

Exploring Intercultural Competence through Perceived Social Distance: Business School Students in Croatia

IVA SEDLIC

College of Transportation and Management
Dalian Maritime University
No 1 Linghai Road, Dalian, Liaoning Province
CHINA

iva.sedlic@gmail.com

<http://www.english.dlmu.edu.cn>

MASHA MAGZAN

Marketing and Communications Dept
Zagreb School of Economics and Management
Jordanovac 110, Zagreb
CROATIA

masa.magzan@zsem.hr

<http://www.zsem.hr>

ANDRIJANA MUSURA

Management DEPT
Zagreb School of Economics and Management
Jordanovac 110, Zagreb
CROATIA

CROATIA

amusura@zsem.hr

www.zsem.hr

Abstract: - In the context of globalisation and internationalisation, intercultural understanding and competencies are becoming essential for global corporations to compete effectively in the world marketplace. In order to examine the level of intercultural competence of students in public and private business schools in Croatia, the study focuses on their individual level of perceived social distance. The results of the study reveal the need for more effort in designing and delivering professional development resources for students in order to enhance their intercultural understanding and competences.

Key-Words: - intercultural competence, intercultural education, motivation, perceived social distance, intercultural management

1 Introduction

Intercultural competence or related constructs such as intercultural effectiveness, success or adaptation have been investigated in various studies with diverse conceptual focus. Depending on either the researcher's theoretical orientation or a specific sample being studied, some of conceptualizations behind intercultural competence were labeled as cross-cultural adjustment, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural understanding or global competence. As a reflection of a growing consensus on a conceptualization of intercultural competence over the last two decades, for the purpose of this study, intercultural competence is defined as „the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts“[1].

There are numerous components of intercultural competence, such as self- and other knowledge, mindfulness, cognitive flexibility, tolerance for uncertainty and motivation [2]. Cognitive flexibility refers to the ability to continually supplement and revise existing knowledge to create new categories rather than forcing new knowledge into old

categories. It helps the formation of stereotypes and avoids prejudgements or jumping to conclusions, while mindfulness is a state of self- and other-monitoring that informs later reflection on communication interaction. For the purpose of this study, an emphasis will be on knowledge and motivation, since acquiring cultural knowledge and attitudes are the key elements in building intercultural competences.

Knowledge assumes information about the people, the context, the communication rules and the normative expectations governing the interaction with the members of the other culture. Lack of such information would most likely cause misattributions or cause the loss of face for self or other. However, the process of building cultural awareness does not only include acquiring knowledge of our own and other cultures, identities, and communication patterns, but at the same time involves fostering attitudes that motivate us and develop a „sense of wonder about culture“[3]. According to Opdal, this sense of wonder may correlate to a high tolerance for uncertainty or what another author explains as

having “an open mind while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others, leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively outside one’s environment [4].

Therefore, knowledge component of the intercultural competence entails both, the body of information as well as the „cognitive schemata needed to assimilate that knowledge in order to be competent intercultural communicators“[1]. The research now shows that the ability to empathize and manage anxiety enhances prejudice reduction, and these two skills have been shown to enhance the overall impact of intercultural contact even more than acquiring cultural knowledge [2].

According to Deardorff [5], prerequisite for becoming interculturally literate is developing positive attitudes of openness, respect (valuing all cultures), curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity). For this reason, besides knowledge, an important factor that influences the level of intercultural competence and communication effectiveness is motivation. Referring to the root of a person’s desire to foster intercultural relationships [6], it is not possible to talk about intercultural competence without considering person's motivation for interaction. Motivation can be extrinsic, meaning that the desire for intercultural communication is driven by an outside reward such money, power, or recognition, while intrinsic motivation is voluntary and driven by a desire to learn more about self and others. It is beyond the scope of this study to further discuss motivation, so motivation is only viewed here as a foundation from which to build additional competence-relevant attitudes and skills. For example, perceived social distance, prejudice, anxiety, attraction or ethnocentrism can strongly influence an individual's motivation and success in intercultural interactions. In other words, if our fears, anxieties and dislikes predominate, we will have negative motivation and we will be likely to avoid the interaction, even if there is the requisite knowledge and skills to perform [1]. On the other hand, if the good intentions and confidence predominate, motivation will be positive and will seek out and engage in interaction with the other. Thus, competent communicators have to be able to reduce the negative influences and increase the positive influences on their motivation to communicate with members of different cultures. In addition to effective communication, basic requirements for becoming interculturally competent are developing intercultural sensitivity and self-awareness. In other words it is important to understand not only yours but also other behaviors,

ways of thinking and their worldviews [7]. For this reason, the study focuses on the perceived social distance because it represents an important source of motivation to engage in an intercultural contact.

