Editorial: navigating an increasingly intercultural reality – intercultural competence in European international management

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1 An increasing intercultural reality in European international management: relevance of the thematic issue

With 259 million immigrants worldwide (United Nations, 2017), workplaces and societies are internationalising and more and more people need to be able to navigate this new reality – even when not living abroad themselves. This is especially relevant in the European context with its free movement of workers. In 2017, 8.8 million EU citizens worked in another EU country; this is an increase of 61% since 2007. Furthermore, the EU-wide number of employed persons from countries outside the European Union increased by 14% (from 7.6 to 8.7 million) in the same period (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018). This international flavour is permeating not only workplaces but society in general, thereby calling for an identification of successful management and training concepts to develop the 'competencies that societies and economies need, today and tomorrow' (UNESCO, 2015).

Researchers agree that to be successful in international and intercultural contexts, managers need intercultural competencies to be able to deal with the increasingly complex and globalised word (e.g. Bücker and Poutsma, 2010; Bird et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2006). In light of these developments, the relevance of understanding the effects of intercultural competencies on international management outcomes has never been greater (e.g. Thomas et al., 2015). The ability to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures (Wiseman, 2002) is increasingly making a difference between success and failure in the workplace (Bird et al., 2010).

These abilities are of special relevance in the European context, which is characterised by a large number of countries with distinct cultures in a relatively limited geographical space (Gelbuda et al., 2008). Cultural differences are part and parcel of international management, and research shows that these differences are not disappearing (Mayrhofer et al., 2011; Taras et al., 2011; Beugelsdijk et al., 2015). However, many underplay the cultural differences between (European) countries, as exemplified by many companies who do not deem it necessary to train expatriates who are sent to relatively nearby cultures (Van Bakel et al., 2017). This expectation of cultural similarity – the presumed cultural similarity paradox (Vromans et al., 2013) – may lead to the unrealistic expectation that the cultures do not differ at all (Martin and Harrell, 2004). Identifying, developing and evaluating the impact of intercultural skills, therefore, is of utmost importance for research and business practitioners in the international management context.

The objective of this thematic issue on the role of intercultural competence in European international management is to provide a platform for researchers in the field to present their recent work on the measurement of intercultural competence as well as the antecedents and outcomes of intercultural competence and how these findings can extend the intercultural competence literature and guide new theory building. The articles included in this thematic issue further advance the intercultural competence research, help to solidify the perspective of intercultural competence, highlight some critical matters for continued consideration, and point to numerous directions for further investigation.

2 Intercultural competencies as a new approach in cross-cultural management: the status quo

The research on cross-cultural aspects of management has long relied on and discussed concepts of cultural values (e.g. the concepts of Hofstede et al., 2010, of project GLOBE, see House and Javidan, 2004, or of Schwartz, 1992, 1994) and value differences between nations (e.g. Shenkar, 2001; Kraus et al., 2016; Jiménez et al., 2017) to understand various international management related outcomes (e.g. Garbe and Richter, 2009; Hoffmann, 2014; Hauff et al., 2015; Gunkel et al., 2015; Kirkman et al., 2006). Accepting that the nation may not be the best unit of analysis for key parts of managerial action, researchers from this stream engaged in advancing the concepts to measure or operationalise culture, and introduced, for instance, the idea of cultural archetypes (e.g. Richter et al., 2016a; Venaik and Midgley, 2015).

Albeit this progress made, researchers claim that it is time to move forward and discover new theoretical streams and methodological practices, which might be useful for explaining management behaviours and the mechanisms to improve international managerial outcomes (e.g. Kirkman et al., 2017; Devinney and Hohberger, 2017). Concepts that focus more directly at intercultural competence at the individual, the team or organisational level are a global mindset (e.g. Rhinesmith, 1992; Lovvorn and Chen, 2011; Maznevski and Lane, 2003) and cultural intelligence (e.g. Earley and Ang, 2003; Ang et al., 2007). These concepts have emerged from different research streams (e.g., cross-cultural psychology, communication science, and research on international education), yet seem to show some overlap and are useful to further study successful intercultural interaction within different management settings (e.g. Levy et al., 2007; Leung et al., 2014; Andresen and Bergdolt, 2017).

