:

- Denial phase: characterized by denying differences or psychological or physical barriers erected in the form of isolation or separation from other cultures;
- Defense phase: characterized by a tendency of defense by denigrating other cultures the tendency of manifestation of superiority towards them;
- Phase of minimizing differences: characterized by the surface recognition of cultural differences and consideration of cultures as fundamentally similar.

Ethnocentrism is understood as a stage in which the individual assumes that his vision on the world is essentially centered on reality. Denial is the base of an ethnocentric view on the world and it means that an individual denies that there is any difference, that there may be other worldviews. This denial may be based on isolation where there is little or no chance at all to deal with difference, so its existence cannot be experienced, or may be based on separation in which an individual or a group sets up barriers between people who are different for not confronting the difference. Separation, therefore, needs at least a moment of recognition of difference and is a development of this moment of isolation.

Ethnorelative stage involves the following three phases:

- Acceptance phase: characterized by acceptance and respect for cultural differences;
- Adaptation phase: characterized by cultural pluralism and empathy;
- Integration phase: characterized by integration into their own view of the world and life of other concepts specific to other cultures.

What is characteristic of the ethno relative stage is assuming that all cultures can only be understood reciprocally; one through another and individual behavior can only be understood within the cultural context. The difference in the ethno relative stage is not perceived any longer as a threat but as a challenge.

3.2.2. The model of coherence-cohesion of culture

Rathje (2007) emphasizes that the meeting of cultures produces unifying effects (coherence, cohesion). Subjects understand the differences within their

own culture in ways different from subjects coming from other cultures. The unique feature of culture is that it largely achieves unity through a mix of internal differences. Although adaptation involves interaction and integration in a culture, it does not produce degrees of uniformity and consistency among members (figure 3). „Intercultural competence is therefore best characterized by the transformation of intercultural interaction in culture itself” [37].

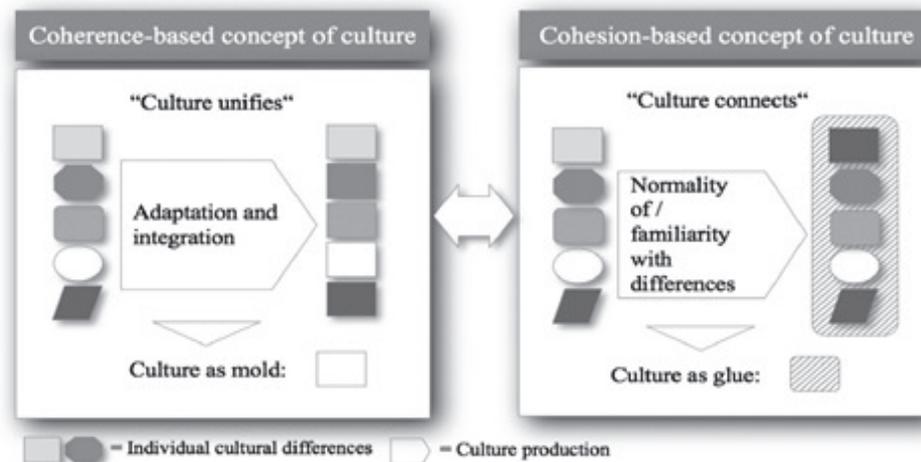


Figure 2. The model of coherence-cohesion of culture (Rathje, 2007)

Co-orientation appears in a competent intercultural interaction and is the result of a cultural environment that does not reflect the common cultural elements, but actually produces a common identity, this process is not likely to be regarded as one of assimilation.

3.2.3. Hamilton’s structural model

Hamilton, Richardson, and Shuford (1998) have defined a list of components of intercultural competence distributed in three dimensions; each dimension is analyzed according to three coordinates [38]. Components can be found in figure 1.

Regarding the affective attitude dimension, it is expected that intercultural competent persons involved in the interaction to be aware of the value of their own group, the equality of groups, to understand and reject discrimination and ethnocentrism, to value risk taking and intercultural interactions. Affective attitudinal dimension complements the dimension of intercultural knowledge, which refers to understanding cultural identities, to cultural differences and similarities and to the knowledge of cultural influences on communication process.

