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Toward Intercultural Competence: Using Expert Consensus to Identify Essential Personality Traits and Attitudes to Develop an Inclusive Extension Education Workforce

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Abstract

The rapid diversification of workforces and client stakeholder groups has prompted a growing emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion as a critical component of professional development across industry sectors. While the proliferation of intercultural competence training models has increased awareness among employers and workforces, the competencies advocated in these models may not always be relevant to an organization or institution's operational context. This study addresses the need for contextually grounded intercultural competency models targeted to extension education contexts. Using a three-phased Delphi approach, data were gathered from a panel of 36 intercultural competency experts. The panel identified nine personal traits thought to be critical for the recruitment and development of culturally competent extension educators. The authors explain how these results may be used to recruit extension educators with traits conducive to engagement with a broad audience of stakeholders using culturally sensitive and responsive techniques. Given the distinct processes by which different components of intercultural competence are developed, we recommend specific measures and techniques administrators can utilize to recruit and develop extension educators who possess the agreed-upon intercultural personality traits.

Keywords

Competency training, diversity training, intercultural communication, nonformal education, professional development

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Today's world is becoming more diverse and interconnected, creating a growing emphasis across extension organizations on developing strategies to better meet the unique needs of their diverse client communities (Deen et al., 2014; McKee & Bruce, 2019). Recognizing an increasingly globalized society, agricultural industries and extension services are adopting intercultural competence (ICC) frameworks to inform hiring protocols, professional development training curricula, goal setting exercises, and performance evaluations (Deen et al., 2014; Wille et al., 2019). Broadly defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes," (Deardorff, 2009 pp. 247–248) ICC has been conceptualized and operationalized in numerous ways across contexts, with more than 20 distinct definitions and frameworks having been identified over the years (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Despite its growing appeal as a model to guide the culturally responsive development of extension professionals, ICC remains a broad and highly malleable concept that necessitates the identification of discrete, measurable, and context-specific outcome objectives (Deardorff, 2009). Two core issues therefore exist when attempting to apply ICC assessments to the extension context. First, the frequent use of commercial instruments to assess ICC and related skills means that the indicators applied may not best reflect the knowledge, skills, and traits needed in extension work. Second, while a growing focus exists on developing agents' intercultural competence, less emphasis is seemingly being placed on the identification of the personal traits required to be a successful extension educator, which may limit the value of using ICC related assessments to inform recruitment and hiring practices (Atiles, 2019). This is a critical gap that should be addressed as competency models such as Dostilio's Cooperative Extension Professional (CEP) model (2017) identify certain personality traits, such as integrity, honesty, transparency, and inclusiveness, that extension professionals need to exhibit in order to successfully engage diverse communities.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Despite researchers' and practitioners' increased interests in ICC, a lack of understanding remains regarding the concept, and no widely agreed upon conceptualization pervades (Bartel-Radic & Giannelloni, 2017; Leung et al., 2014; Van de Vijver & Leung, 2009). Adding to this conceptual confusion, often terms such as cross-cultural competence, ICC, global mindset, and cultural intelligence are used interchangeably or linkages between constructs are not made explicit (Bartel-Radic & Giannelloni, 2017). One specific area of complexity is how to identify and incorporate personality traits and attitudes within ICC constructs and frameworks (Bartel-Radic & Giannelloni, 2017; Li, 2020). Moreover, many scales have placed personality traits together in the same category with abilities while other scales simplify ICC to constitute only a few personality traits without including additional skill or knowledge components (Ang et al., 2007). Thus, in advancing an ICC framework specialized for extension educators, a need persists to explore how to best account for personality traits.

