ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVE FACTORS IN INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF SOCIAL WORKERS: A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH

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Abstract:
Intercultural competence is of crucial importance in our interconnected world. Intercultural competence is defined in a number of ways but generally, it is the ability to communicate and behave in appropriate ways with those who are culturally different and to co-create shared spaces, teams, and organizations that are inclusive, effective, innovative, and satisfying. This study aims to review of effective factors in intercultural competence from the viewpoint of social workers by using DELPHY and AHP Methods. First, effective factors identified by the Delphi technique and then rating is calculated by using Analytical Hierarchy Process. Data were collected through structured interviews with the questionnaire with sample of 23 from the social workers who are active in Iran in the field of international context. Personal attributes has first preference among the main factors. After that, personal skills, cultural knowledge are the next priorities.

Keywords: intercultural competence, social workers, Delphi Technique and Analytical Hierarchy Process

1. Introduction

With ever expanding globalization in the 21st Century, intercultural understanding and competence are increasingly featured in the mission statements of governmental or educational institutions that aim to develop informed and well-equipped citizens for the ever-changing contexts of this new era. Intercultural competence (henceforth IC) is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). The concept of IC is important for a number of reasons. Despite the common belief that globalization has made the world seem smaller and
unified in many ways, increasing cultural diversity has become a challenge for individuals and organizations (Czaika & de Haas, 2014). This challenge has inspired researchers in the fields of culture, communication and education to investigate the possible intercultural learning capabilities of individuals to communicate effectively in contexts characterized by cultural diversity. IC is defined as the ability to interact effectively across cultures, and is perceived as a vital skill in today’s multicultural world. This has become an important research area because living and working in multicultural context necessitates individuals, organizations, and nations to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). This study aims to review of effective factors in intercultural competence from the viewpoint of social workers by using DELPHY and AHP Methods. First, effective factors identified by the Delphi technique and then rating are calculated by using Analytical Hierarchy Process.

2. Literature Review and Background

Intercultural competence (IC) has been researched using a number of theoretical paradigms, most prominently the individualistic paradigm that focuses on the skills and competencies possessed by individuals (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Variation in specific abilities, traits, and behavioural manifestations of individuals is assumed to determine the degree of competent functioning in intercultural contexts. From the earliest Ruben’s (1976) behavioural approach, and Howard-Hamilton’s (1998) componential model, and Bennett’s (1986) developmental model, to Deardorff’s (2006) pyramid and process models, and even Early and Ang’s (2003) notion of CQ (cultural intelligence), all account for a journey from purely individualistic to rather more contextual approaches. However, none of these models has yet provided a comprehensive method that could demonstrate a person in context when working in a community, and when using the tools and artefacts. These models have not explained how a community is structured, how existing rules in a community are set and followed by members of a community, and how roles and tasks are divided among members of the community. Using Activity Theory as a lens helps overcome such shortfall in the literature and provide a more comprehensive insight of IC.

Intercultural competence is defined as “a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett, 2014). Intercultural Competence has also been known by identifying a number of components. For example, there are three components of Intercultural Competence; attitudes, knowledge, skills (Bennett, 2014). These concepts are basic components of IC in most models, which will be discussed in detail in the literature section of this thesis.

Intercultural competence has also been studied in various disciplines and through various approaches. It has been equated with terms such as multicultural sensitivity, culture learning, cross-cultural competence, intercultural effectiveness,
cultural intelligence, and global leadership competence (Bennett, 2014). What these definitions generally most have in common is ‘intercultural communication’, the interactive process used by individuals and groups to create shared meanings across cultures, whether globally or domestically. The ability to communicate across cultures requires one to temporarily suspend judgment, demonstrate cultural humility, and reach mutual adaptation. This indeed should be a two way process conducted both by the refugees and the host community (Bennett, 2014).

Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2010) documented how intercultural competence has been explored from a wide variety of disciplines and approaches. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) note that contemporary theories and models of intercultural competence fit five types: compositional, co-orientational, developmental, adaptational, and causal process. Though the taxonomies and frameworks are varied, most affirm that developing intercultural competence is an ongoing process acquired through intercultural interaction. The widely adopted Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1986) addresses this process of awareness growth from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. It shows how individuals become increasingly interculturally sensitive and competent when they are exposed to or experience cultural differences across six stages over time: from Denial, Defense, Minimization, Acceptance, Adaptation, to Integration. The Intercultural Development Inventory measurement tool (Weng, 2013) was developed from the DMIS model. Now translated into twelve languages, the IDI has been tested in diverse cultures and contexts, regularly updated, and is used extensively in a wide range of intercultural competence studies (Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004; Yuen & Grossman, 2009; Dejaeghere & Cao, 2009; Nam, 2011) and has demonstrated statistically reliability and cross-cultural validity (Hammer et al., 2003; Hammer, 2008, 2011).

As a qualitative supplement, Deardorff (2004) utilized a Delphi technique to generate definitions and components of intercultural competence that could be agreed upon by leading intercultural experts (her Process Model of Intercultural Competence, PMIC). PMIC reflects a cyclical process through individual level factors (attitudes, knowledge, and skills) and interaction levels (internal and external outcomes), movement from personal to interpersonal levels (intercultural interaction). Deardorff (2009a) also thematically categorized the field as focusing on: (1) the importance of relationship development and of identity, (2) the importance of context and interconnectedness in intercultural competence, (3) the need for transcendence of boundaries, (4) the transformation of differences, and (5) the need for genuine respect – and humility – toward each other, perspectives that have guided our design.

2.1 Research Goal
As mentioned, in this study we followed analysis (identification and ranking) of effective factors in intercultural competence from the viewpoint of social workers by using Delphi and Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) approaches. Thus, the research goals are:
Identification effective factors and criteria in intercultural competence from the viewpoint of social workers using Delphi approach

Ranking each of approved factors and criteria based on AHP approach.

2.2 Research Methodology
The aim of this research is investigating effective factors in intercultural competence from the viewpoint of social workers by using Delphi and Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) approaches. So, initially, research conducted in this field is reviewed.

2.3 Research Model
After consideration of previous studies, the effective factors in this field were identified. The primary research model is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The primary research model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective factors in intercultural competence (IC)</th>
<th>1- Personal attributes</th>
<th>2- Personal skills</th>
<th>3- Cultural knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Personal attributes</td>
<td>1-1- Values</td>
<td>2-1- Abilities</td>
<td>3-1- General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-2- Beliefs, norms</td>
<td>2-2- Aptitudes</td>
<td>3-2- Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-3- Personality traits</td>
<td></td>
<td>3-2-1- Factual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3-2-2- Conceptual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3-2-3- Attributional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-3-1- Flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-3-2- Perseverance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-3-3- Self-efficacy, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A. The knowledge dimension
The knowledge component of IC has been of particular interest to business educators and researchers, who have devoted substantive efforts to generating knowledge about the effects of culture on business processes and outputs. The definition of IC presented above implies the need for cultural literacy, which is the acquisition of knowledge and information regarding different cultural groups. Wiseman et al. (1989) state that cultural knowledge is an important determinant of one’s ability to minimize misunderstandings with someone from another culture. Cultural knowledge has a positive effect on other attributes and maximizes intercultural competency.

The knowledge dimension of IC includes specific and general knowledge, knowledge about culture, knowledge of language, and knowledge about the rules of interaction. Hofstede (2001) refers to two different types of cultural knowledge, culture-general and culture-specific:

(1) Culture-general knowledge – a focus on awareness and knowledge of cultural differences. It includes an examination of the participant’s own mental makeup and how it differs from that of others. This knowledge applies to any cultural environment; it deals less with how to live in any specific culture and instead focuses on how to work effectively in an intercultural environment. It includes the material: the components of
culture, how cultural values are, and frameworks for understanding and comparing/contrasting different cultures. It also includes a general knowledge of the complex environment in which international business operates, within the different economic, political, legal, social, financial and technological systems that co-exist.

