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Study of the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students: A case study at University Malaysia Pahang

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Abstract: This study assessed the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students at University Malaysia Pahang. The two mentioned concepts are among the key factors that enable people to conduct proper intercultural interactions. The study includes the quantitative and the interview datasets, and the participants of this study were 108 international postgraduate students from 17 different countries. The outcomes from the current study illustrate that intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence are the main factors that help individuals to conduct proper and effective intercultural communication with people from different cultures. Based on the results, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence have close relationships and have mutual effects on each



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In the ever-growing multicultural environments, interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds could be the essential part of personal and professional lives of all individuals. Intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence as the main attributes of intercultural communication help individuals to conduct successful interactions with different people. Intercultural sensitivity belongs to the personal perception and inspiration of individuals towards cultural differences, and intercultural communication competence refers to skills and abilities that enable individuals to conduct proper interactions in diversified environments. It means that intercultural sensitivity helps individuals to initiate interactions with different people, and their intercultural communication competence helps them to have proper and continuing interactions. Based on the results from this study, the improvement of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among people from different social and cultural backgrounds could enable them to perform proper and effective interactions and to establish helpful relationships to connect different cultures and societies.

other. According to the findings from this study, their good levels of intercultural sensitivity help individuals to initiate intercultural communication and their intercultural communication competence helps them to perform effective interactions. The results from this study may help and encourage researchers and individuals to focus on these two important attributes of intercultural communication.

Subjects: Cultural Studies; Social Sciences; Communication Studies

Keywords: intercultural communication; intercultural sensitivity; intercultural communication competence

1. Introduction

In the ever-growing multicultural environments and institutions which host people from different social and cultural backgrounds, the abilities to deal with cultural diversities could be an important issue. Competencies in both intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence are among the main elements that could affect daily personal, social and professional lives of individuals who live in multicultural environments. One of the main essential parts of daily life in a multicultural environment is intercultural communication. Thus their good levels of intercultural sensitivity and their competency in intercultural communication could help people from dissimilar cultures to interact with one another properly. As stated by Gudykunst and Kim (1994), intercultural communication is a mutual and symbolic process which involves meaning attribution between individuals who belong to different cultural backgrounds. However, it is important to know whether intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence are the same or different, and in which ways these two elements affect each other. Ameli and Molaei (2012) believe that intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity have close relationships. At the same time, high intercultural sensitivity is linked with the probable experiencing of competent intercultural communication (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003).

Ameli and Molaei (2012) asserted that intercultural sensitivity is among the main factors that influence successful communication. At the same time, intercultural competence is among the important requirements to conduct successful interactions with different people, and to improve human relationships (Coffey, Kamhawi, Fishwick, & Henderson, 2013). According to Chen and Starosta (1996), the embedded misperception of intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural communication competence, which are closely related to one another but different concepts, is the main cause of confusion on understanding these concepts. The core point of intercultural sensitivity is personal aspiration of a person to comprehend and appreciate different cultures and cultural norms which are not the same as his or her own cultural norms (Chen & Starosta, 1997). However, intercultural communication competence refers to the abilities that enable individuals to conduct effective interactions in a multicultural environment and to narrate in different cultural perspectives (Bennett & Bennett, 2003). According to Marrone (2005), intercultural communication competence is the skill for conducting peaceful interactions with individuals from diverse cultures, and this ability helps individuals to find their right places in multicultural settings.

Chi and Suthers (2015) focus on the achievement of intercultural communication competence and cultural information through the existence of close ties and collaborations among members of different cultures. The intercultural communication is a new concept which was introduced by Hall (1959), and so far many researchers have evaluated this concept from different perspectives. At the same time, besides the increased attentions to intercultural sensitivity concept in the recent decades, confusions relating to intercultural sensitivity have also increased during this time, and this concept is not broadly understood yet (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Therefore, this study is aimed to assess the relationships between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence as two interrelated issues that help people from different cultural backgrounds to conduct successful interaction with one another.

