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**What it takes to interact with “The other”? :  
A Phenomenology of Interethnic Communication Competence  
among students in an American University**

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### Abstract

Research in the past has illuminated what intercultural communication competence (ICC) is and how individuals may acquire ICC. Unfortunately, the conceptualization of ICC was predominantly based on Euro-American culture and researchers assumed that concept is universal. Consequently, such conceptualization has been inappropriately used to explain phenomenon of ICC in other cultures. Existing models not only reflect cultural bias, but the expansiveness of the term “culture” in the study of intercultural competence also brings its ambiguity. To avoid ambiguities in the conception of culture, this research focuses on a specific level of culture which is ethnicity. It seeks to illuminate conceptualization of interethnic communication competence through a phenomenological approach. An in-depth interview was proposed to conduct data from ethnically diverse students from both local and internationals in an American public university. The components of interethnic competence identified in this study would represent multiethnic views that move away from Eurocentric standpoint. The findings will be profitable to develop models and pedagogical approaches to improve students’ interethnic competence

Harmonious interethnic relation is of pragmatic importance that warrants researchers to study how ethnic individuals relate and communicate with each other effectively (Y. Y. Kim, 1986). One of the most feasible platforms to which effective interethnic communication can be investigated is with university students. Cross ethnic understanding among students is commonly viewed as the essence of educational goals (Parker, Archer, & Scott, 1992). More importantly, most university students will enter the job market upon graduation. Given that emigration and immigration is occurring at a rapid pace in many parts of the world, it is more likely that students will have to work with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, being an interethnic competent communicator is an important factor for graduates to succeed in their careers. Students who are culturally competent are likely to master work environment more so than those who are culturally ignorant. Thus, addressing interethnic communication competence among university students is crucial because it would be useful for designing programs that is appropriate for students' reality.

#### *Problem Statement*

Three problem areas can be pointed out that warrant the study of interethnic communication competence. First, there has been a handful of research that specifically investigates competence in interethnic communication. Past investigations on competence in intercultural context have been largely based on national affiliations or geographical locations rather than ethnic cultures (Wiseman, 2003). Researchers most often investigate intercultural competence among foreigners or sojourners entering a new country (Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008; Lin, 2007; Martin, 1993; Munz, 2007 ; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). Because the demographic landscape in many countries is radically changing, national affiliation approach to the study of intercultural competence seems to be inadequate in this globalized world. For example, census data projected that due to the rapid increment of racial minority groups in the U.S. especially Hispanic and Asian Americans, there will no longer be a racial majority (US Census Bureau, 2000). The trend of population change can also be observed in higher learning institutions. Internationalization efforts coupled with the demographic change has resulted in an immense number of ethnic students from both local and international pursuing education in universities. This phenomenon creates the university as a place for rich cross cultural exchanges and an important place for investigating how individuals relate to members of other cultures.

Second, research indicates that students have limited interethnic interactions in the university (Halualani, Chitgopekar, Morrison, & Dodge, 2004; Tan & Goh, 2006). This finding suggests the possibilities that ethnic groups may subsume to live within their ethnic boundary rather than talking to ethnic others (Argyle, 1982). This is in fact paradoxical to the idea that the presence of diverse cultural or ethnic groups in higher learning institutions provides opportunity for increasing interethnic contact. Unfortunately, communication between people of different ethnic groups is not an easy process that leads people to avoid interacting with one another. For example, communication difficulties between African Americans and European Americans have been the subject of numerous news and analysis in the United States (Eadie, 1994). In higher learning institutions, there is considerable evidence that interethnic communication difficulties among students derive from dissimilar communication patterns, symbols, and values (Holmes, 2005). Hence, the study of interethnic competence is important to understand how students manage cultural difficulties when trying to relate with "the other" or those who share a different worldview from them. The insights are useful to promote cross cultural understanding and allow students to develop competence before they enter the job market.