In an attempt to further understand the status quo of research on these different concepts and to outline future research directions, the first article included in this thematic issue, by Yari et al., offers a systematic review of the research field. This review is different from other recognised review studies (e.g. Ott and Michailova, 2018; Schlaegel et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2018) in two regards. First, it broadens the focus to different but related concepts, namely cultural intelligence, global mindset, and cross-cultural competence and therewith identifies overlaps in research foci. For instance, authors who research into individual-level outcomes examine the associations of either cultural intelligence or cross-cultural competence on the performance of expatriates but remain rather separated along the usage of the respective research construct. Second, it uses bibliometric citation and co-citation methods as well as a burst analysis to more objectively identify the most active outlets and authors in the field, research streams, and

emerging topics. This enables researchers – especially the ones newer to the field – to generate an excellent overview of the research landscape, and it draws the attention to potential in vogue areas for future research.

3   Defining and measuring intercultural competence: still a challenge

Since the turn of the century, intercultural competence has become a trending topic in the academic literature in general. Originally stemming from linguistic studies in the 1960s, the concept of *competence* developed from the innate ability to learn a language to *communicative competence* that can be learned through education (Witte and Harden, 2011). In the 1990s researchers began to study this concept in an intercultural context (Martin, 1993) and applied it to the expatriate context (Gertsen, 1990). In the early 2000s the international management literature also began to focus on this ability or capacity "to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman, 2002, p.208) with the introduction of the concept of *cultural intelligence* (Earley and Ang, 2003).

Different terms abound in the domain of intercultural competence – in this thematic issue alone the terms *intercultural competence*, *cultural intelligence*, *bicultural competence, intercultural readiness* and *global mindset* are used. We follow Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) and outline: "The theories and models display both considerable similarity in their broad brushstrokes (e.g. motivation, knowledge, skills, context, outcomes) and yet extensive diversity at the level of specific conceptual subcomponents" (Spitzberg and Chagnon, 2009, p.35). As the study of intercultural competence has roots in various disciplines such as (intercultural) communication, international business and management, and international education, much can be learned from these different research streams. Our thematic issue contributes to this learning by including several new perspectives. Most notably the second article, by Emontspool and Hansen, who apply a Bourdieusian perspective on intercultural competence, highlights several critical issues in the study of intercultural competence as well as avenues for future research. Bridging the fields of marketing and management, the authors discuss different perspectives on culture, which underlie the conceptualisation of intercultural competence. Furthermore, they highlight two often overlooked aspects that influence intercultural competence in a specific context, namely power relations between those who interact, and their socio-historical context. This paper suggests a novel approach to intercultural competence, inviting researchers to explore neighbouring fields. We believe that this will enrich the study of intercultural competence – to the benefit of organisations and society as a whole.
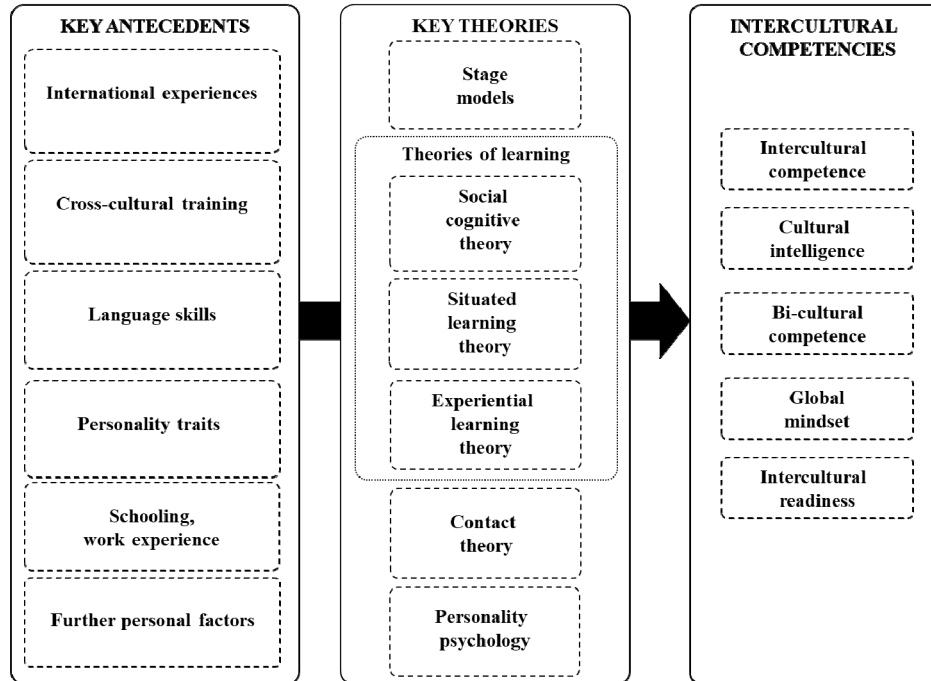
Similarly, many different ways of measuring (part of) intercultural competence have been designed: Fantini (2009) lists 44 instruments and this list has grown considerably in the last years with new instruments or improved versions of instruments being developed (e.g. Alon et al., 2016; Bartel-Radic and Giannelloni, 2017; Presbitero, 2016; Van Der Zee et al., 2013). Many of these approaches are quantitative in nature; however, more qualitative approaches are starting to be introduced as well (e.g. Deardorff, 2006). Furthermore, authors engage in contrasting and evaluating these different measurement approaches (e.g. Varela, 2019). Measurement approaches and instruments are in the focus of the third article included in this thematic issue by Taras. A valid and reliable measurement of intercultural competencies is of relevance for empirical research designs, yet also for business practice, for instance, when it comes to the selection of employees.