The literature reveals a lack of consensus in determining the components of ICC and how such components are related (Van de Vijver & Leung, 2009). According to Deardorff (2006), ICC experts assert that personal attributes (i.e., personality traits) are a common component of ICC and necessary to build the requisite knowledge, skills, and behaviors to work across cultural differences. However, a 2017 study by Bartel-Radic and Giannelloni challenged notions that personality traits predict cross-cultural knowledge, which in turn shapes skills and behaviors, even though research exists that is grounded in this assumption. Although Bartel-Radic and Giannelloni (2017) came to this conclusion, they referred to the existing body of empirical research that contradicts their findings (e.g., Johnson et al., 2006; Schmitt et al., 2007; Van de Vijver & Leung, 2009), and asserted that their own research brought forth more questions than answers and called for continued inquiry.

Five personality traits are typically discussed in the context of cross-cultural communication or cultural intelligence: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Schmitt et al., 2007). However, Caligiuiri (2000) and Ang et al. (2007) concluded that these five traits do not determine effectiveness in cross-cultural communication or exercising cultural intelligence. Beyond these five, the following personality traits and attitudes have been among the most frequently cited in the literature as integral to ICC and interchangeable terms: open-mindedness, empathy, sociability/extraversion, absence of ethnocentrism, self-confidence, tolerance of uncertainty, attributional complexity, and emotional stability (e.g., Black, 1990; Johnson et al., 2006; Li, 2020; Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016). Even though researchers and practitioners have invested efforts toward identifying and analyzing such personality traits, ambiguity still exists, including a lack of consensus, and the need to identify traits for ICC within extension education contexts.

With respect to developing ICC, the literature suggests that personality traits can be changeable not unlike capacities, knowledge, and skills (Deardoff, 2006; Rings & Allehyani, 2020; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Xiaochi, 2012; Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016). Unfortunately, it is also thought that personality traits are frequently less malleable than attitudes, knowledge, and skills, making it important to identify the core traits most crucial on which to focus assessment and development (Ajzen, 2005; Deardorff, 2006; Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016). Although some personality traits may be more fixed than others, some researchers have contended that professional development trainings hold the potential toward changing personality traits and potentially improving ICC (Deardoff, 2006; Rings & Allehyani, 2020; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Xiaochi, 2012; Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016). As such, a nuanced understanding of relevant personality traits may help extension specialists develop effective professional development targeting ICC.

Purpose

This study aimed to describe the personality traits most critical for extension educators' intercultural competence. Using a consensus-building Delphi approach, the investigation aimed to accomplish three objectives:

1. Determine if extension ICC experts agreed upon personality traits and attitudes necessary for extension educators to work across cultural differences.
2. Identify the personality traits and attitudes agreed to have the greatest influence on extension educators' intercultural competence.
3. Align the personality traits and attitudes with an extension educator's years of service by which such competencies should have been developed.

Methods

We used a three-round Delphi process, modified in accordance with panelists' input on the design, (Hasson & Keeney, 2011; Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004) to leverage the expertise of 35 purposively selected professionals, including diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) specialists, managers of education and outreach programs for underserved and underrepresented audiences, community development leaders, and contributors to extension educational intercultural curriculum (e.g., Navigating Differences, Coming Together for Racial Understanding). We used Qualtrics online survey questionnaires to facilitate anonymous discourse among the panel to arrive at consensus.

We employed a multi-stage process, during the summer of 2020, to select and formalize the panel of experts. To start, the principal investigator (PI) researched and solicited recommendations from international and national organizations (e.g., Association of International Agricultural and Extension Education, American Evaluation Association, Epsilon Sigma Phi, National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals) to create the preliminary list of potential panelists. We then reviewed the list, provided feedback, and finalized the initial sampling frame of 51 individuals to contact about their potential interest in the study. Introductory, informational telephone calls were conducted between the lead author and the 39 panelists who agreed to the call to learn more about the study. Some snowball sampling (Johnson, 2014) occurred due to these contacts recommending four additional experts to potentially participate in the study. These four individuals were also contacted by telephone, increasing the sampling frame to 43 panelists. However, only 35 individuals ultimately agreed to participate in the first round of the Delphi.

