(Re)Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence in Malaysia: An Agenda for Future Research

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Abstract. The unprecedented times of a global pandemic have illustrated the need for people to seek interconnectedness of humankind. Given this need, there arises the necessity to explore new ways of understanding "competent" communication that enables people to "live together" with those who speak different languages and hold different values. Taking this necessity, this paper aims to bring forth an agenda for future research on intercultural competence. It explores existing definitions of intercultural competence as viewed from the West and how such definitions resonate with the Malaysian context. The paper suggests a rethinking of intercultural competence by considering the idea of self-other relations. Taken further, it sees the need for future explorations of self-other relations within the migrant worker context, given their pertinence to the Malaysian society. The paper contributes to enriching current understanding of intercultural competence by proposing three key areas for further research.

Keywords: Intercultural competence · Migrant worker · Asian culture · Malaysian context · Self-other relations

1 Introduction

There is a critical need for a networked society due to the increase in migrant populations, workplace diversity, and economic dependence. Nowhere is this need felt more keenly than in today's unprecedented times of a global pandemic which have made people seek new ways to "live together" and a sense of interconnectedness [1, 19, 20]. This realization has brought to the forefront the heightened necessity to understand what it means to communicate effectively between and across cultures. More and more people are letting their interactions with different people determine who they are and what they believe in on an individual basis. Global mobility has produced a situation at the societal level where people must learn how to communicate "well" with those who hold different opinions and values. As a result, it is crucial to foster a sense of "one-ness," whereby individuals learn to get along with others who have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds from their own. Hence, intercultural competence is no longer an option,

but a necessity in achieving good intercultural relations. Arasaratnam [1], in her analysis of her ten-year work in intercultural competence, stated that "competence" needs to be the focus of ongoing research. She emphasised the importance of fostering cultures that are sympathetic to and curious about the "other." In the spirit of such urge, this paper seeks to illuminate what "competence" is like when it is viewed from the West and from Asian countries like Malaysia. Taken further, this paper proposes an agenda for research on intercultural competence by considering the idea of self-other relations. More specifically, given the pertinence of migrant worker issue in the Malaysian society, this paper suggests intercultural competence research that addresses self-other relations in such a context.

2   Making Sense of Intercultural Competence

The term "intercultural competence" does not carry diverse definitions but also terminologies [3]. The essential ideas of intercultural competence—despite the different terminologies and definitions—are appropriateness and effectiveness [2]. As such, it is worthy to discuss these two crucial dimensions as a starting point. Effectiveness connotes one's ability to achieve satisfying communication goals [3]. The capacity to adhere to social or interpersonal standards, rules, or expectations is referred to as appropriateness. [4]. Given this, a competent communicator is able to be mindful of the rules within a given context to demonstrate appropriate communication [5]. Along with this, intercultural competence has three crucial elements: motivation, knowledge, and skills. According to Spitzberg [4], motivation encompasses a person's various driving forces that cause them to either approach or avoid persons from other cultures. Knowledge is a person's cognitive understanding of the proper procedures to follow in a certain situation. The behavioral component of competence known as skills is what allows a person to accomplish their goal.

Hammer's [6] analysis of intercultural competency research conducted over the previous 50 years revealed that the majority, if not all, of the researchers, concentrated on personal traits. Such an approach has established definitional origins in numerous theories of intercultural competency. As a result, researchers looked at numerous personal traits through the prism of compositional cognitive, emotional, and behavioural (CAB) dimensions. Given such a compositional approach, past research was conducted to identify those cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence. This approach focuses on personal variables as compositions of intercultural competence, which include, among others tolerance of ambiguity, open-mindedness, and behavioral flexibility. Hammer offers intercultural competency dimensions, including expectations, initiative self-confidence, intercultural skills, nonverbal behaviours, managing stress, cross-cultural attitude, and cultural comprehension, among others. While this approach is widespread and dominant, taking [7] meta-analysis on components of intercultural competence, Hammer questioned the overlap and long-list of factors for intercultural competence and propose developmental paradigm as an alternative approach. For example, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity draws attention to how individuals experience cultural differences [3]. This approach investigates how individuals progress from less to greater levels of intercultural competence. In this

regard, it visualizes how individuals move from simple to a more complex understanding to patterns of cultural difference between self and other.