The article seeks to discuss the applicability of different instruments in various situations and contexts, discusses their potential limitations, and points to issues that need to be considered in future research to advance our understanding of intercultural competencies.

4 Development of intercultural competence: theoretical lenses, contextualisation and a specific antecedent

Prior research has suggested and empirically tested antecedent factors, which can be used for developing intercultural competence, such as international experiences and contacts with locals (e.g. Engle and Crowne, 2014; Van Bakel et al., 2014), language skills (e.g. Huff, 2013), personality traits (e.g. Ang et al., 2006), and cross-cultural training (e.g. Reichard et al., 2015). The theories referred to in this domain can be categorised into four broader groups (see Figure 1). The first group of theories or conceptual models that researchers refer to concentrates on stages of cultural adjustment and goes back to the thinking of, for instance, Oberg (1960), Adler (1977), Church (1982), and Bennett (1986). These authors outline different evolutionary stages of adjustment that an individual goes through when being exposed to a foreign culture. The second group of authors refers to theories of learning, more specifically to three different theories of learning. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2002) posits that thoughts, affect, and behaviours of individuals are influenced by observation or direct experiences made (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to situated learning, which sees learning as a social phenomenon that takes place in the experienced, lived-in world, through participation in social practice. Finally, the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1976; Kolb, 2015) aims to explain how experience is transformed into learning and knowledge via a four-stage cycle of learning. A third group of authors concentrates on (intergroup) contact theory (Allport, 1954), which assumes that interpersonal contacts can reduce prejudices, if the contacts satisfy specific conditions (Allport, 1954). Finally, with regard to deriving hypotheses on the specific relationships between personality traits and intercultural competencies, some researchers (e.g. Ang et al., 2006; Caligiuri, 2000) refer to conceptual models, such as the five-factor model of personality.

