

Influence of International Students' Empathy on their Attitude towards Other Cultures

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of international students' empathy on their attitude towards other cultures (ATOC) during inter-cultural communication. Previously, this relationship was addressed by western researchers in the culture-general models of intercultural communication competence (ICC). Until now, it is very hard to find such evidences that can establish the presence of relationship among empathy and ATOC from the non-western context. Therefore, this study investigated the impact of empathy on ATOC from the non-western context of Malaysia. The data was collected through simple random sampling by incorporating survey technique through quantitative research approach. Participants were the international students from University Utara Malaysia. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was incorporated to analyze the data in Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS). The findings of the study revealed that there is a positive significant effect of empathy on ATOC of the international students of Malaysia. In addition, the findings are evident that empathy of the international student has a strong impact on their positive ATOC. Lastly, this study supported the findings of earlier studies that witnessed that empathy is the predictor of ATOC.

Key Words: Empathy, Attitude towards other cultures, International students, Malaysia, and Non-Western context.

1. INTRODUCTION

As internationalization is at its peak, intercultural communication competence (ICC) is much crucial for individuals live in multicultural societies and have frequent interaction with culturally diverse individuals [Nadeem *et al.* (2020a)]. Previous studies have increased the understanding regarding the role of various factors that intersects with the competency of an individual

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during intercultural interaction [Arasaratnam and Banerjee (2011); Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010b); Nadeem *et al.* (2020b)]. Despite the fact, it is evident from the recent researches that existence of a relationship among potential influencers (such as, empathy and attitudes) of ICC [Arasaratnam (2016); Deardorff (2009), (2015)]. Even though majority of these conceptualizations have emerged from the western context, it is considered worthy to investigate the association of different contributors of ICC from the non-western context of Malaysia [Nadeem *et al.* (2017a)].

The influx of international students is increasing day by day in Malaysia and they have frequent interaction with the multicultural individuals [Nadeem *et al.* (2017b)]. It is evident from the existing studies of intercultural communication that students possess abilities such as empathy and attitude towards other cultures (ATOC) that help them to be competent in intercultural interactions [Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010a, 2010b)]. On the other side, there are some potential researchers [Deardorff *et al.* (2017); Dunne (2013); Nadeem *et al.* (2017a)] who strongly recommend to further explore the relationship between empathy and ATOC of the individuals during their intercultural encounters. Therefore, this current study targets to readdress the influence of empathy on the ATOC of the international students from the new cultural context of Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Empathy

Among different variables that lead to ICC, empathy is the most crucial among them. This particular term has been abstracted in previous investigations with different approaches. Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) illustrate expressive role-taking along with intellectual interactions often expressed by empathy. In the setting of intercultural communication, Van Der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) express empathy as “the ability to empathize with feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of individuals from a different cultural background” (p. 296). Empathy is one of the important factors that influence ICC.

In the culture-general models of ICC, Arasaratnam (2006) examined the relationship of empathy with other contributing factors of ICC. Findings revealed that there is a positive relationship between empathy and ATOC, interaction involvement and ICC. Another model by Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010a), introduced a comprehensive test of various predictors that leads to ICC. The findings proved that empathy is a key variable contributing to ATOC

and ICC of the individuals. Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010b) introduced sensation seeking in the existing culture-general model of ICC. They witnessed a significant relationship of empathy with ATOC and ICC. It was concluded that this stripe of investigation is till now in its initial phases and needs further exploration among diverse cultures to investigate the association among the variables.

Another research was conducted by Arasaratnam (2016) about the nature of the relationship between bilingualism and intercultural competence. Empathy, along with other factors, was the part of the conceptual framework. Findings of the research proved that empathy is a vital factor that contributes to ICC and ATOC. Thus, the importance of empathy cannot be ignored in the context of intercultural competence as it was the part of previous culture-general models of ICC [Arasaratnam (2006); Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010a, 2010b)]. These abovementioned researches also revealed a significant positive relationship of empathy with ATOC, as strongly recommended in previous studies [Deardorff *et al.* (2017); Dunne (2013)] to further explore the relationship of empathy with other contributing variables during intercultural communication.

2.2. Attitude towards Other Cultures (ATOC)

In the literature of ICC, global attitudes and positive ATOC are used interchangeably. ATOC is well-defined as non-ethnocentric, a positive outlook concerning individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds [Arasaratnam (2006)]. An effort by Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) pointed five key variables (like, empathy, ATOC, etc.) that tend to affect ICC. Based on this specific study, a series of variations are witnessed regarding this culture-general model of ICC in which the researchers keep on refining the models for the determination of nature of variables that influence ICC, to develop one comprehensive model of ICC that can explain well on multiple cultural perspectives.

