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## Emotional Intelligence and Intercultural Competence: Theoretical Questions and Pedagogical Possibilities



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### Abstract

Against the background of increased global mobility and the need to communicate effectively across cultures, the development of Emotional Intelligence (EI) is of growing importance to those involved in intercultural education. There are important theoretical synergies between EI, which is comprised of components such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Goleman, 1998), and models of intercultural competence (IC) commonly utilised in intercultural education (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). In particular, one of the components of EI, empathy has recently attracted attention from new perspectives (Epley, 2014; Bloom, 2016; Breithaupt, 2017a, 2017b). In this paper, we consider the place of EI within models of intercultural competence and then offer theoretical and pedagogical discussion on one particular element of EI—empathy—that we believe will be useful to intercultural educators.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence (EI), empathy, intercultural competence (IC), pedagogical implications, research questions on IC

### Introduction

In all interpersonal interactions, interlocutors must be able to interpret and understand others' emotional cues whilst also regulating their own internal experience of emotion and how it is expressed through verbal and non-verbal communicative modes (e.g., Ekman, 1972; Matsumoto & Takeuchi, 1998; Matsumoto & LeRoux, 2003; Yoo, Matsumoto & LeRoux, 2006; Matsumoto, Yoo & LeRoux, 2007). Such processes and abilities are particularly important in the context of intercultural communication, not only due to the fact that the misreading of emotional cues can lead to

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misunderstandings but also that empathising with others who may have different values and perspectives can be difficult (Breithaupt, 2017a, pp. 18-21). Within psychology, the notion of Emotional Intelligence (EI), made popular by Daniel Goleman in his 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence*, has helped to foreground the particular abilities that help individuals manage the emotional challenges of interpersonal relations. Yet, its application to the field of intercultural education has been rather limited compared to how intensively it has been dealt with in business and leadership management studies (e.g., Goleman, 1998; Sharma & Sehrawat, 2014; Higgs & Dulewicz, 2016; Runde, 2016). One potential cause of this, as lamented by Alvino Fantini during his 2018 keynote speech on *Exploring Intercultural Communicative Competence at Intercultural Competence and Mobility: Virtual and Physical* conference at the University of Arizona, is that after more than four decades of intensified intercultural education there is still no consensus about the definition of intercultural competence nor its components. It is true that elements of EI are mentioned in many intercultural competence models, but the notion of EI has not yet been specifically used as a theoretical umbrella term that links the elements together. Among the most cited components tied to EI are: regulating emotions (Ting-Toomey, 1993), empathy (e.g., Hwang, Chase & Kelly, 1980; Hwang *et al.*, 1985; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Gudykunst, 1993; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Deardorff, 2006), and mindful listening (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In this paper, we take up the notion of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and explore its significance for intercultural education. We do this by considering the place of EI within models of intercultural competence and then offer theoretical and pedagogical discussion on one particular element of EI—empathy—that we believe will be useful to intercultural practitioners.

### **Emotional Intelligence and Intercultural Competence**

The term Emotional Intelligence was initially defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions,” but the term itself became widespread after Daniel Goleman published his acclaimed book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). In 1997, Mayer and Salovey revised their definition because they found it vague and added the element of “thinking about feelings” (1997, p. 10):

Emotional Intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thoughts; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

Mayer and Salovey offered a well-known model of EI called the *Ability Model of Emotional Intelligence* (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), which consists of the four elements mentioned in the definition above; and, developed a test for measuring EI (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2004). Salovey and Mayer’s conceptualisation here is of much relevance to intercultural competence, particularly in the sense that it validates emotion as a source of thinking and makes explicit the importance of being able to analyze emotion as a way of deepening understanding of self and other. We see synergy here with work conducted by scholars such as Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006). Byram’s (1997) notion of “interpreting and relating” highlights that intercultural competence is not a form of static knowledge that resides within each individual, but rather is something that is actualised as interlocutors actively interpret linguistic and non-linguistic messages and draw on cultural knowledge to enhance common ground. Emotional cues are necessarily embodied within linguistic and non-linguistic messages and are therefore a core part of the meaning-making process which needs to be negotiated. Related to this, Deardorff (2006) emphasizes the importance of empathy and taking an ethno-relative view of cultural phenomena in developing intercultural competence, which she sees primarily in terms of interacting effectively and appropriately. Byram (1997) sees this as a matter of “decentering.” We see that the ability to empathize with others and to see their point of view as an important condition for developing

an ethnorelative viewpoint over time, but this also means the individual needs to be attuned to one's own emotional reactions and be willing to self-regulate. In other words, one needs emotional intelligence, as defined above.