The current manuscript has been developed based on the results of an original study on the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students of a Malaysian public university, namely University Malaysia Pahang. The manuscript includes the theoretical support of the study, review of the related literature, methodology, instrumentation and the data collection procedure of the study, the analyses of the data, the results from both the quantitative questionnaires and the interviews, and also the discussion and conclusion of the manuscript. The manuscript has been prepared systematically to establish logical connections between the theoretical support, quoted assertions from the literature, methodology, data collection procedure and the results. Moreover, the discussion and conclusion have been prepared based on the findings from the study and also based on the assertions and findings of other researchers and scholars from the related fields to strengthen the work and to help readers to understand the manuscript properly. The results from the current study may add some new information in the literature and could help individuals to gain new information on intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence to conduct proper communication with people of different cultures.

2. Theoretical support

Attention in the basic and fundamental parts and micro levels of interface and interactions of people across different cultures and societies maintain the main domains for theories and studies of intercultural communication (Kim, 2010). Based on Kim's (1992) systems theory, "the systems perspective emphasizes on the dynamic, interactive nature of the communication process between two or more individuals." The theory also focuses as "all parties involved in a given encounter, including the conditions of the social context in which the encounter takes place, codetermine the communication outcomes. It means that no one element in a multi-person communication system can be singled out for being solely responsible for the outcomes."

Kim's (1992) systems theory introduces intercultural communication competence as "overall capacity to facilitate the communication process between people from differing cultural backgrounds." While, intercultural sensitivity refers to a mental state that includes the consideration of understanding and appreciation of different cultures during intercultural communication. The Bennett's (1998) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity focuses on six steps towards the development of intercultural sensitivity and communication competence among people. The model illustrates that based on these steps individuals can build their cultural directions towards individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The proposed steps are three for ethnocentrism as: denial of differences, defence of differences, minimization of differences, and three for ethno-relativism as: acceptance of differences, adaption to cultural differences, and integration into cultural differences (Bennett, 1998). The cited steps and suggestions from the mentioned theory and model are suitable to guide such a study on intercultural communication.

3. Literature review

Principally, intercultural communication competence deals with interpersonal interactions among individuals from different cultural backgrounds, and looks for manners of understanding the probable disputes, challenges and disagreements in direct individual communication, and to deal with these issues (Bennett, 1998; Stepanovienė, 2011). The higher degree of intercultural contacts in the era of globalization asks individuals to be more skilled in intercultural communication (Ameli & Molaei, 2012). Dusi, Messetti, and Steinbach (2014) argued that the progress of intercultural communication competence needs involvements in the daily practices with specific focus on social skills, self-awareness, cultural-information, and organizational awareness. To improve their intercultural relationships, individuals need to be sensitive to different cultural norms, and sensitivity towards other cultures must not be considered just in the intellectual understanding and must move beyond that (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As asserted by Coffey et al. (2013), intercultural understanding and sensitivity are among the important requirements to improve the human relationships in the new multicultural environments.

The ways researchers define communication competence affect its perspectives in their studies, and communication competence includes the knowledge and skills of well functioning and well performance, and also the ability of achieving communicative goals in an appropriate manner (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; McCroskey, 1982; Ruben, 1976). Moreover, intercultural understanding and intercultural sensitivity are important for individuals to be fitted in multicultural environments, and their good levels of communication competence and intercultural sensitivity help people to find their right places in diverse environments and enhance their social relationships (Coffey et al., 2013; Hu & Fan, 2011; Spitzberg, 1993). Additionally, intercultural communication competence is among the properties that affect the environment, and researchers who study intercultural communication competence must focus on factors that influence interactions among different people in the real life (Kashima & Loh, 2006; White, 1959). Competent interactions among different people build trust and increase collaboration among them, and intercultural communication is an ongoing process in human life (Beamer, 1997; Cohen, Wildschut, & Insko, 2010; Pikhart, 2014). Intercultural communication is the main carrier for social and cultural relationships among different people (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013), and it plays a key role on the progress of the world (Chen, 1990).

According to Mahoney, Cairns, and Farmer (2003), the development of communication competence among individuals from various backgrounds increases their professional achievements as well. It was also pointed out that intercultural communication competence has useful impacts on the social and professional relationships among people. The main three elements of intercultural communication competence are attitudes, skills and knowledge. The skills and knowledge elements construct through the three different stages which are: to know (basic), to understand (advanced) and to apply (proficiency) (Catteeuw, 2012). According to Catteeuw (2012), the attitude construct improves through three different stages, as the ability to deal critically with people around in the society (awareness), the ability to deal with unclear situation, respect differences and otherness (openness), and being flexible when facing the realistic situations and consideration of the demands of other people (flexibility). The mentioned factors belong to both intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence of individuals.