Third, much of our understanding about intercultural competence has been based on Euro-American thoughts (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Chen, 1993; Chen & Starosta, 2008; Deardorff, 2009a; Martin, 1993; Stiftung & Cariplo, 2006). Although such dominance has produced valuable insights, it leaves out the essence of “culture” in the process of conceptualizing competence (Chen, 1993). As a result, the extant model in viewing intercultural communication competence was inappropriately used to other cultures or ethnic groups (Chen & Starosta, 2008; Martin, 1993). Not only does previous research suffer from a dominant Eurocentric standpoint, the definition of competence also sets a race-biased tone and privileged communication styles of middle class white Americans (Moon, 2008). Consequently, misinterpretation of behaviors of others occurred by the dominant group and causes many problems between African Americans and Anglo Americans (Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989). Having presented the three problematic areas, this study would adopt a phenomenological approach using qualitative research methods. To understand multiethnic students’ notions about interethnic communication competence, this study examines the following research questions:

1. How do multiethnic students in an American university define interethnic communication competence? What interethnic communication competence means to them?
2. What are the characteristics of perceived interethnic communication competence that are common to the multiethnic students in an American university?

*Research Implications: Answering the “So What” Question*

The need for intercultural competence is nowhere felt more keenly than in educational institutions. Teachers need to play central role to educate students for the world that students would thrust into interaction with different ethnic groups. The idea of diversity is not an estranged concept for educational institutions. Students in many colleges in many countries have been highly diverse for many years. However, Halualania et. al (2004) assert that although the idea of diversity is embraced, universities do not actively find ways to demonstrate their commitment into actual practice. Consequently, a report by American Council on Education in 1998 concluded that less than 7% of students in higher education achieve basic standards of global preparedness (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006). Hence, there is a need to increase the number and educate students of what it means to be competent. The first step begins by conducting a qualitative research that described the concepts and characteristics of interethnic communication competence from their own perspective. This understanding can be developed into a model that would be useful for pedagogical and training purposes to improve students’ interethnic competence. It can be utilized to educate students through communication courses and training sessions. Hopefully, the model would aid students to go beyond tolerance and relate well with ethnic others through competent communication.

### **Review of Literature**

This study aims to understand what interethnic communication competence is. In so doing, it begins by reviewing the nature of communication competence and how it is applied into intercultural communication context. This understanding is vital to provide the framework for delineating the concept of interethnic communication competence.

*The nature of communication competence from western perspectives*

Defining communication competence seems to be elusive (Cooley & Roach, 1984). McCroskey (1984) pointed out that researchers most often define communication competence from their own perspectives. Consequently, the term competence has been used with such modifiers or labels in the literature as interpersonal competence, social competence, communicative competence, linguistic competence, interpersonal competence, and relational

competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989) In addition; the confusion about communication competence meaning arises from researchers' tendency to equate competence with performance (Cooley & Roach, 1984; McCroskey, 1984). McCroskey (1984) argues that competence and performance are related but they are not the same. He asserts that the areas of language have long distinguished the concept of understanding and doing. Clearly, understanding is not equivalent to doing. Linguistic scholars have long identified that the two concepts develop in individuals at different stages. Competence is commonly referred to as understanding and performance as doing. Cooley and Roach (1984) echoed in that "we observe performance, not competence, and we infer some state of underlying competence that we take to explain that performance" (p.27).

Although competence and performance are separated, competence is the basis for performance (Cooley & Roach, 1984; McCroskey, 1982). However, Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) argued that restricting the notion of competence to the knowledge domain and minimal behavior may reflect lay usage of the term. Parks (1994) echoes in that the difference between the two concepts is only skin deep as action occurs on both cognitive and behavioral aspects. Parks asserts that both knowledge and performance are merely different aspects of the same larger process. In addition, this position seems to be minority in the scholarly literature (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Despite the dialectical standpoints among scholars as to what constitutes communication competence, the notion of knowledge and performance have established the framework for communication competence conception.