We used a modified three-round Delphi format in this study. Within this format, panelists were asked to identify and agree on a range of personality traits and attitudes. In the first Delphi round, panelists were asked to identify personal traits and attitudes they perceived necessary for a culturally competent extension educator. The questionnaire did not explicitly differentiate between domestic or international contexts to account for the work of extension educators in both U.S. and international settings. Twenty-five personal traits and attitudes were identified in

the first round, and we achieved a response rate of 100% (*n* = 35). For analysis, we differentiated between personality traits and attitudes using the definitions found in Ajzen's (2005), which explains that attitudes are more evaluative in nature, expressing a favorable, unfavorable, or mixed evaluation. In contrast, personality traits describe an individual's response tendencies in a given domain (e.g., conscientious, self-confident, and respectful) (Ajzen, 2005).

The study's second round was used for reaching consensus by the panelists and to refine the list of personality traits and attitudes identified in the first round by indicating the level of importance for building each personal trait and attitude to ensure successful programs among diverse audiences. Experts indicated their agreement on the importance of each personality trait and attitude, using a 7-point Likert agreement scale (*Strongly disagree* (1), *Disagree* (2), *Somewhat disagree* (3), *Neither agree nor disagree* (4), *Somewhat agree* (5), *Agree* (6), or *Strongly agree* (7)). We defined consensus *a priori* as two-thirds of the panelists selecting or 6 (*Agree*) or 7 (*Strongly agree*). A response rate of 97% was achieved for the second round (*n* = 34). The panel achieved consensus on 23 items.

In the study's third round, we asked panelists to indicate the career stage during which extension educators should develop the personality traits and attitudes consented to in the second round. This modification was implemented in response to panelists' involvement, together with the authors, in the study design. Our objective was to tailor the third round of the study to prioritize attitudes and personality traits based on career stage. This modification aligns with justifications and examples provided by Hasson and Keeney (2011), Linton and Turhoff (1975), and Okoli and Pawlowski (2005) that outline opportunities to tailor the Delphi to the problem-solving needs and intended outcomes of the process. Panelists were also asked to indicate, using a 5-point ordinal scale, the level of importance (*Not important at all* (1), *Slightly important* (2), *Important* (3), *Fairly important* (4), or *Very important* (5)) of developing each personality trait and attitude in the respective career stage. We changed the 7-point agreement scale from the second round to a 5-point ordinal scale of importance for the third round to help the panel prioritize the items in the different career stages based on perceived importance. Career stages were (a) year 1; (b) 1 to 3 years; (c) 4 to 7 years; (d) 8 to 10 years; and (e) 11 or more years. We created the specific career categories to help delineate some distinct stages in extension professionals' career, including onboarding (i.e., within the first year, initial performance assessments (1 to 3 years), initial promotion assessments (4 to 7 years), and post-initial promotion assessment and late career (8 to 10 years; 11 or more years)). We applied the *a priori* level of consensus as two-thirds agreement to analyze the career stage data, with only *Very important* responses included in the third and final round. We achieved a 94% response rate for the final round (*n* = 33). At the end of the three stages, panelists arrived at consensus about nine personality traits and attitudes deemed most important for extension educators.

Findings

First Round

Table 1 lists the personality traits and attitudes that the panel provided during the first round of the Delphi study. The list includes four attitudinal attributes and 21 personality traits.

Table 1

List of Personality Traits and Attitudes Produced by the Panel During Round 1

Personality traits and attitudes
Approachability
Commitment [a]
Compassion
Conscientiousness
Consistency
Curiosity
Desire to be a lifelong learner around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion [a]
Empathy
Energetic nature
Enthusiasm
Genuine and authentic
Having a positive attitude [a]
Honesty
Humility
Inclusivity
Open-minded
Patience
Resiliency
Respect
Sensitivity
Transparency
Trustworthiness
Willing to take risks to reach across cultural barriers [a]
Willingness to challenge one's own attitudes, preexisting beliefs, and cultural assumptions [a]
Willingness to gain experiences with cultures different from their own [a]

Note. [a] indicates attitude item.

