



# Intercultural Competence and Social Inclusion among Migrant Workers: A Conceptual Framework

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**Abstract.** Malaysia presents a compelling context for research on migrant workers, given its significant role as a major destination for migrant labor in Southeast Asia. The country currently hosts approximately three million documented migrant workers, making it one of the largest migrant-receiving nations in the region. These workers contribute substantially to Malaysia's economic growth, yet they often face challenges related to cultural differences, which can lead to social exclusion within the host society. This reality underscores the urgent need to examine the role of intercultural competence and social inclusion among migrant workers, particularly within workplace settings in Malaysia. This paper draws on Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence and Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory to propose a conceptual framework for research. This framework integrates both theoretical perspectives to explore the dynamics of intercultural competence and workplace social inclusion among migrant workers in Malaysia. By applying this framework, the paper aims to offer insights into how intercultural competence can be enhanced, leading to more inclusive workplace environments. The proposed framework also has the potential to inform the development of training programs specifically designed to improve intercultural competence and social inclusion among migrant workers. Such programs could play a critical role in fostering a more inclusive and harmonious work environment, ultimately benefiting not only migrant workers but also the broader Malaysian society by promoting social cohesion and reducing instances of exclusion.

**Keywords:** Intercultural competence, workplace, social inclusion, migrant workers, Malaysia

## 1 Introduction

Migrant workers constitute a significant portion of the global workforce. Their motivations for migration are often complex, driven by economic disparity and a desire for improved living standards. While migrant workers contribute substantially to the economies of host countries, they can face challenges such as discrimination, exploitation, and limited social protections. Malaysia presents itself as a compelling setting for research on migrant workers. As one of the largest migrant-receiving countries and a primary destination in Southeast Asia, Malaysia has emerged as a significant importer of labor in Asia. Official figures indicate that Malaysia hosts approximately three million

documented migrant workers in 2023, representing an estimated 15.3% of the Malaysian workforce and dominating low-skilled and semi-skilled job [9]. Migrant workers play a pivotal role in Malaysia's economy, bolstering various industries and driving growth. However, their experiences are marred by harsh realities such as exploitation, unfair treatment, abuse, wage theft, and precarious employment conditions [14]. Reports also highlight issues like inappropriate behavior and language barriers among migrant workers [20] fueling misunderstandings and stereotypes that widen the social gap [1]. The challenges in cultivating positive host-migrant social relations are evident, with potential consequences including societal discord if harmony among culturally diverse groups is not achieved. However, successful integration of migrants fosters new forms of social harmony and mitigates potential downsides. Therefore, it is imperative for host members, particularly local employers, to facilitate the development of intercultural competence among migrant workers. Such assistance enables them to engage in culturally appropriate behaviors with host members.

While helping migrant workers develop their intercultural competence is essential, addressing their social inclusion is equally critical. Studies highlight a troubling reality: many migrant workers face discrimination, xenophobia, and social exclusion, often stemming from communication breakdowns and intercultural conflicts [1][17]. Research shows that migrant workers who experience exclusion struggle to participate in work activities due to limitations imposed by themselves or others. This social exclusion, in turn, becomes a significant barrier to developing intercultural competence [13]. This paper argues that social inclusion within the workplace is a vital foundation for enhancing migrant workers' intercultural competence. Effective social inclusion depends on communication practices that foster informal social connections among migrant workers and cultivate a sense of belonging in the workplace. Research supports this view, finding that migrants who felt included had colleagues and employers who initiated casual conversations and encouraged the development of social skills [13]. By promoting social inclusion through effective communication practices, especially within the workplace, employers can significantly enhance migrant workers' intercultural competence.

## 2 Literature Review

A discussion of intercultural competence has usually involved a list of dimensions or components and diverse approaches (see [5] [6] [10] [11]). Given this, we refer to Deardorff's [6] work since it is the first research-based definition that documented consensus among intercultural experts. Intercultural competence is viewed as an individual's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on her/his knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The research on intercultural competence is extensive. Yet, the focus is largely based on expatriates (mainly businesspeople and diplomats) or sojourners (mainly international students/academic migrants) (see [8]). There is very little work that considers intercultural competence of the migrant workers, particularly those of low skilled who predominantly occupied the labour force. Moreover, most if not all empirical models of intercultural competence were completely defined from the Western perspective [24]. There is a lack in the concrete justification for the perspectives of intercultural competence that considers non-Western

context [4].