McCroskey (1984) proposed that competence requires not only the ability to demonstrate certain communication behaviors, but also cognitive ability to understand and make choices among behaviors. From this standpoint, McCroskey defined communication competence as an "adequate ability to make ideas known to others by talking or writing" (p.263). Theoretically, McCroskey claimed that communicatively competent individual is a person who (1) acquires certain behavioral skill, (2) acquires cognitive understanding of the communication process and the situational constraints that would influence communication behavior, (3) behaves in communicatively competent manners with the acquisition of these behavioral and cognitive skills, and (4) uses competent communication behaviors. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, 1989) offer a comprehensive view on communication competence. They maintain that competence is manifested in effective and/or appropriate behavior. Effectiveness derives from the notion of control and is referred to "successful goal achievement or task accomplishment" (p.7). In this sense, effectiveness is closely related to maximizing rewards or positive effect from achieving the desired outcomes. Appropriateness reflects politeness and is defined as "the avoidance of violating social or interpersonal norms, rules or expectations" (p.7). Appropriateness forms the basis of communication competence. In order to know what is appropriate, a communicator needs to identify the rules of a given situation. His or her sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable provides the knowledge to perform what behavior follows or violate rules in a given context. Flaherty and Stojakovic (2008) added that communication competence is perceived by the people who are interacting. Hence, competent communicators are considered as those who are able to co-orient and coordinate their behaviors (verbal and non-verbal) to accomplish personal goals as well as fitting themselves in the expectation of a given situation (Wiseman, 2003). Nonetheless, McCroskey (1982) argues that from behavioral perspective, competent communicators do not always achieve goals. He further contended that "effectiveness is not only excess baggage; it will also lead to inappropriate judgment of competence" (p.3). Despite this argument, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, 1989) noted that there are three important

themes that pervade the literature on communication competence: control, collaboration and adaptability.

*Control:* The key to competence concept is the ability to control environment because it allows a person to be effective. Environmental control is generally demonstrated by a person's ability to achieve desired outcomes or goals on other people. The notion of control carries the characteristics that one is able to manipulate responses of others, specify and attain goal, as well as the ability to solve interpersonal problems. Several personal traits that enhance one's ability to control include autonomy, creativity, empathy, health, intelligence, judgment, Machiavellianism, self esteem, and assertiveness.

*Collaboration:* Control is exercised in an interactive context because all interactants influence and are influenced by each other. When interacting, participants bring their personal goals and the desire to control the social encounter. Thus, this interdependence nature brings the notion of collaboration which recognizes that a person's goals and attempts to control must be reconciled with the awareness that others also possess the same intention. Competence occurs when interactants allow each other to cooperatively attain satisfying outcomes. Several skills are perceived as related to collaborative nature such as empathy, role taking, listening, attentiveness, social confirmation, and interaction involvement.

*Adaptability:* Adaptability is closely related to control and collaboration concepts. Adaptability is analogous to behavioral flexibility. It involves adaptation of actions to fit in a given context. This notion posits that a communicator utilizes diverse behavioral repertoire that involves strategy and tactics during interaction as well as effectively adjusting to changes of different communication contexts. Because of this principle, judgments of competence are context based.

#### *The nature of intercultural communication competence*

What does it mean to be a competent intercultural communicator? When does communication become intercultural? The formal study of intercultural communication originated in 1946 when the Foreign Service Institute was established in the United States to provide cultural training for foreign diplomats (Jandt, 2010). The development of intercultural communication as a field of study was associated with the role played by an anthropologist—Edward T. Hall who published a book “The Silent Language” in 1959 (Jandt, 2010; Moon, 2008). Hall's work on providing communication approach to culture marked the beginning of intercultural communication field (Moon, 2008). Most scholars usually study intercultural communication between people from different national cultures and it is limited to face-to-face communication (Gudykunst, 2003). However, communication does not only become intercultural when interaction involves people from different countries. In the broadest sense, intercultural communication refers to communication between people of different groups (Gudykunst, 2003). Nonetheless, it is important to point out that groups do not communicate, individuals do (Singer, 1998). Hence, Spitzberg and Changnon, (2009, p.7) describe communication becomes intercultural “to the extent that individuals are influenced by their group or cultural affiliations”. Bochner (1982) asserts when individuals engage in an intergroup communication, the differences that separate them such as skin color, language, and religion tend to become salient. He maintains that:

When we deal with members of other cultures, their physical appearance and language or accent provide cues to their ethnic origins and their status as strangers. We immediately place such people into the category “they” distinguishing “them” from “us”. (p.10)

Lustig and Koester (2006) point out that immigration patterns have shifted segments of the world population and create a global village that enables intercultural interactions. Despite this global village idea, people do not know how to live with “them” or “the other” because

“their” behaviors seemed strange. Therefore, intercultural competence is feasible because it helps individuals to learn how to effectively communicate with “the other”.