In recent years, some empirical work has emerged which draws connections between emotional skills and intercultural skills, and between intercultural competence and empathy in particular (e.g., González *et al.*, 2013; Melvin, Ephraim & Sussie, 2013). One strand of research explores the relationship between EI and intercultural development. For example, tracking the intercultural development of accounting students during a short-term study abroad program, Tucker, Gullekson, and Esmond-Kiger (2012) proposed EI as a key factor of success during study abroad or expatriate sojourns. Referring to pre-test and post-test data, the authors came to the conclusion that emotional intelligence can be a predictor of accounting for students' intercultural growth in the form of decreased ethnocentrism and decreased communication apprehension. It has also been observed in studies about mobility students that emotional intelligence may significantly influence students' cultural adjustment and performance during their study abroad (Harrison & Voelker, 2006; Ornstein & Nelson, 2006; Gullekson & Tucker, 2012), which suggests that there is a direct linkage between one's Emotional Intelligence and Intercultural Competence. Students with obviously higher EI are more cooperative and can therefore presumably succeed more in intercultural interactions. If so, EI training simply cannot be neglected in the era of global mobility (see findings of Ornstein & Nelson, 2006; Harrison & Voelker, 2006; Gullekson & Tucker, 2012, etc.).

Besides these first analyses, we can observe some phrases emerging on the Internet and in smaller-scale research further suggesting a little-noticed relationship. Among them is the concept of "*intercultural emotional intelligence*," which has not yet been further investigated in scholarship, but which is beginning to be used in other circles (e.g., [www.emic-project.org](http://www.emic-project.org)).

While it is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a comprehensive theoretical synthesis of emotional intelligence and intercultural competence, in the next section we take up the notion of empathy in more detail and review work which has addressed empathy within intercultural contexts.

## Empathy

Although *empathy* has been listed as a component in several intercultural competence models (e.g., Hwang, Chase & Kelly, 1980; Hwang *et al.*, 1985; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Gudykunst 1993; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Deardorff, 2006), it has been not specifically defined and conceptualized. In the following paragraphs we will make an attempt to start an analysis on this issue. In order to show the practicability of our endeavour, we provide an exercise for teaching EI as an example.

According to Goleman (1995, 1998), *empathy* is, besides self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, and social skills, one of the five key theoretical components when talking about Emotional Intelligence. *Mit-Erleben* - the translation of empathy in the German language expresses a core idea of this complex emotion—"with-living, co-experience" (Breithaupt, 2017b, p.15). This echoes Paul Bloom's definition, which defines empathy as "the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does" (Bloom, 2016, p. 16). Several models in the field of intercultural communication list empathy as a crucial element of intercultural competence—either as a prerequisite for understanding people from other cultures, or as an outcome of intercultural competence (i.e., Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Deardorff, 2006; Arasaratnam, 2008). These models imply that we should be more empathetic towards people from the out-group when we have higher intercultural competence (outcome). That means, if we have a high intercultural competence we must be able to feel with others. For example, students who had substantial intercultural training might feel

the joy and suffering of people from other cultures more intensely. Also, when we are able to be more empathic toward other cultures, we might demonstrate more intercultural understanding toward them (prerequisite). This suggests that people with deeper emotional understanding are also prone to act effectively in an intercultural situation. It is important to point out that all these assumptions are based on exclusively theoretical research (see models above), and they still need an empirical validation.

*Mit-Erleben - the co-experience* has an emotional/affective dimension. This includes “the ability to access and/or generate feelings when facilitate thoughts; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge”—as Mayer and Salovey put it (1997, 10). Therefore, *empathy* is very much a crucial part of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1995). To be precise, it is its ground-stone, on which EI is built—without *empathy*, the ability to regulate emotions, cope and react appropriately in an intercultural encounter (or in any kind of successful interpersonal interaction) would not be possible. Therefore, *empathy* and Emotional Intelligence must be weighted more heavily when researching Intercultural Competence (Dressler, 2017), and pedagogically effective exercises must be developed and implemented in the curriculum.