Hence, there are already many strong theories that help in understanding how specific antecedents contribute to the development of intercultural competencies. Moreover, recent literature reviews provide good overviews of findings generated on different antecedents, especially on the learning or training aspect (e.g. Varela, 2017; Zhang and Zhou, 2019; Ott and Iskhakova, 2019). However, we still lack a more fine-tuned understanding of the mechanisms through which specific dimensions of intercultural competencies are developed and how contextual factors may act as moderators or mediators in the development of intercultural competencies. This gap is tackled by the fourth article included in this issue, by Kempf and Holtbrügge. The authors develop a conceptual framework on the effectiveness of cross-cultural training. They perform a literature review in which they identify relevant moderators and mediators of cross-cultural training effectiveness and conceptualise them in line with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 2002). Therewith the authors provide recommendations for the selection and training of candidates in an international management context and for the design and evaluation of cross-cultural trainings.

Figure 1   Antecedents of intercultural competencies and key theories

Another antecedent factor that may positively impact on the development or level of intercultural competence is bi-culturalism or multi-culturalism. For expatriate assignments, for instance, it is suggested that cross-cultural individuals could have an edge, functioning as boundary spanners with their knowledge of multiple cultural contexts (Furusawa and Brewster, 2015). The number of these individuals who have cultural knowledge due to birth or experience in more than one culture is on the rise (Furusawa and Brewster, 2015; Tung, 2016). The fifth article included in this issue, by de Waal and Born, relates to a specific group of these cross-cultural individuals, namely adult Third Culture Kids (TCK). TCKs are people who, in the period between 0 and 18 years of age, have lived in another culture than the passport culture of their parents (Pollock et al., 2009). The authors compare TCKs to their non-cross-cultural counterparts in terms of multicultural personality as well as intercultural competencies and examine the effect of these on their preferred leadership style. Hence the paper sheds light on both antecedent factors of intercultural competence and outcomes.

5   Outcomes of intercultural competence

Prior research aims at understanding the direct, moderating or mediating associations of intercultural competencies with management related performance outcomes (e.g. Remhof et al., 2013; Rockstuhl et al., 2011; Bücker et al., 2014). We know from past research that intercultural competencies have a meaningful impact on many work-related and further managerial outcomes (e.g. Rockstuhl and Van Dyne, 2018; Schlaegel et al., 2017). The sixth article included in this issue, by Szymanski and Ipek, analyses work-related

outcomes such as creativity and leadership behaviour, yet from a very specific angle. Their article focuses on football (soccer) players competing in the English Premier League, using the sports context as a form of 'research laboratory'. They show positive effects of a bi-cultural background, but they also introduce potential negative effects, such as the stress that is experienced by these individuals as well as that they are less often seen as leaders of their team. The article highlights that increased intercultural competencies (due to a bi-cultural background) do not always lead to more positive outcomes.

While this and other prior research has significantly contributed to a better understanding of the (empirical) associations between intercultural competencies and various outcomes (see also the overview in Ott and Michailova, 2018), oftentimes the theoretical mechanisms explaining these associations are still not fully developed. As in any field it is important to fully understand the 'why and how' and therewith to uncover the mechanisms, processes, and conditions through which intercultural competencies translate into various outcomes. In line with a more general criticism on theorising practices outlined by Thomas et al. (2011), we find that theorising on the effects of intercultural competencies still relies rather strongly on the first steps that are part of the theorising process, namely: (a) listing definitions of constructs and hoping for readers to automatically understand the associations between constructs, (b) using previous empirical results as a sole backing for an effect, and (c) providing mere references to previous literature or theory rather than true explanations of how the mechanisms therein contribute to explaining an association. This is not sufficient to truly develop theory in the field; hence, we argue that we need to put more effort into digging deeper into the theoretical mechanisms of relationships. The final article in our thematic issue, by Richter et al., works on this aspect. The authors test the explanatory power of an expanded CQ scale in predicting an outcome: expatriation intention. In doing so, they develop more specific arguments on the 'why and how' of the CQ and expatriation intention relationship and exemplarily outline the theoretical advancement that is possible when using a more fine-grained measurement instrument. The article moreover further advances the literature on the assessment of intercultural competence by showing the value of the extended version of the CQ scale above and beyond the established determinants.