Intercultural communication competence in the literature has been defined in much the same way as it does to communication competence (Chen & Starosta, 2008). The term has also been used interchangeably with such modifiers as multicultural or cross cultural competence, cultural learning, global competence, cross cultural knowledge, intercultural understanding, cross-cultural adjustment, cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural effectiveness, cultural competence, multiculturalism, and cross cultural awareness (Bradford, Allen, & Beisser, 2000; Lough, 2010). Amongst the terms, intercultural communication competence and intercultural communication effectiveness are most frequently used in the literature due to their reflective relationship with communication competence concepts (Bradford, et al., 2000; Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders, 1993). Scholars agree that intercultural communication competence included *effectiveness* and *appropriateness* (Bradford, et al., 2000). *Appropriateness* means that a person is able to meet expectations, rules, and norms of the relationship and *effectiveness* suggests that the person is able to accomplish her/his desired goals or outcomes (Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2003). What distinguishes intercultural competence conception is the emphasis on contextual factors in addition to effectiveness and appropriateness (Chen & Starosta, 2008). Lustig and Koester (2006) describe that the contextual factors imply intercultural competence depends upon the association between individuals. It is possible that a person to be perceived as highly competent in certain intercultural situations and less competent in another. Judgments of intercultural competence also depend on cultural rules about permitted behaviors that frame the settings within which people communicate and a person’s ability to achieve his or her goals within cultural rules. Therefore, intercultural competence is referred to effective and appropriate behavior in a given context (Chen & Starosta, 2008; Y.Y Kim, 1991; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Spitzberg, 1991). Spitzberg (1991) posits that “communication will be competent to an intercultural context when it accomplishes the objectives of an actor in a manner that is appropriate to the interpersonal context and relationship.”(p.354).

Intercultural competence also requires participants to have knowledge or cognitive capacity, motivations, and skills to manage intercultural communication challenges (Chen & Starosta, 2008; Kim, 1991; Lustig & Koester, 2006). These components are the crucial components of intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam, 2004; Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008; Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2003). Lustig and Koester (2006) describe that *knowledge* is referred to cognitive information about how much a person knows about a specific context, rules for appropriateness that functions in a specific culture, the other person in conversation as well as the subject. *Motivation* shows the extent to which a person wants to converse with other cultures. Motivation involved feelings and intentions. Feelings represent emotional or affective state that reflects how individuals react when interacting with people from other cultures. Also, it includes sensitivity and attitude toward whom one interacts. Intentions function as a guide that determines choices being made in intercultural interactions. Intentions may be perceived as goals, plan, objectives or desires that steer an individual’s behavior. Flaherty and Stojakovic (2008) describe that *skills* represent actual and successful performance of appropriate and effective behaviors.

The imperatives for intercultural competence in today’s world are undeniable. Chen and Starosta (2008) point out several important trends of the late twentieth century that demand individuals to acquire intercultural competence. First, technological development links every part of the world which increases face to face communication as people can travel around the world.

Second, globalization and economy have made the business world more interrelated and international than in the past. The trend toward global economy brings people from diverse cultural backgrounds to come together which necessitate greater intercultural understanding for doing global business. Third, the widespread of population migrations has resulted in remarkable population change across national borders. For example, the increasing numbers of immigrants have restructured the fabric of American society. As a result, the multiethnic society makes intercultural contact inevitable and requires members of ethnic groups to adjust to one another's identity.

*Approaches to the study of intercultural communication competence*

The study of intercultural communication started some 40 years ago from intercultural problems that triggered the interest of communication experts (Vijver & Leung, 2009). After World War II, the U.S. sought involvement and investment in foreign lands and many were sent overseas to carry international assignments (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). However, expatriates failed to accomplish their assignments and returned because they could not cope with different business culture (Vijver & Leung, 2009). Other problems that were encountered by sojourners include culture shock, personal adjustment, cultural adaptation and cross-cultural effectiveness (Ruben, 1989).