2 Intercultural competence and Perceived Social Distance: Methodological Specifics

Emphasizing the need for intercultural competence among business students, Freeman et al [8] claimed that intercultural competence skills are important graduate attributes because global literacy is required to be successful in the changing modern business environment. Although industry expects its multicultural workforce to communicate across cultures and contexts, it has been argued that many graduates are still ill-prepared to face the global employment market and relatively few undergraduates gain international or intercultural competence in universities [4].

Private business schools included in the research are VERN and Zagreb School of Economics and Management (ZSEM), while public higher education sector involves Faculty of Economics and Business in Zagreb, Faculty of Economics and Business in Osijek and University of Applied Sciences in Slavonski Brod. Research sample included 119 students from five Croatian private and public business schools and economic faculties – ZSEM (29), VERN (28), Faculty of Economics and Business in Osijek (20), Faculty of Economics and Business in Zagreb (20), University of Applied Sciences in Slavonski Brod (20). Responses to the survey of the respondents were positive. There was no reported problem or ambiguity in understanding the survey.

Given that the sample was selected randomly, hypothesis could be generalized on the entire population with a relatively high degree of reliability. Methodological remark refers to a quantitative aspect of research because the survey included insufficient number of respondents, and this number was not well distributed. In order to obtain more reliable results, it would be necessary to include a larger number of participants and properly distribute it among the students. Guidelines for future research are related to the need for greater attention towards developing and implementing different methodological frameworks for studying social phenomena. Inclusion of non-statistical methods of inquiry and using qualitative research such as structured interviews and narrative descriptions together with quantitative approach could be used to better understand and examine

social processes that might be missed by traditional quantitative measures only.

3 Research Results

The level of students' social distance was measured by using eight levels of intensity - from the most intimate relationships (marriage) to a complete aversion, i.e., exclusion from the country. Students were asked to indicate how comfortable would they feel for a typical representative of certain national or ethnic minority to be their superior, employee, business partner, spouse, close neighbour, friend, visitor to their country or should they be banned from visiting their country. In order to grasp a big picture on this issue, we summed up the levels of social distance for personal relationships (spouse, friend, close neighbor) and business relationships (superior, employee, business partner).

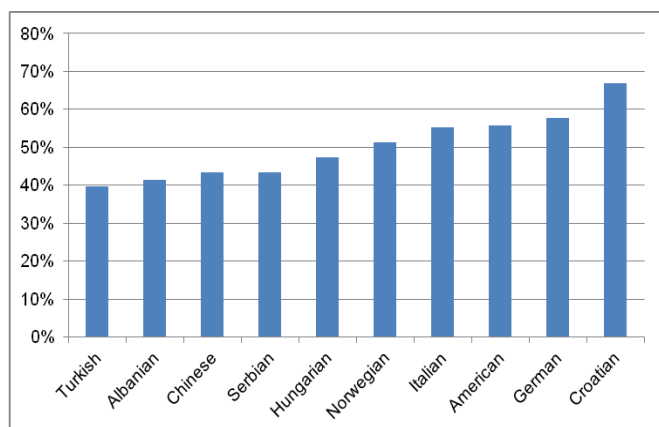


Figure 1: Total average of Croatian Students' social distance

Overall average data reveals that for Croatian students, most desirable nationality is their own. We found an average of 67% of choices in the categories of Croats. Next most desirable nationality is German followed by American and Italian. Least desirable nationality, on average, is Turkish. Following undesirable nationalities are Albanian, Chinese and Serbian. Differences between these nationalities are very small and negligible.

