

Lecture 4: The components of intercultural competence

Intercultural communication competence is the degree to which you effectively adapt your verbal and nonverbal messages to the appropriate cultural context.

CONTEXT. Intercultural competence is contextual. An impression or judgment that a person is intercultural competent is made with respect to both a specific relational context and a particular situational context. Competence is not independent of the relationships and situations within which communication occurs. Thus, competence is not an individual attribute; rather, it is a characteristic of the association between individuals. It is possible, therefore, for someone to be perceived as highly competent in one set of intercultural interactions and only moderately competent in another. Judgments of intercultural competence also depend on cultural expectations about the permitted behaviours that characterise the settings or situations within which people communicate. The settings help to define and limit the range of behaviours that are regarded as acceptable. Consequently, the same set of behaviours may be perceived as very competent in one cultural setting and much less competent in another. For instance, one person might want to use highly personalised nicknames and touching behaviours in public, the other person might regard such visible displays as unwarranted and therefore incompetent.

Many previous attempts to describe intercultural competence have erroneously focused on the traits or individual characteristics that make a person competent.

Individuals have been selected for particular intercultural assignments based solely on such personal attributes as authoritarianism, empathy, self-esteem and world mindedness.

As intercultural competence is contextual, these trait approaches have been unsuccessful in identifying competent intercultural communicators.