Positive ATOC was utilized as the key variable in the initial model [Arasaratnam (2006)]. The findings exposed that there was an association of ATOC with interaction involvement, empathy, and experience. In the next attempt [Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010a)], it did not have any direct relationship with ICC and still, it was considered as the contributor of ICC [Arasaratnam (2006)]. Another model by Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010a) witnessed that there were different contributors that lead to ICC. Results depict that insignificant relationship of ATOC with experience and a significant relationship of ATOC with ICC. The next model by Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010b) also reconfirmed the

relationship of ATOC and ICC and other paths of the previous study. In the most recent model, by Arasaratnam and Banerjee (2011) introduced various variables that contribute to ICC. It was noticed that a significant relationship of ATOC existed with sensation seeking, motivation, and ICC whereas insignificant relationship in the presence of ethnocentrism. Another study by Arasaratnam (2016) confirmed the findings of previous research. From the non-western cultural context of Malaysia, a study by Nadeem *et al.* (2019) revealed that ATOC has potential to influence the effectiveness of the international students during intercultural communication.

2.3. Empathy and Attitude towards Other Cultures (ATOC)

Empathy has been defined as the advocating the emotional condition of another individual instead of the emotional condition of own. Wiseman (2002) refers to cultural empathy as a motivational construct in the literature of intercultural competence. Deardorff (2006) mentioned that empathy is an anticipated internal result of intercultural competence. Whereas it appears noticeable that empathy plays a key role in maintaining the relationship and understanding the people of other cultures.

The construct attitude towards the people of other cultures closely relates to the construct of open-mindedness. Van Der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) defined open-mindedness as the open and positive attitude towards the individuals of other cultures with different norm and values. Researchers further define open-mindedness in terms of attitude; this dimension can be a witness as the representation of competent attitude in intercultural context [Van Der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000)]. As Williams and Johnson (2011) revealed that open-mindedness is not a personality characteristic, but an attitude which can be refined with suitable experience besides education. Previous researchers pointed that the attitudes have a tendency to change through studying in abroad [Carlson and Widaman (1988)].

Deardorff (2015) pointed that the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the individuals contribute to the internal outcomes which consist of empathy and other variables. Additionally, when the outcome is achieved, individuals are able to respond in positive attitudes according to the demand of others for their treatment. According to the model of ICC by Deardorff (2009), an individual who has positive ATOC and has the motivation to get knowledge about different cultures is likely to be competent in intercultural interactions. This attitude about getting knowledge of other cultures increases the empathy level of the individual. It further increases the ability of the individual to associate with other individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds. It results in

the efficiency of the communication by the individual in different cultural contexts.

The triadic model of ICC explains that knowledge, attitude, and skills are the contributors of ICC [Byram *et al.* (2002)]. The attitude was considered as the third pillar of ICC. On the contrary, Ruben (1976) revealed that mindfulness and empathy are the pillars of the attitude. Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) noticed that empathy and ATOC are two different constructs, and both are the qualities of a competent intercultural communicator. These studies showed that there is an association between empathy and ATOC. Loo and Shiomi (1999) linked the outcomes of the participants of Japan and Canada and found that participants of Canada scored higher on empathy, behavioural response, intercultural interactions and ATOC. Mahon and Cushner (2014) noticed that empathy and ATOC are psychological constructs and have a possible natural relationship between them.

Previous research (Arasaratnam (2006)) on testing the relationship of different contributors those contribute to ICC, found that there is a positive relationship among empathy and ATOC. Besides this, these two variables are considered as the contributors to ICC. Another research in the same manner by Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010a) revealed that higher level of empathy among international students tends to have a more positive ATOC. Findings proved the strong positive relationship between empathy and ATOC.

Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010b) conducted a new research to retest the findings of previous research regarding the contributors to ICC with the refinement in the model. The finding showed that there is again a positive relationship among empathy and ATOC. The outcomes were consistent with the results of previous research [Arasaratnam *et al.* (2010a)]. In the same pattern, research by Arasaratnam (2016) proved a statistically significant positive relationship among empathy and ATOC from the western context. The discussed studies were conducted in the western cultural contexts. Therefore, despite the lack of evidence in the literature about the relationship of these variables in the non-western context, it still proves the existence of a relationship between ATOC and empathy. Based on these discussed studies, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *There is a relationship between empathy and ATOC.*

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The research participants (international students) were selected from the public university of Malaysia namely, University Utara Malaysia through random sampling. Male and female international students took part in the study from the respective degrees: bachelors, masters, and PhD. In this study, different countries got representation from the international students such as, Pakistan, Jordan, Iran, Thailand, China, etc., while the international students stayed in Malaysia between one to five years. Most of the participants of the study were Muslims, while some were Atheists, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians etc. The demographic factors reveal that Muslim participants were in the majority and they were from the Muslim states.

3.2. Measures

The responses were captured using the Liker-type scale of 5-point responses as an instrument for survey and the responses ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Few items of the instruments were eradicated during Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) for the attainment of a single factor. The results of the specific instruments are discussed in the following subsections.