Second Round

Table 2 lists the personality traits and attitudes from the first round with the panel's rating in the second round of their level of agreement on the importance of each item for an extension educator's intercultural competence. Using the *a priori* level of consensus, two items were removed from consideration; these were enthusiasm and energetic nature.

Table 2

Personality Traits and Attitudes Rated for Agreement by the Delphi Panel Based on Level of Importance for ICC

Personality traits and attitudes	% Strongly agree/Agree
Empathy	100.0
Genuine and authentic	100.0
Open-minded	100.0
Willingness to challenge one's own attitudes, preexisting beliefs, and cultural assumptions [a]	100.0
Willingness to gain experiences with cultures different than their own [a]	100.0
Commitment	97.0
Compassion	97.0
Desire to be a lifelong learner around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion [a]	97.0
Honesty	97.0
Humility	97.0
Inclusivity	97.0
Respect	97.0
Sensitivity	97.0
Trustworthiness	97.0
Willing to take risks to reach across cultural barriers [a]	97.0
Patience	93.9
Approachability	90.9
Conscientiousness	90.9
Resiliency	90.9
Transparency	87.9
Having a positive attitude [a]	81.8
Consistency	81.8
Curiosity	75.8
Enthusiasm *	60.6
Energetic nature *	42.4

Note. [a] indicates attitude item.
* indicates item did not meet consensus threshold and did not advance to the next round.

Final Round

We identified nine items comprising a mix of attitudes and personality traits most important for extension educators to develop ICC. The Delphi panel rated six personality traits as *Very important* for building ICC of extension educators during the first year of their professional career (see Table 3). These six traits included: open-mindedness, respect, humility, empathy, trustworthiness, and honesty. The Delphi panel also agreed that three attitudes were *Very important* to ICC for development during years 1, 2, and 3 of an extension educator's career. These were: the willingness to challenge one's own attitudes, preexisting beliefs, and cultural

assumptions, inclusivity, and desire to be a lifelong learner around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Table 3

Personality Traits and Attitudes Rated as Very Important by Career Stage

	% of respondents who rated the item as *Very important* according to career stage	
Personality traits and attitudes	*In the first year*	*1-3 years*
Empathy	79.0	
Honesty	85.0	
Humility	73.0	
Open-mindedness	64.0	
Respect	82.0	
Trustworthiness	67.0	
Desire to be lifelong learning around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion [a]		94.0
Inclusivity [a]		70.0
Willingness to challenge one's own attitudes, preexisting beliefs, and cultural assumptions [a]		85.0

Note. [a] indicates attitude item.
No items resulted for *4-7 years* and *8-10 years.*

The remaining 16 items that the panel rated were viewed as *Fairly important* for ICC but not prioritized as *Very important* to be developed during the designated career year(s)/stages. Table 4 provides the breakdown of the responses for these items. The panel did not rate any items to be *Very important* to develop in the associated career years, as designated.

Table 4

Personality Traits and Attitudes Rated as Fairly Important by Career Stage

Personality traits and attitudes	% of respondents who rated the item as *Fairly important*	% of respondents who identified the career stage during which the knowledge area should be developed	
		In the first year	*1-3 years*
Approachability	76.0		85.0
Commitment	70.0		91.0
Compassion	79.0	70.0	
Confidence	64.0		82.0
Conscientiousness	70.0		88.0
Consistency	70.0		82.0
Curiosity	82.0		82.0
Genuine and authentic	79.0	73.0	
Having a positive attitude [a]	64.0	64.0	
Patience	70.0		85.0
Professionalism	73.0		94.0
Resiliency	70.0		70.0
Sensitivity	73.0	64.0	
Transparency	82.0		91.0
Willing to take risks to reach across cultural barriers [a]	82.0		73.0
Willingness to gain experiences with cultures different from their own [a]	76.0		82.0