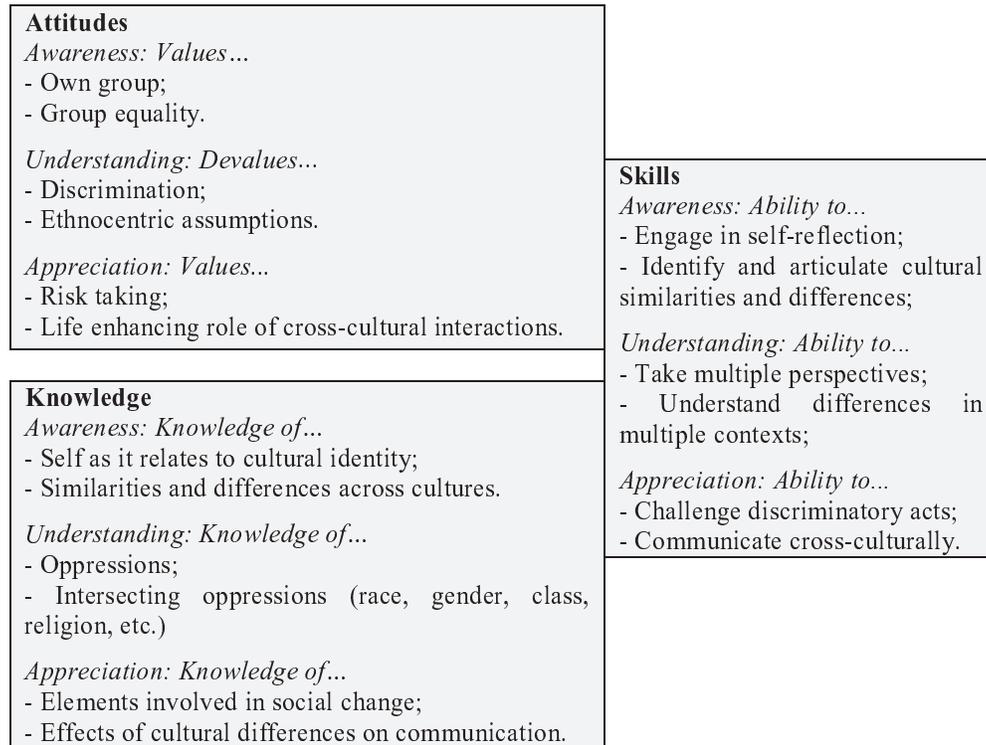


Figure 3. Components of intercultural competence (Hamilton et al, 1998)

A series of abilities complete the profile of an intercultural competent person: the capacity for self-reflection, the ability to identify cultural similarities and differences, the ability to analyze a phenomenon from multiple perspectives, the ability to combat acts of discrimination and intercultural communication skills.

3.2.4. Processual model of intercultural competence

Deardorff (2006), using the grounded theory method, has also developed a process model that suggests the existence of facility attitudes, which support the formation of intercultural competence (respect, openness and curiosity). Motivation is also optimized through knowledge (awareness of own culture, cultural knowledge in depth, sociolinguistic awareness) and individual skills (listening, observing, measuring, analyzing, interpreting, networking).

Motivation, knowledge and skills mediate internal changes increasing empathy and adaptability (figure 5). These internal changes precede external and internal results [39].

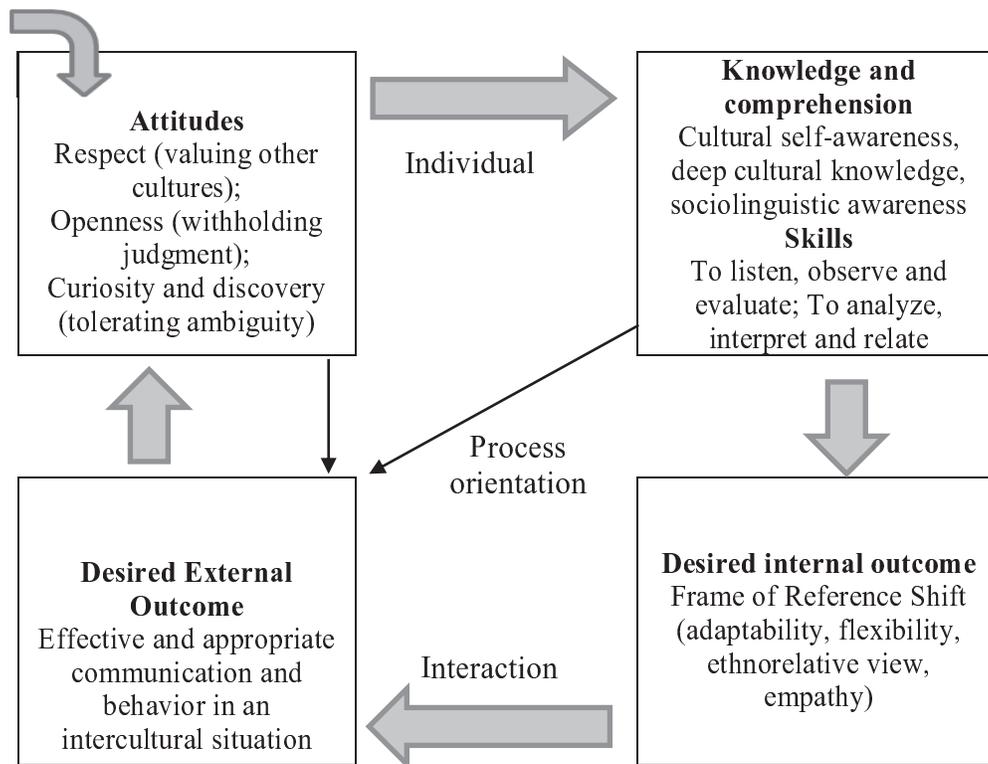


Figure 4. The process model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006)

3.2.5. Attitude acculturation model

In the process of adaptation there is a tension between those involved in the interaction. The authors present a typology of four possible forms of acculturation (figure 4) [40].