In terms of social inclusion, this concept extends beyond mere physical presence in a society; it involves enabling individuals and groups to fully participate in economic, social, cultural, and political life [15]. This concept also encompasses access to social services, general social participation [18], and a subjective sense of connectedness and belonging [16][23]. Major et al. [13] emphasize an understanding of social inclusion that centers on migrants' feelings of connectedness at work and their sense of belonging in the host country. The workplace can require a complex set of communication skills, among them the ability to make requests [22], give directives [21] manage disagreements [3] and use humour to negotiate meetings [19]. Studies indicated migrant workers faced social inclusion challenges within and outside their work environment [12]. Major et al. [13] found that migrants often experience feelings of exclusion due to various limitations, whether self-imposed or imposed by others. These limitations include language barriers and the inability to participate fully in work activities and workplace interactions, such as small talk and humor. The responsibility for bridging these barriers often falls solely on the migrants, rather than being a shared effort among all workplace members.

However, fostering a socially inclusive workplace requires collective effort and shared responsibility. Fostering relationships through social interaction, particularly in the workplace, can help migrants build connections beyond their own ethnic communities and cultivate a sense of belonging in a new country. This relies heavily on socially inclusive practices in the workplace, such as the willingness of colleagues to actively encourage and engage migrants in meaningful interactions [23]. Such practices not only support migrants in developing their intercultural competence—such as acquiring new language skills and understanding cultural norms that enable them to engage in culturally appropriate behaviors with their colleagues—but also help them feel recognized and valued as productive members of society.

### **3 Proposed conceptual framework**

Two important theoretical frameworks can be drawn upon for delineating a conceptual framework on intercultural competence and social inclusion: Deardorff's [6] model of intercultural competence and Allport's [2] Intergroup Contact Theory.

Deardorff [6] developed a process model of intercultural competence. Her model is a widely used framework for understanding the key elements that contribute to a person's ability to interact effectively in intercultural settings. She suggested the following elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes. Attitudes (i.e., openness, respect, curiosity, and discovery) are viewed as fundamental for the development of the intercultural competence of an individual. Comprehension of knowledge is gained through cultural awareness and an in-depth understanding of other cultures. Both internal and external outcomes are seen as the resulting end of attitude, knowledge or comprehension, and skills of a person. These outcomes are demonstrated through one's flexibility, adaptability, ethno-relative view, and empathy which enables the person to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. The degree of intercultural competence depends on the degree of attitudes, knowledge or compre-

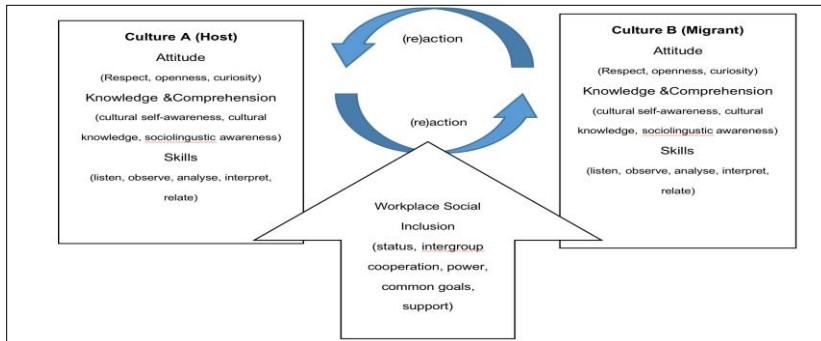
hension, and skills that the person acquires in the ongoing process of intercultural competence development. Her model depicts these elements as building blocks, with each level laying the foundation for the next, culminating in successful intercultural communication and behavior.