Achievement of intercultural communication competence is not only important for the enhancement and communicative ability of the individuals, but it is also important for the future leaders, professionals, and educators with required skills for the promotion of successful intercultural collaborations (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2007). Individuals have to consider and respect all cultural differences to gain a good level of intercultural sensitivity; cultural prejudice may prevent them to improve their intercultural communication competence. Bennett (1998) believes that some individuals believe on the uniqueness and superiority of their own cultures and they cannot interpret cultural dissimilarities in multifaceted ways. Based on the mentioned statements from the cited scholars and researchers, study of the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence could bring more interesting information in the literature, and may answer some questions on intercultural communication competence.

4. Methodology

The methodology section of this study includes the participants, the instruments, and the data analyses procedure of this study.

4.1. Participants

This study consisted of 108 international postgraduate students who are currently pursuing their studies in a Malaysia public university. The participants are from 17 different Asian and African countries. The convenience or accidental sampling and data collection procedure was applied to collect the required data. Based on the convenience data collection procedure, researchers collect the required data from the estimated population based on the availability and personal

agreements of the participants without randomizing of the population. According to Kumar (2011), the convenience or accidental sampling helps researchers in accessing sampling population and researchers collect the data from the convenient locations. Trochim (2009) argues that convenience or non-probability sampling refers to the data collection procedure that researchers use the easiest way to collect their data, and this procedure is applied when researchers aim to test basic and general perspectives.

Moreover, all international postgraduate students of the said university were from 20 different countries, and during the data collection procedure the researchers were able to collect the data from the participants who belonged to 17 countries. The participants were chosen based on their availabilities and personal agreements during the data collection procedure, and 108 participants from 17 different countries were participated based on their availabilities in the main gathering areas such as classrooms/ lab, library, cafeteria and hostel during the data collection procedure. From all participants, 83 (76.9%) of them were males and 25 (23.1%) others were females. The overall *Mean/St. Deviation* scores for male participants were $M = 152.3$, $SD = 13.6$, and for females were $M = 154.8$, $SD = 11.3$. Based on their levels of education, 63 (58.3%) of them were master students, and 45 (41.7%) others were PhD students. The age range of the participants was from 22 to 40 years of ages. From all 108 participants, eight of them were interviewed to strengthen the data. The interviewees were chosen based on their own agreement, and there were no more volunteers to be interviewed.

4.2. Instruments

The quantitative questionnaire of this study included three sections which are the demographic information, the intercultural sensitivity scale, and the intercultural communication competence questionnaire. The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) of Chen and Starosta (2000) was used to assess intercultural sensitivity among the participants. The ISS questionnaire has 24 items and measures the level of intercultural sensitivity based on the Likert Scale with five options per item from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). This instrument assesses intercultural sensitivity under five factors which are: interaction engagement, interaction confidence, the respect for cultural differences, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Interaction engagement is the ability of interaction commitment, and the respect for cultural differences prevents from cultural bias and wrong judgment towards other cultures, and also enables individuals to be open-minded to others. Interaction confidence refers to the self-confidence of individuals when interacting with others. Interaction enjoyment indicates individuals' eagerness in involvement in interactions with others, and lastly interaction attentiveness shows the treatments and the ways that individuals behave when interacting with people from different backgrounds (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Kim, 2012).

The Intercultural Communication Competence Questionnaire (ICCQ) of Matveev (2002) which has 23 items was used to assess intercultural communication competence of the participants. The ICCQ was developed under the guidance of the Intercultural Abilities Model of Abe and Wiseman (1983), and Intercultural Effectiveness Concept of Cui and Awa (1992). The ICCQ questionnaire also measures the level of intercultural communication competence based on the Likert Scale with five options per item from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), and under four factors, which are: interpersonal skills, team effectiveness, cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy.