Each of the articles included in this issue is far richer than the brief summaries we gave in this introductory overview. Each article individually, and the articles collectively, draw attention to exciting research directions that open up on intercultural competence when we ask new research questions and look into different research streams for answers to these questions.

6 Call for future research and recommendations for research practice

Following from the current status quo of research, we call for future research that addresses the following key aspects: more specificity in defining, measuring and theorising on intercultural competence and its dimensions, and further theorising on the relationships of intercultural competence with antecedents and outcomes. Table 1 provides an overview of the current research practice, potential problems associated with this practice, and recommendations for future research along these two aspects and we will elaborate further on the key points below.

Table 1   Recommendations for future research

Current research practice	Potential problem	Recommendation for future research
Specificity in defining, measuring and theorising on intercultural competence and its dimensions		
• Researchers often do not clearly distinguish between the overall construct and its individual sub-dimensions in developing theoretical arguments and seem to neglect that constructs from different disciplines have similar individual dimensions	• Aggravates progress in understanding the antecedents and outcomes of intercultural competence as findings on constructs from other disciplines are often neglected • Unclear (and potentially misleading) understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of individual sub-dimensions of intercultural competence	• More engagement in improving our understanding of the incremental value of different constructs and sub-dimensions of intercultural competence • Further research into the distinct features of measurement constructs that are proposed • More precision in the decision for or against the focus on an overall construct or on individual sub-dimensions • More precision in the development of the theoretical background for individual sub-dimensions of intercultural competence *Research methods and practices that might support these procedures:* • Use computer aided text analysis (CATA) to clarify upon the unique facets in the measurements of interrelated constructs (Belderbos et al., 2017) • Specifically test sub-dimensions of constructs under study and refer to the overall construct only if this fits the theory or research aim • Test alternative measurement approaches, such as approaches taking into account both the individual sub-dimensions and the overall construct (Edwards, 2001; Rockstuhl and Van Dyne, 2018), or aggregate dimensions to more holistic patterns, such as competence archetypes (Richter et al., 2016a)
Theorising on the relationships of intercultural competence with antecedents and outcomes		
• Studies focusing on outcomes often use practices, such as listing definitions, using previous findings and providing mere references rather than explaining theoretical mechanisms • Studies focusing on antecedents seem to be more advanced as regards the theoretical background, yet we lack research and theorising on contextual (moderating and mediating) factors	• Lack of a true understanding of the 'why and how' of different relationships as the first step towards strong theory in the field • Potential stagnation in our understanding of the role of intercultural competence in the multicultural work context	• Focus on theory and develop stronger theoretical arguments for hypotheses to be tested (Gligor et al., 2016) • Critically evaluate the usefulness of existing theories and compare and combine different theories, i.e., theory pruning (Leavitt et al., 2010) • Consider a multidisciplinary approach and borrow theories from different disciplines (Doz, 2011) *Research methods and practices that support these theorising efforts:* • Make use of longitudinal studies (Reeb et al., 2012) • Shift the focus to mixed methods including experimental or quasi experimental research designs (Van Witteloostuijn, 2015) and qualitative designs (see Doz, 2011) • Ensure methodological rigor to support theorising (for instance, see the following providing more general guidelines in this regard: Cascio, 2012; Chang et al., 2010; Richter et al., 2016b; Kingsley et al., 2017) • Use the full portfolio of new analytical methods; e.g. use regression-based methods to examine the strength of the associations, yet complement these by, for instance, testing necessities (NCA: Dul, 2016), decomposing unique and common effects of individual sub-dimensions of intercultural competence (Nimon and Reio, 2011; Nimon and Oswald, 2013) and examine interaction effects between CQ dimensions and use fuzzy-set QCA to identify the combinations of interrelated predictors that lead to an outcome (Fiss, 2011)