The Intergroup Contact Theory by Gordon Allport [2] posits that under appropriate conditions or environments, intergroup contact could be one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice (or discrimination and culture insensitivity) between majority and minority group members. This meant that under certain conditions, contact between members of different groups can work to reduce prejudice. The crucial conditions needed are (i) Equal Status: For positive interactions and mutual understanding to develop, members of both groups must feel like they have equal standing and power within the interaction. Power imbalances can create a barrier to open communication and hinder the ability to build trust, (ii) Intergroup Cooperation: Working towards a common goal fosters interdependence and cooperation between groups. This shared objective breaks down barriers and promotes positive interactions as both groups rely on each other's contributions for success, (iii) Common Goals: The presence of a shared objective motivates collaboration and positive intergroup relations. When working towards a common goal, groups are more likely to see each other as allies and build positive relationships, and (iv) Support by Social and Institutional Authorities: Social and institutional support for intergroup contact strengthens its positive effects and discourages prejudice. This support can come in various forms, such as laws promoting equality or policies encouraging intergroup interaction. When institutions actively promote intergroup contact, it becomes more normalized and accepted, leading to a reduction in prejudice.

By viewing the workplace as an intergroup contact situation, the proposed framework suggests that migrant workers will feel socially included and develop their intercultural competence if (a) employers/worksite supervisors/coworkers have the opportunity to get to know migrant workers as an individual (opportunity to interact) rather than as a stereotype or label (stereotype disconfirmation), (b) employers/worksite supervisors/coworkers work with the migrant workers as an equal peer (equal status) to accomplish common work goals (outcome dependency), and (c) employers/worksite supervisors/coworkers unequivocally supports the equality and workplace inclusion of the migrant workers.

Drawing from the above scholarly work, this paper proposes a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) that integrates intercultural competence and social inclusion in the workplace, focusing on interactions between host culture (Culture A) and migrant workers (Culture B). The framework identifies three key components of intercultural competence for both groups: Attitude (e.g., respect, openness, curiosity); Knowledge & Comprehension (e.g., cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness) and Skills (e.g., listening, observing, analyzing, interpreting, and relating). These components shape intercultural interactions in the workplace, influencing the process of workplace social inclusion, which is facilitated by five conditions: status, intergroup cooperation, power, common goals, and support. The framework also acknowledges the dynamic nature of mutual interactions, as represented by the bidirectional arrows labeled (re)action, which indicate the reciprocal influence of intercultural engagement between host and migrant workers. This suggests that the process of social inclusion is shaped by

continuous actions and responses from both parties. This framework advances intercultural communication theory by integrating Deardorff's intercultural competence model and Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory to explain social inclusion in the workplace for migrant workers. It highlights the reciprocal nature of intercultural engagement, where inclusion is shaped by continuous (re)actions between host and migrant workers. By identifying key conditions that facilitate or hinder inclusion, the framework provides a structured approach for understanding how intercultural competence influences migrant workers' integration and interactions in the workplace.



**Fig. 1.** Proposed conceptual framework on intercultural competence and social inclusion

Addressing social inclusion among migrant workers in Malaysia requires comprehensive policy reforms, including measures to improve labour rights, enhance social protection, combat discrimination, and promote inclusive social policies. Social inclusion poses significant challenges to migrant workers' intercultural competence. Hence, investigating the factors of intercultural competence among migrant workers, particularly within the framework of social inclusion offers insights into the factors that facilitate or impede their ability to develop intercultural competence in Malaysian society. Understanding the factors that influence intercultural competence, while considering the effect of social inclusion, can inform the development of targeted interventions and training programs aimed at enhancing migrant workers' intercultural competence skills and fostering their social inclusion.

#### 4 Recommendations for future studies

Future research warrants exploration to deepen our understanding of this complex phenomenon. Firstly, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the dynamic nature of intercultural competence among migrant workers over time, allowing researchers to examine how antecedents and the moderating effect of social inclusion evolve and interact. Additionally, qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies, could offer richer insights into the lived experiences of migrant workers and the nuanced ways in which social inclusion influences their intercultural competence. Moreover, comparative studies across different migrant populations and host societies could illuminate how contextual factors shape the antecedents and outcomes of

intercultural competence, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper sheds light on intercultural competence and social inclusion in the context of migrant workers in Malaysia. This paper underscores the importance of promoting inclusive practices in the workplace to enhance migrant workers' intercultural competence. Future research could expand on the proposed conceptual framework by using longitudinal studies, comparative analyses, and intervention-based research. These approaches would deepen our understanding of intercultural competence and guide the development of targeted strategies to promote inclusive intercultural relations in Malaysian society.

**Acknowledgments.** n.a.

**Disclosure of Interests.** The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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