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) maintain that, as international stability led to foreign aid programs, organizations like Peace Corps arose. Difficulties were experienced by Peace Corps volunteers as well that led to project failure in the sense of personal adjustment difficulties and lack cultural participation (Ruben, 1989). The need to train individuals to serve effectively in a dissimilar environment stimulated scientific interest in the concept of intercultural competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Ruben (1989, p. 229) posits that perspectives of intercultural competence were needed to meet four essential goals: "i) to explain overseas failures, ii) to predict overseas success, iii) to develop personnel selection strategies, and iv) to design, implement and test sojourner training and preparations methodologies". These four needs guide theory and research directions of intercultural competence since the earliest days. Since then, studies on intercultural competence have developed at an immense rate. Consequently, the very breadth of communication competence concept has contributed to numerous controversies regarding how it ought to be conceptualized (Parks, 1994). Since there are many definitions about intercultural competence, the ontological issues of this concept need to be addressed before any conceptualization can be offered. One important concern about communication competence centers whether it is defined as a trait or a state. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, 1989) maintain that most competent conceptions and extant measures are trait oriented. McCroskey (1985) describes that the trait approach presumes people are competent, not behaviors. As such, the trait orientation adopts personality based theory to explain competence. People are competent because they are empathic, assertive, Machiavellian, and good listener. Because of this contention, the trait approach proposes that competent communicators are able to behave competently across various communication situations. Early attempts on assessing intercultural competence have been based on characteristics of prospective sojourners that might predispose the individual's success or failure in overseas assignments (Ruben, 1989). Competence in the current literature is still largely viewed as personality attributes and is almost measured accordingly (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Personality attributes refers to the traits that constitute a person's personality that stem from one's unique experiences within a culture and reflect, in part, one's heredity (Chen & Starosta, 1998). Personality patterns that are associated with competence, among others, include interpersonal sensitivity, openness, empathy and self involvement (Spitzberg &

Changnon, 2009). In addition, Ting Toomey (2005) lists the characteristics of competent intercultural communicators such as resourceful individual, mindful, able to be at ease with cultural differences and able to use multiple communication styles. Intercultural effectiveness at general level using this approach has been conceptualized in terms of “universal communicators”, “multicultural persons” and “universal persons” by researchers in the past (Hammer, 1987).

Hammer (1987, p.66) argued that “one difficulty with personality oriented descriptions of effective intercultural person is their inability to specify the behaviors or skills needed to engage in effective intercultural interaction”. In addition, Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) argued that viewing competence as a trait may be overly simplistic and paradoxical. They maintain that communication is contextual and so is competence. People vary in their competent behaviors as they interact with different people in different physical and social contexts. In an effort to overcome such difficulty, a state approach was offered. McCroskey (1985) described that a state or situational approach views competence as a function of behaviors, not a person. Thus, competence is situation or context based. The situational view posits that a person may perform competent behavior in one situation but may not in another.

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) suggest not embracing the term “state” and “trait” because of their ambiguous differences. They further assert that to measure a state competence, items must reflect perceptions of a particular place, time, and activity. The trait measures on the other hand, must entail tendency across contexts. In this sense, the terms “state” and “trait” are analogous to the terms “situational” and “dispositional”. They further argue that dispositional term reflects behavioral tendency over communication events to generate a person’s general predispositions. Hence, the dispositional oriented measures ultimately focus on a person’s tendency to communicate effectively in various contexts, with different receivers to attain diverse goals. Since there are various factors that may affect performance such as motivation and knowledge, it is useful to distinguish between competence as a trait and competence-related traits. Spitzberg and Cupach claimed that “competence related traits are viewed as part of a larger picture that also includes situational, cultural, environmental, and relational variables” (p.55). Researchers may enhance the predictiveness of the trait competence variables by considering their interaction with contextual variables. Because of the complexity in competence conception, McCroskey (1985) suggested that there is no one way to study the construct. A researcher is obligated to make clear as to what choice is made when investigating communication competence. Having explained the frameworks for intercultural competence, how this concept can be understood in the context of interethnic communication? How this construct can be distinguished from intercultural communication competence?