3.2.1. Empathy

Empathy was measured by the 18-item Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (Cultural Empathy Subscale) by Van Oudenhoven and Van Der Zee (2002). The items of the scale such as, "I am able to voice other people's thoughts". $M = 3.37$, $SD = .931$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$; $\chi^2 = 97.54$, $\chi^2/df = 2.26$, PNFI = .627, TLI = .967, IFI = .979, CFI = .979, NFI = .963, GFI = .953, SRMR = .03, and RMSEA = .06.

3.2.2. Attitude towards Other Cultures (ATOC)

Attitude towards other cultures was measured by the 8-item unifactoral scale by Remmers *et al.* (1965) which has items such as, "I consider it a privilege to associate with people of other cultural backgrounds". $M = 3.41$, $SD = .971$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$; $\chi^2 = 17.63$, $\chi^2/df = 2.93$, PNFI = .695, TLI = .979, IFI = .992, CFI = .992, NFI = .987, GFI = .984, SRMR = .01, and RMSEA = .07.

4. FINDINGS

Through SPSS and AMOS (version 24) the data were analyzed for this current study. For the determination of constructs' reliability and validity, different tests were employed. Lastly, for the investigation of the causal relationship among the variables, this study incorporated Structural Equation Modelling.

4.1. Measurement Model

For the assessment of the measurement model, CFA was produced. It revealed that the data had an excellent fit with the model of the study; $\chi^2 = 253.599$, $\chi^2/df = 2.11$, PNFI = .737, TLI = .958, IFI = .967, CFI = .967, NFI = .940, GFI = .927, SRMR = .05, and RMSEA = .05. On the other side, to ensure the constructs' validity and reliability; discriminant validity, average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) were assessed to attain the fitness of the measurement model. Table 1 reveals the findings of the validity and reliability of the constructs. It further shows that the findings exceed the cut-point level.

Table 1. CR, AVE, and Discriminant Validity

	CR	AVE	Empathy	ATOC
Empathy	.932	.536	.732	
ATOC	.917	.649	.408***	.805

*** $p < 0.001$.

4.2. Regression Analysis

Table 2 represents the findings of the regression analysis of the present study. The results ($\beta = .469$, $t = 6.587$, $\rho < .001$) in Table 2 depicts a positive significant relationship among empathy and ATOC. Thus, the findings of the study supported the hypothesis (Hypothesis 1). The empathy of the international students of Malaysia has a statistically significant impact on their positive ATOC.

Table 2. Regression Analysis

		β	S.E.	t	ρ	Status
Empathy	→ ATOC	.469	.071	6.587	***	Significant

*** $p < 0.001$.

5. DISCUSSION

This study targets to explore the influence of international students' empathy on their positive ATOC, specifically on the non-western context of Malaysia. As indicated from the earlier efforts by the western researchers that a significant influence of students' empathy on the ATOC [Arasaratnam (2016); Deardorff (2015); Mahon and Cushner (2014)]. In the same manner, the findings of this study have also reconfirmed this association from the non-western context. Furthermore, the results indicated that international students' empathy and their ATOC are significantly positively associated with each other. It revealed that during intercultural communication, the international students of Malaysia can empathize with culturally different individuals which lead them to express a positive ATOC. This current study has increased our understanding and contributes to the current body of knowledge by examining the influence of empathy on ATOC, which was preliminarily dominated from the western context [Nadeem *et al.* (2018)]. Therefore, the findings of this study are evident and in line with very few studies that revealed the students of the non-western context of Malaysia do express such attitude and behaviours that are helpful for their effective intercultural interaction [Nadeem *et al.* (2020a, 2020b)].

The results of this specific relationship (empathy and ATOC) are according to the past studies who found that empathy of the individual has a strong impact on their positive ATOC [Arasaratnam (2006, 2016); Deardorff (2009, 2015)]. In a similar vein, this study also enriched the understanding of well-established a theory of intercultural communication namely, anxiety uncertainty management (AUM) theory [Gudykunst (2005)]. AUM predicts that when the individuals' empathy and positive expectations towards culturally different individual increases, it affects them to behave efficiently and appropriately. The variables (empathy and ATOC) of the study are explained in the individual level variables of AUM as empathy and positive expectations of strangers. Even though, this study only aimed to determine whether empathy influences ATOC. The findings contributed that empathy of the international students of Malaysia tend to impact on their positive ATOC from the non-western cultural context of Malaysia.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study reconfirmed the findings of past studies conducted by the western researchers that individuals' empathy bears a strong positive significant influence on the positive ATOC. Within the non-western context of Malaysia, this systematic influence of empathy on ATOC is very hard to find.

However, the participants were from diverse cultural backgrounds and still represented the worthy findings that ultimately enhanced the current body of knowledge. It is evident from this study that empathy is the antecedent of ATOC. For the upcoming studies, it is strongly recommended to address this association from other non-western standpoints. It would be important for the future researchers to assess the influence of empathy and ATOC on ICC, and empathy leads to ATOC that further leads to ICC needs further investigations.

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