The above definitions are certainly fruitful for our understanding of intercultural competence. However, there is a caveat that many of the existing definitions of intercultural competence were mostly derived from Western (primarily US and European) contexts [8]. The scholars' definitions of intercultural competence tend to highlight on the individual to achieve effective and appropriate interaction in intercultural situations and the knowledge, motivation, and skills required for the individual to be more competent [8]. It is worthy to elucidate the source that shapes such a standpoint. Woelfel [9] claimed that most Western communication theory roots lie in the Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle assumed that there are a set of behaviors from which an individual person may choose in any situation and choices are made based on the individual's beliefs and attitudes. As such, the primary goal of communication in the West is to provide self-realization and to achieve personal control [10]. Additionally, Parks [3] remarked that the themes of control, collaboration and adaptability form the fundamental Western assumption on competency. The theme of control necessitates a person to influence communication to achieve his or her goals. Given the idea that we must rely on others for the fulfillment of our wishes in communication, collaboration admits that a person must also acknowledge that others bring their own goals and attempts to control the communication. In this sense, competence occurs when interlocutors allow each other to mutually achieve satisfying outcomes. Adaptability warrants an individual to demonstrate behavioural flexibility. This requires the individual to execute diverse behavioural repertoires in interaction. In this sense, the individual must be adaptive to modify his or her strategies for effective and appropriate communication with others.

Hofstede [11] has long pointed out the importance of the cultural origins of the researchers' minds. He posited that culture affects our daily practices as well as theories that we developed to explain our practices. When Western researchers developed theories, the issues that they study are relevant to the Western cultures, and consequently, they may be oblivious to other issues that the Western minds would not normally find important. As Hofstede has correctly stated, the Western perspective has been argued for its (in)adequacy in capturing significant issues in experiences of other cultures [4]. For example, while personal control is the primary issue in Western experiences, such issue seems to be less significant in the Asian cultures [12]. In Asian ways of thinking, the sense of self is deeply rooted in the web of human relationships. Accordingly, Asian people see themselves not as independent individuals but as interdependent and interrelated beings. Chen and Starosta [12] remarked that harmony sets the core of Asian cultural value. Driven by such a value, human interaction is not a process in which individuals exert power to influence interaction in their own favour. Rather, individuals cooperatively communicate within an interdependent network. In other words, harmony induces a sense of duty for individuals to cooperate with the other party by sincerely displaying a whole-hearted concern with the other. Harmony is viewed as the ultimate goal of communication and it is used as the guidance of human communication.

A review on other cultural voices in the conception of intercultural competence (which includes Arab, African, and Chinese perspectives, among others) reiterated the importance of relationships [13]. Given this perspective of other cultures, there arises

a question of whether relationship is a foreign concept in the West. [14] argued that although relationships are employed in their competency models, the key to competency in the West is oriented toward achieving an individual's goal from a relationship rather than relational harmony. This view strongly echoes Miike's [15] assertion that the theme of individualism dominates Western ontology where the emphasis is placed more on the independent self than on interdependent relationships. Given this fundamental view, notwithstanding the fact that many Western models propose a partner, it is common to find that most skills and knowledge reside within a single individual. This suggests that Western models tend to view intercultural competence as an individual concept. Hence, the focus on a single individual remains inherent in many Western models of intercultural competence [4].

While there exist arguments on the locus of intercultural competence that leads to a dichotomized position between the West and Asian cultures, Spitzberg and Changnon [7] contended that it is intricate to determine the Western bias on the conceptions of intercultural competence. Spitzberg and Changnon further attested that it is commonplace to find the emphasis on individuality in the West while the focus on empathy and sensitivity is very much found in Asian cultures. However, they argued that assertiveness is not emphasized as an approach to social skills, even within the U.S. social scientific approaches. Instead, empathy works as an important social skill in most models of intercultural competence. Acknowledging this claim, Chen's [16] proposition is useful as a possible way of establishing future research agenda. Chen remarked that the dichotomous concept of human practices between cultures may be used as a means of understanding one another. However, such dichotomy should never be treated as a means of excluding cultural differences. In such a spirit, we see the need for researchers to find a "multi-contextual co-existence" that suggests the idea of embracing foreign concepts and integrating them into one's cultural setting. Thus, we propose that a reconciliation of intercultural competence is rather an admirable attempt.