The interpersonal skills dimension refers to skills that enable people to conduct successful interpersonal interactions in a multicultural environment, to obtain necessary knowledge on different social and cultural values, and to admire differences. Team effectiveness refers to understanding and acknowledging team roles and goals, sharing information, involving in team decision-making,

receiving, giving and using helpful feedbacks, managing the probable conflicts, and respecting team members. Cultural uncertainty refers to the ability to deal with cultural ambiguities, being patient towards differences, being open towards social and cultural differences, and being flexible towards differences. Cultural empathy refers to the ability of looking to the world from different cultural viewpoints, inquiry of different cultural values, norms and beliefs, and appreciation of different lifestyles (Cui & Awa, 1992; Koester & Olebe, 1988; Matveev, 2002). The Cronbach's alpha rating for ISS was .828, and for ICCQ it was .774. Interviews were conducted under the guidance of an interview protocol which included the demographic information of the interviewees, information about the interview procedure, and nine unstructured interview questions. All nine questions for the interview instrument were developed based on the salient statements in the ISS and ICCQ instruments.

4.3. Data analyses

The essential tests from SPSS were applied to analyze the data from the survey questionnaires. The descriptive test was conducted to identify the frequencies and percentages, the bivariate correlation test was applied to find out the probable correlations between the attribute of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence, and the paired samples *t*-test was used to compare the mean scores of the attributes with each other. To analyze the interviews, the audio recorded interviews were listened carefully and all interviews were transcribed. Once all interviews were transcribed, the answers of the participants were grouped, and the main parts of their views and answers for the interview questions are quoted directly in the interview findings section.

5. Findings

The findings section includes the quantitative results from the ISS and ICCQ questionnaires and the results from the interviews.

5.1. Quantitative results

Based on the descriptive results, for both instruments (ISS and ICCQ), the levels of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence of the participants differed based on their *M/SD* scores for both of these variables. The overall *M/SD* scores of the participants for ISS were $M = 79.6$, $SD = 9.7$, and for ICCQ their scores were $M = 76.8$, $SD = 10.8$ respectively. Their mean scores for some of the attributes of ISS were higher than their mean scores for the attributes of ICCQ. Table 1 includes the *M/SD* scores of the participants for the attributes of ISS and ICCQ.

Table 1. Mean scores of the participants from attributes of ISS and ICCQ

Attribute	Mean	SD
1. Interaction engagement	3.2	.57
2. Respect for cultural differences	2.3	.80
3. Interaction confidence	3.1	.59
4. Interaction enjoyment	3.7	.58
5. Interaction attentiveness	3.4	.67
6. Interpersonal Skills	2.8	.35
7. Team effectiveness	3.4	.42
8. Cultural uncertainty	2.1	.85
9. Cultural empathy	3.5	.50

Table 2. Correlations between the attributes of ISS and ICCQ

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Interaction engagement									
2. Respect for cultural differences	.294								
3. Interaction confidence	.592	.312							
4. Interaction enjoyment	.426	.297	.556						
5. Interaction attentiveness	.357		.500	.611					
6. Interpersonal Skills									
7. Team effectiveness	.316	.221	.314						
8. Cultural uncertainty	.366			-.273		.466			
9. Cultural empathy	.358						.242	.273	

The bivariate correlation test was applied to explore the probable correlations between the attributes of ISS and ICCQ. Some significant correlations were found between the attributes of the mentioned variables. There were positive correlations between the interaction engagement attribute of ISS and cultural uncertainty attribute of ICCQ, between the interaction engagement attribute of ISS and cultural empathy attribute of ICCQ, between the interaction confidence attribute of ICCQ and the team effectiveness attribute of ISS, and between the interaction confidence attribute of ISS and the team effectiveness attribute of ICCQ. But, there was a negative correlation between the interaction enjoyment attribute of ISS and cultural uncertainty attribute of ICCQ. Table 2 illustrates the results from the correlation test.