Table 1: Social distance of Croatian Students across different national/ethnic minorities

NATIONAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS	Yours supervisor	Yours spouse	Close neighbor	Friend	Business associate	Employee in your company	Visitor in your country	Forbid the entrance into your country
Albanian	32%	20%	45%	58%	50%	51%	68%	7%
Norwegian	57%	36%	51%	63%	70%	58%	72%	3%
Croatian	68%	85%	76%	85%	76%	75%	64%	7%
Hungarian	40%	35%	57%	56%	59%	57%	71%	3%
Chinese	38%	17%	38%	52%	60%	55%	74%	13%
German	66%	40%	61%	71%	73%	71%	77%	3%
American	56%	45%	59%	72%	74%	61%	77%	3%
Turkish	30%	20%	41%	51%	47%	49%	65%	14%
Serbian	29%	32%	44%	62%	53%	49%	65%	14%
Italian	51%	47%	60%	70%	72%	62%	77%	4%

If Croatian students would have a choice, they would choose their superiors to be from Croatia (68%), Germany (66%), Norway (57%) or from the United States (56%). The least desirable nationalities to work for would be people with Turkish (30%), followed by Albanian (32%) and Chinese (38%) descent. In most intimate relationship – marriage, Croats students would most easily engage with members of their own nation (85%). Second and third place were taken by Italian (47%) and Americans (45%). Not many of them are open to get married to Chinese (17%), Turks (20%) or Albanian (20%). Beside Croats (76%), for close neighbors they would have Germans (61%), Italians (60%) and Americans (57%). They would avoid having Chinese (38%), Turks (41%) and Serbs (44%) in their neighbourhood. Most of the respondents would choose to have friends among Croats (85%), Americans (72%), Germans (71%) and Italians (70%). In this list at the bottom are Turks (51%), Chinese (52%) and Hungarians (56%).

For business partners, respondents would prefer to have Croats (76%), Americans (74%), Germans (73%) and Italians (72%). Not that many students would be open to look for a business partner among

Turks (47%), Albanians (50%) and Serbs (53%). If they would have an opportunity to hire, they would look for employees among Croats (75%), Germans (71%) and Italians (62%). Serbs (49%), Turks (49%) and Albanians (51%) would be least fortunate among other nations in finding employment in our respondents firms.

According to business students' choice, the most welcome tourists in Croatia are Italians (77%), Americans (77%), Germans (77%) and Chinese (74%). Less desirable tourists are Croats (64%) followed by Turks (65%) and Serbs (65%). Results received when measuring the level of highest aversion toward certain nations, showed that 14% of respondents would not allow Serbs and Turks to enter Croatia and 13% of them would stop Chinese from doing the same.

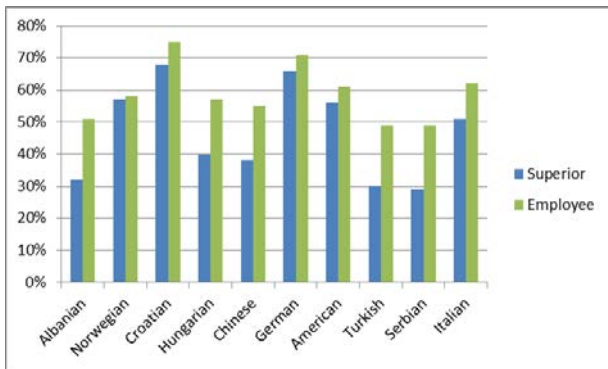


Figure 2: Croatian students' perceived social distance towards superiors and employees

Comparing the levels of acceptance of Croatian students of having a representative of a certain nation as a supervisor or as an employee, the smallest difference in preferences can be seen when it comes to Norwegians, Germans and Americans. Members of these nations are almost equally desired as employees and supervisors. The biggest differences in preferences can be noticed with Serbs, Albanians, Turks and Chinese. Croatian students would prefer to have members of these nations as their employees rather than to work for them.

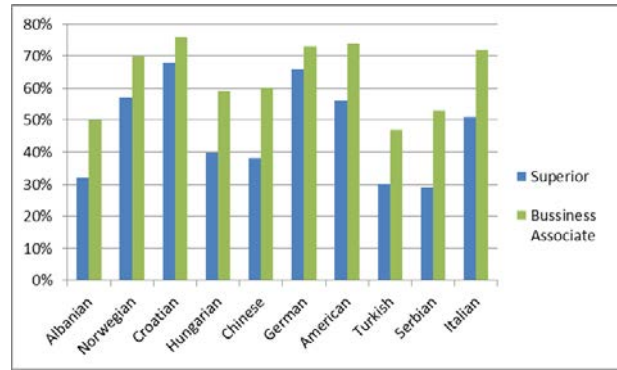


Figure 3: Croatian students' perceived social distance towards superiors and business associates

For business associates, Croatian students would trust most the other Croats, as well as Germans, Americans or Italians. Croats are also most desired when it comes to choosing supervisors. Germans are next to the Croatian supervisors, followed by Norwegians which are only slightly more desired than Americans.