3   Researching Intercultural Competence: A Reconciliation

In rethinking the relevance of Western conception, it is therefore vital to bring forth our understanding of intercultural competence with the Malaysian context. Our review of current knowledge in Malaysian literature on intercultural competence indicates a tendency on the self-other relations theme. For example, we see knowledge about relating to others through language serves as a significant factor of intercultural competence [17–21]. More importantly, we see that intercultural competence necessitates both self and other need to mutually develop language skills and acknowledge (pre-conceived ideas/religious/ideological) positions in attempting to connect with diverse others [17, 18]. A recent study by Harun et al. [22] also brings forth self-other relations on the sense-making of intercultural competence. The authors posited that "the notion of intercultural competence should be viewed as the ability to situate individuals in a multicultural context where communication skills are essential intermediary of self-other relationships" (p.155). When we attempt to resonate this Malaysian standpoint with other Asian cultures, we see similar concepts. For example, competent behaviors in the Chinese culture value interconnectedness and indirect communication as an appropriate way for

interlocutors to interact. Communication is viewed as a means to establish and to maintain interpersonal relations rather than merely an expression of one's ideas to others or achievement of one's goals [16, 23, 24]. Since relationship is primary in social interactions, Yeh [23] contended that appropriateness is more important than effectiveness. In this sense, speaking and behaving appropriately are far more important than speaking explicit, accurate, and direct messages to be effective. The Chinese tend to observe the situations to interpret subtle or concealed meaning and respond with speech that reflect relational status, and sacrifice effectiveness for the sake of saving themselves and others from embarrassment. In Korean culture, Yum [14] proposed that effectiveness is not a matter of fulfilling the needs of an individual in her or his communication with others. Rather, it is about maintaining relationships rather than achieving one's goals.

Given the above argument, there remains much to explore and discuss. What does it mean to situate intercultural competence within various contexts to fully understand the true complexity of intercultural competence? What is the impact of our global connections during this global pandemic on intercultural competence? How do we reconcile our understanding of intercultural competence? In view of this, Deardorff's [25] current observation might be useful: Within the literature on intercultural and global competence, definitions focus on knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Increasingly, there is research about social-emotional learning, emotional intelligence, and discussion around empathy. Yet, it seems like empathy may not be enough, emotional intelligence may not be enough, and intercultural competence and global citizenship may not be enough. What seems to be missing in all of this, is perhaps how we view others and how we view ourselves in relation to others. It illuminates the theme of connection, which has been demonstrated so powerfully over this last year. What if we viewed ourselves through the lens of "we" given our interconnectedness? What if we viewed others through the lens of neighbor, both our local and global neighbors? (p.16).

In rethinking of the conception of intercultural competence, we also see the need to reconsider the dominant standpoint in which Malaysian researchers often take. Our examination of the literature indicated that intercultural competence has been most often focused on the perspective of expatriates (mainly business people and diplomats) or sojourners (mainly international students/academic migrants) (see, for example, [17, 26–28]). There is a dearth of work that addresses intercultural competence among migrant workers, particularly those low-skilled who predominantly occupied the labor force in Malaysia. This area of inquiry is urgently needed given that Malaysia is recognized as the largest importer of labor in Asia, particularly low-skilled migrants to fill the gap in the labor market [29]

Official data shows that Malaysia currently hosts more than two million migrant workers [30]. While the import of migrant workers is helpful to boost its economy, the social consequences of their presence, particularly their competence in Malaysian society is a subject of inquiry. The presence of migrant workers has led to the creation of a sub-community that contributes to the enrichment of cultural values, norms, and beliefs within the culturally diverse Malaysians. Notwithstanding such enrichment of cultural diversity, their existence has been associated with several problems such as inappropriate behaviors [31], poor language and communication skills [32] and negative societal perceptions [30]. Despite such issues, Malaysia faces a continuous increase in

the number of migrant workers in various sectors [33]. Hence, the in-coming of migrant workers seems to not only be desirable, but pertinent to the long-term economic goals of the country. The increased immigration and diversity can be an important social asset to the nation. Successful migrant communities can create new forms of social harmony and dampen the negative effects of diversity. Therefore, it is imperative for migrant workers and Malaysians to mitigate differences and find ways to co-exist harmoniously with one another. This poses a question of how Malaysian researchers like us should seek for the meaning of "one-ness" in our existing society, in which "we" see the need to relate with the "the other" (i.e., the migrant workers).