As above, although it is often assumed in the intercultural studies field that empathy is a positive attribute, work has started to appear recently which prompts us to delve into deeper consideration. Specifically, authors such as Jesse Prince (2011), and later Paul Bloom (2016) and Fritz Breithaupt (2017b) have warned about assigning only positive aspects to empathy, which also raises questions for thinking about intercultural competence. As described in their respective books, there is a “dark side” of empathy. Bloom (2016) argues that since empathy has a narrow focus, specificity and innumeracy, we are only empathizing with someone, who captures our attention in a shared space of experience. Therefore, we tend to co-experience the feeling of individuals close to us over the suffering of entire groups of people who are far from our field of experience. But this type of biased orientation is not the worst side of *empathy*. As Breithaupt (2017b) explains, empathy can be used for manipulations and sadistic actions, or even for the most evil psychopathic handlings. Serial-killers are reportedly good at understanding their victims’ thinking and feelings. People working in the sector of the so-called “helping” professions (medical doctors and even educators) can slide into burnout when they cannot shut off their empathic feelings (Breithaupt, 2017b, pp. 22-24). It needs to be pointed out and conceptualized that empathy can potentially have negative implications when it comes to intercultural situations, especially when we think about the possibility of its manipulative instrumentalization in intercultural situations when there is an uneven distribution of power between two interlocutors (see, for example, the case of Abu Ghraib broadly discussed in psychology research such as Fiske, Harris & Cuddy, 2004; Hasso, 2007; Zimbardo, 2008). As Bloom (2015, p. 35) points out: “Empathy is like cholesterol, with a good type and bad type.”

### **Dealing with “empathy” in the intercultural communication classroom**

As discussed in the previous section, the assumption that empathy is an unquestioned good in intercultural communication has been called into question. It is difficult to simply assume that “the more empathetic one is, the more interculturally sensitive one will be” (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 5). Therefore, regardless of institutional context, scholars and teachers in intercultural education now face fundamental theoretical and pedagogical questions: What does it really mean to foster empathy within intercultural education? Is empathy actually something that can be taught? While the second question may seem counterintuitive to some, there are in fact doubts about whether empathy can be taught. At the American Association of Teachers in Foreign Languages (ACTFL) conference in 2016, a notable incident occurred where a scholar called-out in a self-confident voice: “Well, you cannot teach empathy!” In the crowded session, which was attended by more than a hundred people addressing the importance of an intercultural approach in foreign language teaching, nobody openly disagreed with

this statement. In theoretical terms, such a sentiment was even expressed by Carol M. Davis (1990) in an article almost thirty years ago. Davis argues that:

the act of empathizing cannot be taught. According to Edith Stein, a German phenomenologist, empathy can be facilitated. It also can be interrupted and blocked, but it cannot be forced to occur. What makes empathy unique, according to Stein, is that it happens to us; it is indirectly given to us, “nonprimordially.” When empathy occurs, we find ourselves experiencing it, rather than directly causing it to happen. This is the characteristic that makes the act of empathy unteachable. (Davis, 1990, p. 707).

Recently, Helen Riess (2017) is one scholar who has contested such a position, arguing that empathy should be seen as a predominantly cognitive attribute rather than an inherent personality trait (Hojat, 2009, p. 412). In her role as director of the empathy and relational science program at Massachusetts General Hospital, Riess (2017) has developed a series of online courses called “Empathetics” ([www.empathetics.com](http://www.empathetics.com)), which is designed to train physicians how to more effectively connect to people. According to her research, *empathy* is a mutable and teachable human competency, which increases patient satisfaction, clinician effectiveness, and productivity.

We believe that it is important for the field of intercultural education to take up such insights to expand the possibilities for systematically incorporating activities and materials to enhance empathy and other aspects of emotional intelligence for intercultural communication. In line with work by scholars such as Gullekson and Tucker (2012), Harrison and Voelker (2006), and Ornstein and Nelson (2006), this means seeing EI development as a core part of developing intercultural competence.

In terms of classroom practice, we believe it is advantageous to address empathy and other aspects of EI without an intercultural focus in the first instance. For example, teachers can help students reflect on the general role of empathy in human emotional functioning and relationship management, such as by drawing attention to how humans experience and perceive emotions. For finding teaching advice and well-established exercises on EI, there are many manuals and teaching guides (both in book form or on the Internet), which can be easily tailored to different student groups (see e.g., Elias & Arnold, 2006; Mortiboys, 2012; Lewkowitz, 2016; Bauer, 2018).