The paired samples t-test was used to compare the statistical mean scores of the attributes of ISS with the attributes of ICCQ. The interaction engagement attribute of ISS was compared to the interpersonal skills attribute of ICCQ and there was a significant difference as $t(107) = 7.213, p < .01$. The *M/SD* scores for interaction engagement were $M = 3.2, SD = .57$, and for interpersonal skills were $M = 2.8, SD = .35$. The respect for cultural differences attribute of ISS was compared to the team effectiveness attribute of ICCQ and there was a significant difference as $t(107) = -5.892, p < .01$. The *M/SD* scores for the respect for cultural differences attribute were $M = 2.9, SD = .80$, and for the team effectiveness attribute the scores were $M = 3.4, SD = .42$. The interaction attentiveness attribute of ISS was compared with the cultural empathy attribute of ICCQ and no significant difference was found as $t(107) = -1.750, p > .05$. The *M/SD* scores for the interaction attentiveness attribute were $M = 3.4, SD = .67$, and for the cultural empathy attribute the scores were $M = 3.5, SD = .50$. The respect for cultural differences attribute of ISS was compared with the cultural empathy attribute of ICCQ and there was a significant difference as $t(107) = 6.893, p > .01$. The *M/SD* scores for respect for cultural differences attribute were $M = 2.9, SD = .80$, and for cultural empathy attribute the scores were $M = 3.5, SD = .50$. The results from the paired samples t-test show that there are some differences between the attributes of ISS and ICCQ.

5.2. Interview results

The Constant and Comparison method of Glasser and Strauss (1967) was applied to analyze the interviews. Based on this method, three steps will be applied to code and analyze the recorded interviews. The required steps are: transcribing the interviews, categorization of the data, and identifying and categorizing the themes that mirror the data-set (Sherburne, 2009). To analyze the interviews, the audio-recorded interviews were listened carefully and all interviews were transcribed and were divided under the related themes, and the salient views of the interviewees are directly quoted in the text. To strengthen the quantitative results, from the participants of the survey, eight of them were interviewed to support the data. The interviewees were: (1) an Algerian male master student, (2) a Chinese female master student, (3) a Nigerian male PhD student, (4) an Indian male PhD student, (5) an Iranian female PhD student, (6) an Afghan male master student, (7) a Pakistani female PhD student, and (8) a Bangladeshi male PhD student.

Based on the answers of the vast majority (75%) of the interviewees, the levels of their intercultural sensitivity and their personal willingness towards conducting interactions with different people had direct effects on their daily communications. For instance, interviewee 1 said that “At first I had different perception towards people of other countries, especially Asian people. But, when I tried to talk and communicate with students from different countries and exchange our social and cultural information, I have discovered many interesting social and cultural information and this perspective had positive effects on my personal and social lives.”

This view was supported by the interviewee 4 who said “I do want to interact with students from different cultures to explore their cultural norms, but I wait for them to start the communication or at least say “Hello” to me and then I will continue my interactions with them. I think when I start interactions they may think that I am trying to interfere in their personal lives.” The quoted views from the interviewees show that their personal perceptions towards cultural differences affect their daily interactions with other students who are from various cultures.

According to the views majority (62.5%) of the interviewees, both of their personal perceptions towards differences and their daily interactions have affected the levels of their intercultural communication competence. As interviewee 2 said “I learned many theoretical information about intercultural communication in my hometown in China, but in the real life it was difficult for me to interact with people from other countries. However, when I joined an international university and experienced daily interactions with different people, even though it was challenging in the beginning, I was able to communicate with other international students and discuss our assignments and personal needs.” Interviewee 8 said that “My daily contacts with other international students helped me to get useful information about different cultures and countries. Now, I think I am competent to work as a professional staff in different multicultural environments in different countries.” These views are supportive of the direct impacts of daily interactions of the participants on their intercultural communication competence.

6. Discussion

Intercultural communication is among the main factors that enable people from various cultures and countries to share their knowledge and experiences, and to establish personal, social and cultural relationships beyond their geographical and cultural borders. As argued by Kim and McKay-Semmler (2013), intercultural communication plays a key role on enabling people on establishment of cross-cultural relationships. Intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity are key factors helping people to conduct successful intercultural interactions. Even though these two variables have some similarities, they are not the same. Intercultural communication competence mainly belongs to the skills of individuals that enable them to interact properly, while intercultural sensitivity refers to their perceptions towards differences and their personal willingness towards involving in daily contacts with people of different cultures. Chen and Starosta (1996) also stated that intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence are closely related to each other, but they are different. The findings from this study are supportive of these arguments. Based on the results from this study, intercultural communication competence and intercultural sensitivity have close relationships, but they are different in function and perception.