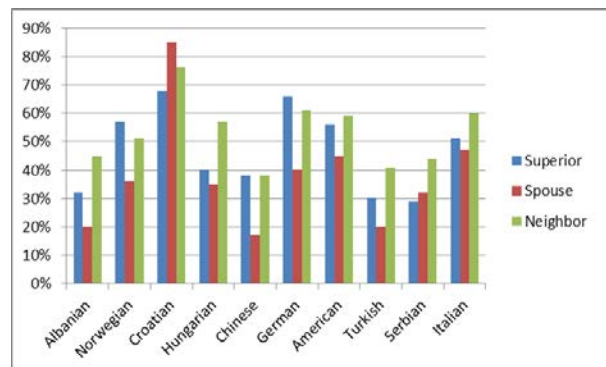


Figure 4: Croatian students' perceived social distance towards superiors, spouses and neighbours

When looking from more general stance, the research results suggest that the greatest social distance within personal compared to business area refers to Chinese. Chinese are more desirable in business related relationships than in personal ones (36% vs. 51%). Norwegians and Germans are also perceived as more close within business relationships (64% vs. 50%; 73% vs. 60%). For Croatian students, Croats are less desirable within business relationships (85% vs. 76%).

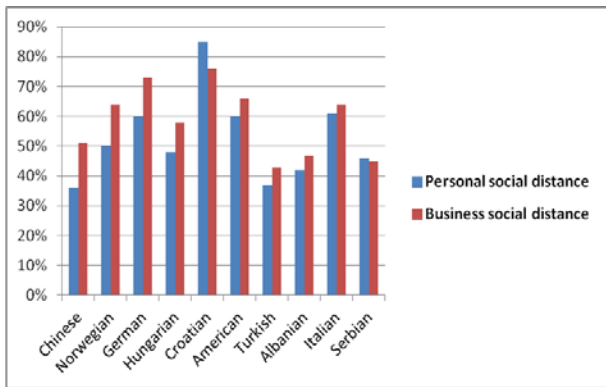


Figure 5: Croatian students' perceived social distance in personal vs. business relationships

Since ZSEM is, in comparison to all other Croatian academic institutions, recognized as the one with highly developed international orientation, we assumed that it could make a difference within our data [13]. Overall, the social distance expressed by ZSEM students accounts for an average of 52%, compared to 50% within the rest of our sample of students. We find that this difference is not considerable. If we consider the differences in relation to different nationalities, we find that ZSEM students have more favorable tendencies toward Croatians, Germans and Italians and feel greater social distance towards Albanians. However, these comparison needs to be interpreted with caution since the number of subjects in these two categories vary.

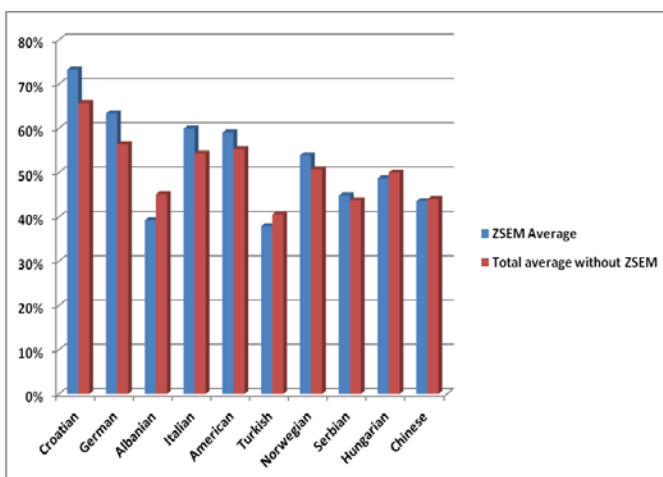


Figure 6: ZSEM students' perceived social distance in comparison to the rest of Croatian students

The research results clearly suggest that the first place for the degree of closeness, as well in relation to other nations and ethnicities, has been taken by the members of their own nation. This might be explained due to rather declaratory efforts being

made on introducing multicultural values as educational goals, since the „contents of teaching programmes in humanities and social sciences, including textbooks, in elementary and secondary schools in Croatia, still remain predominantly unicultural and ethnocentric, concretely Croatocentric.“ [14] For Croatian students, the second closest nation to their own, are Germans. Third place on the list of closeness is taken by Americans. According to the percentages closely related to kinship and "marriage", it can be concluded that the responses are dominated by the following nationalities: Croatian, Italian, American and German. Perceived closeness for these four nations is expressed in the majority of the other statements.