It is also useful for teachers to become familiar with some of the psychological research on empathy of the past ten years, which calls into question key assumptions about emotions in communication. For example, Nicholas Epley, a leading social psychologist, pleads for caution when reading other people by observing their facial (micro)expressions. He states that, according to current research, many emotions remain concealed from us, and we cannot give too much relevance to detecting and searching the faces of others (Epley, 2015, p. 166). Our intuitive sense that emotions—using the words of Epley—“leak out and are clearly visible to others looks to be more of an egocentric illusion than objective reality” (2015, p. 165). This presents a challenge to conventional approaches to empathy within intercultural education which have often turned to the importance of interpreting non-verbal communication, and encourages students to look for cues in mimics and intonation in conversations (see factor labels of Intercultural Competence by Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Aiming for perspective-taking alone is not enough, according to Epley’s series of experiments. In fact, imagining other people’s circumstances could increase misunderstanding, or even harm the interaction (e.g., Tarrant, Calitri & Weston, 2012; Vorauer, Martens & Sasaki, 2009). This is likely to surprise many intercultural educators. Trying to take someone else’s perspective based on observation is one of the major skills that is often listed in intercultural competence models and is also called “attributional reasoning” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Morris *et al.*, 2014, p. 198). Instead of *taking-*

*perspectives* (implicitly tracing observed behaviours to intentions), Epley and other social psychologists encourage us to consider *getting-perspectives*, meaning the verbalization and the verification of our perceived cues (Johnson & Bechler, 1998; Ames, Benjamin & Brockner, 2012; Epley, 2015, pp. 180-181). Here, thus, the focus shifts to articulating one's perceptions and interpretations of observed features and clarifying the meaning of what has been observed with one's interlocutor.

In view of these insights, we would particularly like to emphasise the importance of meta-cognitive tasks when addressing empathy in the intercultural communication classroom. This means providing opportunities for students to become experienced at describing emotions and by spending more time on personal reflections (Morris *et al.*, 2014, pp. 207-215; Kaplan *et al.*, 2013). As a specific method for developing meta-cognitive awareness of emotions, Epley (2015) refers to a method Native Americans have reportedly used, the so-called "talking stick" technique, which is also often called "parroting" (Epley, 2015, pp. 180-181). This practice is about reiterating feedback in order to increase proper understanding. When two different people or groups have a dispute, only one person holding a stick is allowed to speak. When that person finishes, another participant has to recall and restate the comments. Only when the first person feels understood, can the next person make a new comment. This method relies on the verification of information from others, which is also described as the "speaker-listener technique" (Markman, Stanley & Bloomberg, 2001). Facilitated in intercultural courses and training, this exercise can teach participants to become careful listeners, which is the base of understanding the perspectives of others. Since this approach is presumably not part of our natural conversational habit, it requires learning and an elaborative discussion in the classroom with the help of teachers' explanations.

This briefly-described method above is just one of the exercises educators in intercultural training can use for enhancing emotional intelligence and empathy. There are several other techniques, developed in social psychology about Emotional Intelligence and empathy, which would be worth to become part of the educators' repertoire in intercultural education (e.g., [www.empathetics.com](http://www.empathetics.com), or Singer & Bolz, 2013). To the authors' best knowledge, currently there is no evidence showing which strategies of emotional intelligence training are effective within regular education settings. There are some observational findings, but they are mostly controlled studies (see Satterfield, 2017, discussing social and emotional learning school-based programs across the USA). Nevertheless, the evidence that Emotional Intelligence and empathy are significant contributors of intercultural competence calls for further theoretical and empirical examinations by urging scholars to develop empathy-based exercises for intercultural pedagogical settings.

Once a certain amount of awareness has been raised regarding the nature of empathy, students can be encouraged to consider the cultural variability of emotional experience, the challenges of interpreting emotional cues across cultures, and the role that empathy plays in increasing one's attentiveness to the effect of emotion on intercultural communication. In line with our earlier discussion, students can be encouraged to consider how empathy helps individuals with interpreting and relating across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997) and using dialogue around emotional experience to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006).

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued for the importance of seeing EI as a core aspect of intercultural competence to be addressed in the intercultural communication classroom. Although emotional dimensions of intercultural competence are sometimes neglected, it is important for teachers to experiment with creative ways of helping students become more attuned to the ways individuals experience and communicate emotion. As we have emphasised throughout, empathy is an aspect of EI

that is particularly amenable to meta-cognitive instruction, and there is a clear role for the teacher to create opportunities for students not only to empathise with individuals from diverse backgrounds but also to be able to formulate one's perceptions and seek to understand emotions in dialogue with others. It is also important for teachers to explicitly introduce notions such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and so forth, to help develop students' conceptual understanding. Such an approach helps to diversify the repertoire of intercultural training.

It is true that dealing with empathy brings about additional demands for teacher education, particularly in the sense that it requires a certain amount of familiarity with psychological concepts and literature. We believe it is essential for EI to be included within formal teacher education. If this is not feasible, practitioners should familiarise themselves with this subject by reading more scholarly articles or attend emotional intelligence/empathy training seminars. The idea of Weidemann and others (2007) that successful and effective educators profit from a strong interdisciplinary knowledge is very true in the context of intercultural education.

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