Interpersonal sensitivity and intercultural communication competence are two different elements, but they are correlated factors that help each other to function well. A good level of intercultural sensitivity does not work well without the existence of a good level of intercultural communication competence and vice versa. The results from this study confirmed the existence of some correlations between these two main elements of intercultural communication. Ameli and Molaei (2012) introduce intercultural sensitivity as one of the main requirements for conducting fruitful intercultural communication. The results from this study also illustrate that intercultural sensitivity has deeper effects on daily interactions among communicators from various cultures. The quantitative results of this study illustrate higher mean scores for most of the main attributes of intercultural sensitivity rather than the attributes for intercultural communication competence.

Based on the results from the interviews, their personal perceptions and willingness were recognized as two of the main elements that affect daily interactions among the participants. Based on answers of some interviewees, they were competent to interact well, but sometimes the low levels of their sensitivity towards different cultural norms prevented them to interact with individuals from various social and cultural norms. It means that the results from interviews were also supportive of the differences between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence and their mutual effects of on each other.

Moreover, the steps and conditions of Kim's (1992) Systems Theory and the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity of Bennett (1998) are supportive of the results from both of the survey questionnaires and interview datasets of this study. The Systems Theory of Kim (1992) focuses on the dynamic and interactive nature of communication process among communicators during their interactions. Based on the results from this study, the interaction engagement and interaction enjoyment attributes of ISS had positive correlations with the interaction confidence, team effectiveness and interaction attentiveness attributes of ISS. It means that the interactive nature and personal willingness of the participants helped them to interact confidently and have effective roles in their teamwork. In other words, in a multicultural environment, their personal willingness and involvements in interactions with different people help individuals to conduct successful interactions.

The Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity focuses on the acceptance of differences and adaption of cultural differences, and the results from this study also illustrate that their intercultural sensitivity and their perceptions towards differences help individuals to have helpful and continuing interactions in a multicultural environment. Based on the results from this study, the respect for cultural differences attribute of ISS, and the cultural uncertainty and cultural empathy attributes of ICCQ have positive correlations with the interaction engagement attribute of ISS. It means that individuals who respect cultural differences and have cultural uncertainty and cultural empathy skills, could have durable and successful interactions with individuals from different cultures. The interview results also illustrate that the participants who respect cultural differences and were open towards differences had frequent and successful intercultural communication with their peers from different nationalities.

However, mistaking intercultural sensitivity with the intercultural competence and misperceptions towards the relationship between these two different issues and introducing of intercultural sensitivity as an attribute of intercultural communication competence undermine the real concept of intercultural sensitivity. Chen and Starosta (2000) also believe that even though there are increased attention and works on intercultural sensitivity, still it is not a well known concept for all. Understanding of the differences between these two interrelated concepts and assessment of the relationships between them help researchers to develop more concise and helpful academic reports. More studies on these issues may help individuals to focus on these two concepts and conduct successful interactions through focusing on these two helpful properties.

7. Conclusion

This study assessed the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence among international postgraduate students of University Malaysia Pahang. Through the use of the intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) and intercultural communication competence questionnaire (ICCQ) instruments, this study assessed the relationships of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence and their mutual effects on each other. The participation of 108 postgraduate students from 17 different nationalities enabled the authors of this manuscript to evaluate the relationships between the two mentioned factors in a multicultural university campus. Based on the results from this study, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence are two of the main requirements for successful interactions among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. These two main elements of intercultural communication are different, but they are the correlated factors of intercultural communication that support each other to bring good outcomes.

Based on the results from this study, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence have some similarities and close relationships, but they are still different concepts and are not the same. Intercultural sensitivity belongs to the personal perception of individuals towards differences and their willingness to initiate interactions with people of other cultures, while intercultural communication competence is the combination of different skills that help individuals to conduct proper interactions and perform well. Based on the results, intercultural sensitivity enables individuals to initiate contacts with people from different cultures, and intercultural communication competence helps them to continue their interactions properly and manage the probable challenges well. More studies on these interrelated issues may answer more questions and add more information in the literature.

Supplemental data

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2017.1310479>.

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Author's Contributions

Dr Abdul Qahar Sarwari is the main author of the current manuscript and has conducted the study during his PhD studies. Dr Mohamad Nubli Abdul Wahab has supervised the main author during his PhD studies.

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