

Chapter 50

Follow the Experts: Intercultural Competence as Knowing-in-Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores individual intercultural competence as an enacted capability developed through social interaction and experience with dominant local cultures and minority cultures. The authors employ a knowing-as-practice perspective, following Nicolini et al. (2003), and notions of tacit knowledge within particular domains (Sternberg et al., 1995), to suggest that the study of intercultural experts has potential to inform this area of knowledge. From this perspective, examining practice repertoires used by expert actors can provide a useful complement to cultural intelligence frameworks (Thomas & Inkson, 2004, Earley, 2002) for understanding individual intercultural competence. Drawing on emerging literature on biculturalism, this chapter introduces an approach to researching intercultural knowing-in-practice through a focus on one type of experts, in this case, a group of young, bicultural Canadians. The authors found emotion- and behavioral-based themes that informed these experts' responses to intercultural scenarios, their responses to proposed in-situ practice. From the findings, the chapter suggests that management can learn about intercultural competence from such experts' approaches to navigating intercultural conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

Equipped with the language skills, cultural knowledge and contacts that so often elude native-born Canadians, new immigrants [and their families] might be the missing link that could pave Canada's way into hard-to-penetrate markets. With one foot

in Canada and the other in their country of origin, these cultural double agents have the ability to act as (trade) bridges.... Andrea Mandel-Campbell (2007:219)

Management scholars have given considerable attention in recent years to the topic of individual cross-cultural effectiveness, pointing to its importance in a globalizing and culturally interconnected

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business world. Models of “cultural intelligence” have been proposed (Thomas et al., 2008; Thomas & Inkson, 2004; Earley, 2002; Peterson, 2004), taking as their main premise that effectiveness in interacting with people from cultures other than one’s own rests on a discrete capability or skill-set. Existing constructs from psychology-based studies of expatriate adjustment tend to form their foundation, with effectiveness viewed as dependent upon an individual’s personality traits and cognitive knowledge, and more recent theory proposing a behavioral dimension (Thomas & Inkson, 2004; Earley, 2002; Peterson, 2004; see also Hammer et al., 2003; Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1999; Zakaria, 2000).

This chapter proposes a perspective drawing on organizational knowledge theory and centering on intercultural effectiveness as an enacted capability may be an important complement to more traits-oriented, cognitive approaches. This perspective posits that knowledgeability or expertise, while often remaining implicit and unstated, is developed over time and constituted in situated practice and social interaction (Nicolini et al., 2003, Cook & Brown, 1999, Sternberg et al., 1995, Orlikowski, 2002). Capability and effectiveness are viewed as embedded in the actions of expert actors, and as observable through studying these actions and actors’ explanations of them. This is in contrast to a more traditional approach to competence as resulting from explicit, cognitive knowledge, relatively static dispositions, or discrete behavioral skills independent of context. Underlining the importance of practice and process-oriented aspects of intercultural competence (Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2005), the chapter explores the knowing-in-practice (Nicolini et al., 2003) of experts in the intercultural domain.

Citing the multicultural environment within Canada, the opening quotation suggests exploring bicultural individuals as potential intercultural experts whose capabilities may represent an untapped resource for developing a competent global workforce. Increasingly, multinational organiza-

tions seek to identify and develop staff with highly effective intercultural and global skills (Claudio, 2007; Rossi, 2007). Bicultural individuals are exposed to two cultural value systems during their upbringing and likely identify with both (Luna et al., 2008). Scholars have suggested bicultural individuals may have a “sufficiently complex self-concept to reflect the flexibility needed for “CQ” [cultural intelligence]” (Earley, 2002:275).

The concept of biculturalism generally reflects an individual’s “ability to move back and forth between the minority community and the dominant culture” (Richard & Grimes, 1996) and can be related to bilingual capacities as well (Luna et al., 2008). While remaining to date largely within the anthropology and psychology literatures (cf. Berry, 1979; LaFromboise et al., 1993), in an era of globalization, the phenomenon of biculturalism has become more relevant to examine within international management (Berry, 2008).

The objective of this chapter is to contribute to the literature on intercultural competence in two distinct ways. First, the authors propose that studying intercultural competence as knowing-in-practice may be a fruitful complement to existing research, through exploring the expression of intercultural actions which are linked to experiences lived and embedded in participants’ personal practice repertoires. Second, we draw upon exploratory data from an “expert” sample of bicultural individuals, a population assumed to engage in intercultural interaction on an ongoing basis. Here, we wish to address whether their knowledge can inform organizations which need employees who can cross multiple cultural boundaries.

In pursuing these two themes, we set the following research questions for this study:

1. Will using our proposed approach and methods surface an understanding of intercultural competence that can be explored in future research, with other groups of “experts” in workplace settings?; and

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