(2) Culture-specific knowledge – a focus on specific knowledge about another culture. This includes information about geography, economics, politics, law, history, customs, hygiene, what to do, and what not to do – but spends little time on the participants’ own cultural introspection. Culture-specific training also includes learning the language of the culture, although the ability to communicate effectively in the foreign language is more properly categorized as a skill.

In addition to the general/specific categories of knowledge, Earley and Ang (2003) offer an approach that deals with the cognitive aspects of knowledge acquisition. These authors call this approach ‘metacognition’, and it seems to provide insights into three aspects of the knowledge acquisition process: (1) ‘person’ aspects – intra-individual, inter-individual, or universal; (2) task variables – the nature of the information acquired; and (3) strategy variables – the procedures for using the acquired knowledge (Earley and Ang, 2003).

The personal aspects of metacognitive knowledge deal with how we view ourselves and others, which is an important element for the social interactions part of the cultural learning process. The second aspect of this metacognitive perspective deals with the nature of information that is being acquired by a person who is learning the culture – individuals analyze the degree of complexity of this task and become prepared, or not, to face it. The last aspect of this metacognitive perspective is about what to do and how best to use the acquired knowledge. This latter perspective of knowledge acquisition provides an interesting complement to the general/ specific classification of culture: whereas the general/specific classification is concerned with the structure of knowledge, metacognitive knowledge operates at a higher level and provides useful insights into understanding the process of learning cultural knowledge.

B. The skills dimension

The Oxford Dictionary defines skill as ‘expertness, or practiced facility in doing something’. It is the behavioral component of IC, and includes abilities (such as foreign language competence, adapting to the behavioral norms of a different cultural environment, effective stress management, or conflict resolution) and aptitudes. An ability is a set of specific skills that have been acquired over time, whereas an aptitude is an individual’s capacity to acquire additional abilities in a specific skill-set (Dunnette, 1976). However, there is considerable overlap in the literature between ‘skills’, ‘abilities’ and ‘aptitudes’, because they are often defined in terms of one another, and indeed it is not always necessary to distinguish clearly among them (Dunnette, 1976; Earley, 2002). For the present, we shall group them together under the same category of ‘skills’.

C. The personal attributes dimension

This dimension includes personality traits in addition to the internalized values, norms and beliefs of one’s home culture. Leadership studies typically list personality traits as
antecedents to the effective acquisition of management and leadership skills (e.g., Bass, 1990): such traits include ambition, courage, curiosity, decisiveness, enthusiasm, fortitude, integrity, judgment, loyalty, perseverance, self-efficacy, tolerance for ambiguity, etc. The disadvantage of such lists is that they can contain dozens of desirable attributes, yet do not indicate which attributes are more essential than others in developing the required behaviors. In addition, such lists usually do not include personality traits that can constrain the acquisition of desirable skills. Leiba-O’Sullivan (1999) classifies personality traits as ‘stable crosscultural competencies’, suggesting that:

1. personality traits are competencies in themselves, rather than antecedents to cultural competence; and
2. individuals who lack certain traits cannot easily acquire them. Although we accept the latter, we disagree with the former, because we treat personal attributes as antecedents that can either help or hinder the development of IC. However, Leiba-O’Sullivan’s perspective does suggest that all employees are not equally trainable, and that there are some individuals who may lack the personality traits necessary for them to acquire certain knowledge and skills. This is a valid point, and one to which we shall return later in this study. So far, we have presented the elements that we believe are important to individuals who intend to operate in a cross-cultural business context, and therefore these elements will have an effect on their effectiveness (cultural competence). We find strong support for this list in Tan and Chua (2003), who list these elements (personal attributes, skills, and knowledge) and call them collectively an ‘inventory of intercultural competencies’, although ‘competencies’ here refers to the prerequisites for, or antecedents to, IC.