Since Deardorff (2020) has made the call for a view of "interconnectedness" on intercultural competence, how do we rationalize intercultural competence in Malaysia, particularly when it includes migrant workers? When we consider the context in situ, Malaysia comprises 69.8% of Bumiputera (meaning sons of the soil, i.e., the Malays and the minority groups of Sabah and Sarawak), 22.4% of Chinese, 6.8% of Indians and other 1% constitutes other ethnic groups [34]. Given this understanding, Malaysia presents a complex multicultural social setting because of the wide range of differences in religious beliefs, values, norms, language, and cultural practices of her people. On the other hand, we are also mindful to the existence of the multicultural/multiethnic identities of migrant workers themselves (e.g., Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Pakistani among others) in the Malaysian society [29]. Hence, how do we reconcile the conception of "intercultural competence" and bring forth the theme of "interconnectedness"?

4 Proposed Conceptual Framework: Agenda for Future Research

We contend that Deardorff's [35, 36]work is useful to be considered since it is the first research-based definition that documented intercultural experts' consensus. Intercultural competence is viewed as one's ability to execute appropriately effective communication based on his/her intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In her framework, Deardorff proposed attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes as the critical dimensions of intercultural competence. Attitudes are viewed as the basis for one's development of intercultural competence. Knowledge is gained through her/his cultural awareness and in-depth understanding of other cultures. The internal and external outcomes are unique to the model where both outcomes are predicated on the result of one's attitude, knowledge/comprehension, and skills. These outcomes are demonstrated through her/his ability to be flexible, adaptable, ethnorelative, and empathic. The outcomes will drive a person to demonstrate effective and appropriate behaviors in intercultural situations. One's level of intercultural competence would then depend upon his/her attitudes, knowledge/comprehension, and skills that the person acquired in the continual process of intercultural competence development.

Drawing on Deardorff's work, Dalib et al. [37]. Revised the definition of intercultural competence by placing an emphasis on the concept of self-other connections. They suggested that intercultural competence requires an individual (the self) to not only become aware of his/her cultural identity but also to have some knowledge of the cultural identity of the other. In so doing, the self and the other attempt to understand each other to make their communication meaningful. Given this view, intercultural competence is a

function of attitude, knowledge, and skills of self and the other who both hold different cultural identities. When taken further, attitude is seen as the fundamental foundation that propels both self and the other to acquire information and abilities, as well as internal and external results. Both the self and the other must adjust to new communication styles in order to interact with one another as a result of the internal outcome. The ability of oneself and the other to behave and communicate in a way that is appropriate for their encounter can be characterized as the external outcome.

The existing research has fairly contributed to our (re)conceptualization of intercultural competence. We also resonate with Murray's [38] proposition that how people relate to others demands that they inculcate not only their own cultural awareness but also knowledge of the other including language and the contextual factors. Given this perspective, the following three key research questions need to be considered for further studies:

a) How do language and cultural identity play role in the intercultural competence of migrant workers and their local (Malaysian) supervisors? Future studies are recommended to investigate the diverse linguistic and cultural identities of migrant workers and their local supervisors. Researchers may incorporate observations of the respondents' actual interactions in their natural setting to gain rich data.
b) How do migrant workers and local (Malaysian) people adjust or adapt to each other in their social interaction? Future researchers are recommended to investigate the ways both migrant worker and the locals view language or cultural experience in negotiating their interactions. Such inquiry can lead to insights on characteristics of intercultural competence of their related behaviors (such as cultural sensitivity, effective and appropriate communication; and polite language).
c) How does the desire to establish relations among migrant workers and the locals (Malaysians) influence intercultural competence? Future researchers are recommended to study reflections on intercultural encounters through the lens of migrant workers or local people. Such approach will be useful tool for researchers to interpret the social acts and transform our understanding on the variety of intercultural norms in such social realms.

As we continue to gain greater insight into the complexity of intercultural competence, there are still many research questions that need to be answered. For sure, given the realities of what we experienced within our own cultural context and the changing nature of how people connect at the global level, other questions will continue to emerge as we seek ways to relate more meaningfully with diverse others.

5 Conclusion

This paper has outlined existing definitions and approaches to intercultural competence. Comparatively, it brings forth how intercultural competence is viewed from the West and Asian countries like Malaysia. The paper suggested to rethink intercultural competence by considering the idea of self-other relations. Taking this idea, more understanding of intercultural competence must be sought, especially within migrant worker context particularly in Malaysia. With this in mind, the paper has proposed three key areas that

are worthy to consider for further explorations. The key areas highlight significant factors such as language, cultural identity, and context in situ that can be investigated by future researchers.

Authors' Contributions. The researchers contribute to being a research planner, conducting research, analysing data, and writing a research paper.

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