Note. [a] indicates attitude item.
No items resulted for *4-7 years* and *8-10 years.*

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Personality traits and attitudes may impact extension educators' ability to work effectively with diverse clientele. The Delphi panel agreed on six personality traits and three attitudes that they perceived were most important to ICC in an extension educational setting. The panel reinforced the importance of these traits by agreeing that they should be developed in the early years of an extension educator's career. Findings from our Delphi study were consistent with the literature, which emphasized the need to consider personality traits and attitudes in professional development programs regarding ICC (Bartel-Radic & Giannelloni, 2017; Deen et al., 2014; Deardorf, 2006; Dostilio, 2017; Li, 2020; McKee & Bruce, 2019). Even though an additional 16 attitudes and personality traits were revealed that the panel agreed were important for ICC after the second round of this study, we strongly believe it is important to focus on the items in Round 3 rated *Very important* for extension educators to develop early in

their careers. This is corroborated by literature (Ajzen, 2005, Bartel-Radic & Giannelloni, 2017; Deardorff, 2006; Deen et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2007) indicating that personal development in these areas is typically more arduous, given an individual's personality traits and attitudes are not as malleable as knowledge and skill acquisition (Ajzen, 2005; Deardorff, 2006; Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016).

Applying the results of this study has implications for hiring, onboarding, and training of new extension professionals. First, it is important to develop the identified six core personality traits during the first year. Extension educators and evaluators should consider targeting the development of these traits through preservice extension education curricula created by academic extension education faculty. The challenge is that preservice education differs across extension education institutions. So, efforts would need to be made to develop cross-cutting certificates, minors, or simply, broadly available course offerings to ensure linkages can be made to other programs to increase student accessibility and learning.
In addition, extension administrators should consider using the traits to inform new extension educator interview screening questions and checklists. Although research has demonstrated that personality traits are changeable similar to capacities, knowledge, and skills (Deardoff, 2006; Rings & Allehyani, 2020; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Xiaochi, 2012; Yeke & Semerciöz, 2016), it may not be feasible to build a completely new set of personality traits in an individual, and, therefore, it may be more realistic to target individuals with threshold levels of existing core traits to enter the extension service.

Once a new extension educator is hired, they are typically engaged in an onboarding program to help familiarize them with the organizational culture, their job responsibilities, organizational resources, and so forth. It is important that these efforts begin to integrate strategies for the development process of these core traits and foundational attitudes needed for ICC. These initial efforts should be considered only as a step towards preparing new extension educators to gain ICC and must be built on thereafter.

To strengthen both onboarding and in-service training activities, extension specialists should consider leveraging theories and methodological approaches that connect personality, developmental, social, clinical, and educational psychology to the evolutionary and socio-cultural dynamics of the extension educators' training pathways (Mroczek & Little, 2014). Strategically integrating the developmental activities into already existing structures may help manage extension educators' development loads while also connecting the enhancement of these foundational traits to their job roles and responsibilities.

Finally, assessment options exist that can be integrated into recruitment and professional development activities with the potential to advance development of the six personality traits and three attitudes that reached final consensus. The simplest approach is the single item, direct assessment where respondents are asked to directly self-report their own attitudes and personality traits (Ajzen, 2005; Boyle, 2014). Indirect approaches also may be used that assess personality traits and attitudes based on an individual's self-assessment and responses to a given scenario or context (Ajzen, 2005; Boyle, 2014). The indirect approach helps to mitigate

the issues related to self-presentation bias which may occur from the direct, single item approaches. Although numerous existing assessments are available (e.g., offered from the United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM)) such offerings are frequently direct item constructs. Therefore, the need exists for research, development, and validation of specialized, indirect assessments for ICC in extension. According to Deardoff (2009), assessment tools should be tied to the intercultural context. The results of this study may aid in strategically adapting existing measures to the extension education context.

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