3. Data analysis and finding

3.1 Structure of the Delphi Method
The Delphi Method is a communication process to solve a problem. One has to try to reach a consensus on specific subjects through the interrogation of experts. The experts are able to clarify areas of uncertainty and to provide a decision support. The Delphi Method is based on investigation by a dialectical approach: Thesis (establishing an opinion), antithesis (a contradictory opinion) and a synthesis (a new consensus). The synthesis becomes the new thesis. This method can establish an agreement on a complex topic. The process is repeated until a consensus is reached. It can be used in the field of management, economics, technology, but also in the field of social science.

The different phases of the Delphi Method:

- Step 1: Formulating the problem and developing the questionnaire: This is a fundamental stage because it is important to define the problem clearly. The questionnaire is made according to certain rules where questions must be accurate, independent and quantifiable.
- Step 2: Choosing the experts: The experts are selected in relation to their ability to envision the future. One must isolate the experts in order to avoid having a
distorted opinion issued from a group. Their opinion is collected anonymously and by postal services.

- Step 3: Exploration of the results: The questionnaire is sent to the experts explaining them the goals and the practical conditions of the investigation. In the 2nd round the experts must give new answers. They are informed of the results of the 1st round, so they have to justify their responses if they derivate from the ones of the group.

In the 3rd round they have to comment the arguments of the deviants and in the 4th round it is the definitive answer to clarify the final opinion. Successive questionnaires are sent to reduce the fragmentation of the opinions.

3.2 Specialty community research including technical and professional experts
In this study, simple random sampling was used. To determine the sample size in this research was used sampling formula of Cochran.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pqN}{(N-1) + Z^2 pq}$$

According to the formula, the total sample consisted of 23 experts. As noted, the objective of the questionnaire is awareness from opinions of experts about the identification effective factors in intercultural competence from the viewpoint of social workers. Therefore, experts should express "amount" values through the variables. Qualitative variables give more freedom to the Experts. The use of qualitative variables such as “Very low”, "Low", "Medium", "High" and “Very High” . The results of the first questionnaire were specified at Table 2.

In the table below, were confirmed all the factors and criteria. After completion of the Delphi process, the final model was approved by 3 main factors and 13 criteria.
Table 2: The results of the first questionnaire responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Row</th>
<th>Main factors</th>
<th>Impact of effective factors</th>
<th>Very low</th>
<th>low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Very High</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Personal attributes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1-1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1-3-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>1-3-2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1-3-3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Personal skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cultural knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3-1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3-2-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3-2-2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of effective factors</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3-2-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Analytical Hierarchy Process

Nowadays making decisions quickly and selecting the best alternative are very important for companies to gain competitive advantage in a complex environment (Tuş Işık et al., 2013). An Analytical Hierarchical Process (AHP) model is developed to structure the criteria for the selection of the most appropriate layout for each configuration stage (Reza Abdi, 2009). In traditional AHP, pair-wise comparison is made using a nine-point scale, which converts human preferences (i.e., numbers 3, 5, 7, and 9 meaning ‘generally important’, ‘strongly important’, ‘very important’, and ‘absolutely important’; and 2, 4, 6, and 8 for compromises between 3, 5, 7, and 9). Thus, the AHP uses only absolute scale numbers for judgments and for their resulting priorities. Even though the discrete scale of AHP has the advantages of simplicity and ease of use, it is not sufficient to take into account the uncertainty associated with the mapping of one’s perception to a number (Chen & Wang, 2010). AHP numbers is shown at Table 3.
Table 3: AHP numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AHP numbers</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Equally important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Judgment values between equally and moderately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Moderately more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Judgment values between moderately and strongly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Strongly more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Judgment values between strongly and very strongly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Very strongly more important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Judgment values between very strongly and extremely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Extremely more important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1996, a Chinese researcher named "Young Chung" presented Development of analysis methods. In this methodology, the triangular fuzzy numbers to all elements of the judgment matrix and weight vector by this method, is used in most studies due to the simplicity of calculations (Wang et al., 2007). Assuming \( \tilde{A} = \{\tilde{M}_{ij}\} \) was being matrix of fuzzy paired comparison, which is defined as follows:

\[
\tilde{A} = \begin{bmatrix}
\tilde{M}_{11} & \tilde{M}_{12} & \cdots & \tilde{M}_{1n} \\
\tilde{M}_{21} & 1 & \cdots & \tilde{M}_{2n} \\
\vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\
\tilde{M}_{n1} & \tilde{M}_{n2} & \cdots & 1
\end{bmatrix}
\]

Then will be established equation

\[
\tilde{M}_{ji} = 1/\tilde{M}_{ij}
\]

Now to solve the model using EA, in each row of a matrix of paired comparisons, the value of \( S_k \) that is a triangular fuzzy number is calculated as follows:

\[
S_k = \sum_{j=1}^{n} M_{kj} \ast \left[ \sum_{i=1}^{m} \sum_{j=1}^{n} M_{ij} \right]^{-1}
\]

In which, \( k \) represents the number of rows \( i \) and \( j \), indicates options and indicators respectively.

In this way, after the calculation \( S_k \), it should be achieved their large degree than together. In general, If \( M_1 \) and \( M_2 \) were two triangular fuzzy numbers, a large degree is defined as follows:

\[
\mathcal{V}(M_1 \geq M_2) = 1 \quad M_1 \geq M_2
\]

\[
\mathcal{V}(M_1 \geq M_2) = \text{hgt}(M_1 \cap M_2)
\]

And if not, we have:

\[
\text{hgt} (M_1 \cap M_2) = \frac{u_1 - l_2}{(u_1 - l_2) + (m_2 - m_1)}
\]
To calculate the indicators weight in the matrix of paired comparisons we act as follows:

\[ W'(X_i) = \min \{ V(S_i \geq S_k) \} \quad k = 1, 2, ..., n, k \neq i \]

Therefore, the vector of indicators weight as follows:

\[ W' = [W'(X_1), W'(X_2), ..., W'(X_n)] \]

That is the vector of fuzzy AHP abnormal coefficients based on the equation normalize weights and achieve index (Azar and Farajy, 2008). The results of the ranking factors using fuzzy AHP are shown in table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4: The results of the Analytical Hierarchy Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The relative weights</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effective factors in intercultural competence (IC)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.365</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>0.321</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.315</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the table above, personal attributes has first preference among the main factors. After that, personal skills, cultural knowledge are the next priorities.

Among the criteria of personal attributes, values, beliefs and personality traits are priorities respectively. Among the criteria of personal skills, abilities are the first priority and aptitudes are the second. Among the criteria of cultural knowledge, general is the first and specific is the second priorities. Among sub- criteria of personality traits, perseverance and among sub- criteria of specific, factual are the first priority.

4. Conclusion

Intercultural competencies are those knowledge, skills and attitudes that comprise a person’s ability to get along with, work and learn with people from diverse cultures. We conceive of intercultural communication competence as ‘the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors to elicit a desired response in a specific environment.’ This definition shows that competent persons must not only know how to interact effectively and appropriately with people and environment, but also know how to fulfil their own communication goals using this ability. Intercultural competence
In this paper, we examined the effective factors in intercultural competence from the viewpoint of social workers by using DELPHY and AHP Methods, the knowledge, skills and personal attributes that constitute an inventory of intercultural competencies. After completion of the Delphi process, the final model was approved by 3 main factors and 13 criteria. The results of the AHP showed that personal attributes has first preference among the main factors. After that, personal skills, cultural knowledge are the next priorities.

References