First, we need more clarity in differentiating related constructs acknowledging differences yet also similarities between different yet related concepts, such as cultural intelligence, global mindset, and intercultural competence. This is especially relevant as the international business and international management literature seems to remain somewhat separated along constructs (Johnson et al., 2006; Levy et al., 2007). Generating a further understanding of the incremental value and distinct features of different constructs and their dimensions over other constructs may broaden the knowledge base by taking into consideration the findings from different disciplines. Given the multidimensional nature of intercultural competence (Bird et al., 2010), in empirical studies this involves more precision in the decision for using an overall construct against individual dimensions as well as more precision in developing the related theoretical background (Rockstuhl and Van Dyne, 2018). We recommend researchers to be as specific as possible and to analyse on the level of individual dimensions, as long as there is no theoretical reason to look at the overall construct. In this context, we call for more openness towards alternative approaches of aggregating individual dimensions to an overall construct. Edwards (2001) describes analytical procedures that include the overall construct and their dimensions in a single analytical approach. Rockstuhl and Van Dyne (2018) demonstrate this in the context of cultural intelligence. Moreover, researchers might borrow concepts from cross-cultural research, such as a gestalt perspective and an archetype approach to explore the blend of intercultural competence dimensions in different research contexts (Richter et al., 2016a).

Second, we call for stronger theorising and theory building related to understanding the mechanisms through which specific antecedents translate into intercultural competence and through which intercultural competence translates into (positive) outcomes relevant for the management of international firms. Especially when it comes to research on different outcomes, the theoretical foundations explaining 'why and how' intercultural competence has a certain effect remain vague. Hence, we call for more effort to advance theory building, uncover mechanisms and causality or simply engage in explaining the 'how and why' of the relationships under study. Likewise, we call for a critical evaluation of the usefulness of existing theories that might be adapted or combined (Leavitt et al., 2010). Given the complexity of challenges in a multicultural context, theories from different disciplines might be needed. In order to further support the process of theorising, researchers might need to shift attention towards a somewhat different set of research methods or approaches than the ones relied on in current practice: a stronger reliance on longitudinal rather than cross-sectional data might be of value to identify causal mechanisms. If it comes to the identification of causality, implementing experiments and quasi-experiments is a recommendation that can likewise be a fruitful avenue to improve theory building on phenomena in the context of intercultural competence (van Witteloostuijn, 2015) as experiments can help to rule out alternative causal explanations. Hence, we encourage experimental designs and thinking (Zellmer-Bruhn et al., 2016).

Furthermore, qualitative research and mixed methods research (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki and Nummela, 2006; Shah and Corley, 2006) should receive more room in the research on intercultural competence. They would contribute to both of the areas outlined in Table 1: they are well suited to generate a better understanding of the mechanisms of the how, who, and why of individual attitudes, intentions, and actions (Doz, 2011), as well as to explain the relationships between constructs (Gligor et al., 2016). A procedure which might be useful in this context is computer-aided text analysis (CATA). This is a

technique that assists in the content analysis of qualitative data (Belderbos et al., 2017; Gaur and Kumar, 2018). Yet, it might likewise help in clarifying the unique facets that interrelated constructs show in applied research, such as global mindset versus cultural intelligence, as it supports the systematic review of text.

Finally, new analytical approaches may support our understanding of individual relations, such as necessary condition analysis (Dul, 2016), commonality analysis (Nimon and Reio, 2011; Nimon and Oswald, 2013), and fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (Fiss, 2011). Theorising on individual dimensions might, for instance, involve the outline of necessities in the form of a certain dimension being a necessary condition for an outcome to occur (e.g. Rockstuhl and Van Dyne, 2018).

We hope that the recommendations and findings in each of the articles published in this thematic issue, and our recommendations for future research, will provide the necessary inspiration to push the research on intercultural competence even further forward. We thank all authors for their excellent contributions, all our reviewers for their constructive comments, and the journal management and team at Inderscience for their wonderful guidance and assistance.

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