		Is maintenance of cultural identity and characteristics valued?	
		Yes	No
		Society of origin	
Is maintenance of relationships with other groups valued?	Yes	Integration	Assimilation
	No	Separation/ Segregation	Marginalization
Host society			

Figure 5. Attitude acculturation model (Berry et al, 1989)

Cultural assimilation occurs when an individual welcomes absorption of own identity in the host culture, the individual defines himself by values of the host culture. Integration, however, accepts the possibility of multicultural groups to operate separately. Members composing them retain their identity, but recognize the importance of supporting multicultural group. When a person has an increased interest towards other cultural groups, combined with a low interest on maintaining their own group membership, there may occur imposed or voluntary separation. When there is little interest in adopting the values of another culture or values of their own culture, the person may experience feelings of marginalization.

4. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE MODELS

Although most presented models and theories are relatively recent, their joint note is the prevailing descriptive character. All have operationalized intercultural competence, but few models have been accompanied by the development of a useful instrument of assessment of intercultural competence.

4.1. Strengths and weaknesses

We are exploring further, in sequence and critically, the five categories of models. Analyzed theories and models have a number of common elements (including motivation, knowledge, skills, and context) and some private ones. We reaffirm once again that their division was made in a more explanatory purpose with the reference to individual elements. The features of models that would justify them in another classification and in another category are not few.

Structural models have the advantage of having indicated the appropriate scope and the content of a theory, which has as an aim intercultural competence should incorporate them. These models can be considered to be weak in terms of their ability to establish and interpret connections between components [34]. Another one of their weakness results in the poor concern of the authors to define their own central concept, the intercultural competence. In other words, it is not clear what contributes to the development of intercultural competence and which results are expected to occur to a person considered intercultural competent. It is unclear how this competency can be assessed.

Some of the shortcomings of the first category of models have been removed from the so-called interaction models. Intercultural competence is understood, in these models, in terms of an ongoing relationship rather than as a breakthrough achievement. This approach illustrates the importance of a missing element in the structural models - time. The major advantage of this class of models is that they have focused on process and interactions that occur between representatives of different cultures.

Models of development continue the idea of process and draw attention to the evolving nature of interactions and relationships. The social systems, institutional relations, social and personal, are procedural and change over time. To the extent that different social systems reflect similar types of changes over time and in certain contexts, the theory might be more able to represent such changes, like Piaget, in the form of steps that predict and build upon each other [34]. However, development models tend to be more convincing in terms of intercultural training and development stages, but weaker in specifying traits and interpersonal skills able to facilitate or moderate the course of such developments [34]. The last category of models focuses on the basic phenomenon that occurs in intercultural interaction - adaptation. The capacity of adaptation is fundamental for the development of intercultural competence. Adjustment models however raise a number of theoretical problems. According to Spitzberg (1993), adapting in itself is a questionable criterion for assessing intercultural competence. The author points out that most adaptation models still need to deepen types of mutual accommodation, needed in various stages of development of intercultural competence [41]. To a large extent, causality underlies all explanations. Causal models posit explicit assumptions regarding the connections between the components of intercultural competence. Precisely this reveals one of the weaknesses of these models. To the extent that causal relationships form too many loops, bidirectional feed-backs, they reduce the value of the theory in terms of the weak possibility of hypothesis testing and verification of falseness hypothesis.

4.2. Discussion on actual theories and models of intercultural competence

A sensitive issue highlighted by these models, which has to be clarified, still remains the status of motivation, knowledge, attitudes and skills. More specifically, how they should be treated separately or as a whole. The affective-motivational dimension remains poorly theorized.

There is little concern on emphasizing the psychological and emotional needs of people interacting in a multicultural context. Besides "traumatic effects of culture shock" or "anxiety", people are seen as rational beings par excellence. Thus, motivation tends to have a too cognitive nature; even anxiety is often seen as a result of rational processing of information. Theories of personality, affectivity theories, theories of information processing, can complement current models of interpretation of intercultural competence.

Another problem is the conceptual primitive nature of theoretical constructs [34]. For example, adaptability. It appears as a central element, implicitly or explicitly, in almost all models of conceptualizing intercultural competence. Adaptability was never validly measured, in part because the concept was not operationalized very carefully. Many of the sub components of

intercultural competence have the same status. Intercultural sensitivity, empathy, curiosity, multiple vision, the consciousness of own culture and openness to new are also examples of concepts that have not been operationalized and whose validity has not been demonstrated.

A third issue brought before by the critics refers to the potential ethnocentric character of the theories and models proposed [34]. Most of these presented models have appeared in Western literature, speaker of English. We have great doubt that today, a model that has verified its applicability in Anglo-Saxon areal, will be equally useful in the Eastern European or Eurasian areal. Future research should focus with priority on generalizing these models.

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