Such results suggest that respondents identify themselves and their own culture primarily linked with the same surrounding with these nations. Business students surveyed for the purpose of this study show clear social closeness towards members of the wealthier nations or people who live in societies whose lifestyles appears to more pleasurable, easier and therefore more attractive to them. Nations with less wealth and attractive markets, as well as nations with a more distinct or unfamiliar culture, different religion or skin color, followed by the nations with whom there is a history of disputes, conflicts and wars were typically placed on the bottom of their preference list. But despite such results, complete animosity towards less developed nations, different religions or reflection of cultural and political confrontations from traumatic postwar period cannot not be found because results do not show a simple 'black and white' picture. For some social roles, certain nations are not well accepted while for other roles there is a higher percentage which suggests acceptance of the same national and ethnic groups. For example, Turks, together with the Serbs, are at the bottom of the list when it comes to preferred immigrants to Croatia, but almost half of the Croatian respondents would employ members of both nations in their companies. Furthermore, almost for 12% Serbs (32%) are more favourable spouses than the Albanians or Turks. Also, for example, Chinese are in the last place when it comes to marriage (17%) and the category of close neighbours (38%), but as co-workers (60%), they are more preferred than Turks, Albanians, Serbs and Hungarians.

Since ZSEM differentiates from all the other academic institutions in this research in terms of its international activities and the continuously raising number of exchange students, assumption about greater social closeness didn't appear to be

supported. ZSEM students tend to show greater social closeness but this tendency is rather small (52% vs. 50%). This difference is greater within the well developed countries whereby ZSEM students show greater social closeness toward Germany, America and Italy. For less developed countries, ZSEM students show slightly greater level of social distance compared to the rest of the Croatian students in our sample. Additionally, Croatian students exhibit greater preferences to Croatians than the rest of our sample does. We could say that, overall, ZSEM students don't differ significantly to the rest of our sample in their level of social distance but tend to show greater social closeness toward Croatians (more ethnocentric) and toward members of the wealthier nations.

Comparing the percentages of expressed most intimate relationship (marriage) and the most prominent distance (prohibition of entry into the country), it is evident that percentages showing acceptance are considerably higher than the indicators of rejection. Based on this, it is possible to conclude that the respondents do not show extreme ethnocentrism towards any of the listed nationalities and ethnicities. Social distance and its structure obtained in this research is probably not the result of cognitive knowledge of subjects. It is a complex result of several factors: firstly, the education and socialization in the family, possible xenophobic indoctrination by influential social groups and the role of mass media in the transmission of stereotypes and prejudices tied to certain nationalities and ethnicities.

4 Conclusion

Many authors [9-12] believe that interculturally literate and competent managers should be able to understand the value of their own culture, to profile precisely organizational and national culture, and to avoid mistakes while managing company in different cultural environments. For this reason, intercultural competences and sensibility are becoming an essential element to equip students to handle the challenging and constantly changing global workplace. The research reveals that students' motivation and perceived social closeness was biased and not consistent across all nations. This might suggest that some respondents did not manage to acquire a sufficient level of information and knowledge necessary for the formation of their own world view.

It is important to notice that students from this sample exhibit discrepant levels of social distance toward personal and/or business relationships

meaning that social distance is in the function of different life areas.

In order to raise the general level of intercultural competence, business schools should shift their focus from traditional business and economic programs and provide professional development resources for students to enhance their intercultural understanding and competencies. In this sense, ZSEM curricula offers International Management as one of the elective courses in the 3rd and 4th year of undergraduate studies. Along with the important roles that society, media, family and professional experiences have in developing intercultural competence, emphasis needs to be placed also on higher education institutions and their responsibility in providing and designing strategies for effective intercultural education. Exploration of students' perceived social distance reveals the need for more effort in designing and delivering professional development resources for students in order to enhance their intercultural understanding and competencies.

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