*Interethnic communication competence.*

Moon (2008) documented that there are various operationalization for “culture” within communication research field. Because culture is a group related phenomenon, the term as it applied to the study of intercultural communication encompasses nations, ethnic, organization, religions, geographic, and gender variances (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Bippus & Dorjee, 2002; Collier, 1996; Singer, 1998). Although intercultural communication competence with its use of the term “culture” is more inclusive and covers a wider spectrum of communication, the expansiveness of the term also brings its ambiguity (Bippus & Dorjee, 2002). Hence, this study uses a more specific cultural abstraction which is ethnicity. Nonetheless, ethnicity and culture are not two separate entities. Culture is the parent concept associated with ethnicity (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). The difference between the two normative categories of culture is the level of

analysis being discussed but the process remains the same (Singer, 1998). Hence, the study of interethnic communication is subsumed under the rubric of intercultural communication and applies to communication under conditions of ethnic differences within a societal boundary (Y. Y. Kim, 1986; Ross, 1978). The primary concern in interethnic communication study is to investigate critical differences between ethnic groups and how it influences communication through the use of verbal and nonverbal exchanges (Kim, 2002; Kim, 1986; Ross, 1978).

Researchers most often study interethnic communication pertaining to ethnic groups within national boundary. However, Lustig and Koester (2006) assert that the term interethnic is also used to imply communication between people who live in specific geographic areas rather than the same nation. Taken from the standpoint that interethnic communication is a subset of intercultural communication, the concept of interethnic competence evolves from intercultural competence conception. As such, interethnic competence refers to *an impression that behavior is appropriate and effective associated with interaction with people from different ethnicity*. The term ethnicity certainly needs further elaboration. Jackson and Garner (1998) explain as to how the term ethnicity originates:

“The etymology of the word *ethnic* traces to the Greek *ethnikos*, meaning “a foreign group or nationality within a society”. Also, Latin *ethnicus* meant not only foreigner but also *heathen* ... ethnic group references are most often tied to groups considered to be non-white, foreign, and heathen”. (p.43)

Hraba (1979) defines ethnicity as “self conscious collectivities of people who on the basis of a common origin or a separate subculture maintain a distinction between themselves and outsider” (p.27). However, the term subculture in Hraba’s definition is ambiguous because it may be referred to cultural or social groups within a nation and is often cited to mean groups based on religion, language or occupation (Hecht, et al., 2003; Lustig & Koester, 2006). Therefore, Hecht et. al (2003) suggest that ethnicity can be viewed as “shared ancestral heritage”( p.5). Taking these definitions into account, ethnicity can be defined as a wide variety of group who normally have origins that are external or precede present nation-state and share common heritage, history, religion, tradition, religion, and language (Collier, 2006; Hecht, et al., 2003; Lustig & Koester, 2006). Lustig and Koester (2006) add that the nature of a group’s ethnic culture depends on a number of characteristics. Many people such as in the United States still identify themselves with their ancestors’ ethnic group who emigrated from other nation. In other case, ethnic identification may coincide such as in former Yugoslavia with which three were major ethnic groups -- Slovenians, Croatians, and Serbians. Each group owns distinct culture and language. Ethnic group may also share common identification although they belong to many different nations such as Jewish people.

Kim (1986) proposes a different stance toward the conception of ethnicity. Ethnicity involves both sociological and psychological perspective. Kim posits that:

“ Sociological tradition defines ethnicity primarily in an objective sense which is a label to designate social groups and differentiate one group from another.. the label is based on symbolic markers such as race, religion, language, national origin and combinations of these characteristics... psychological approach views ethnicity as the subjective identification of individuals with an ethnic group that is the identity felt by members of the ethnic group”(p.10)

Kim proposes that when understanding ethnicity, this dual perspective should be taken into consideration because it provides the ground to understand a person’s dispositions and how it influences interethnic communication. Labeling the distinctions made by ethnic markers such as language, religion, and national origin of ethnic cultures is useful to indicate similarities within

group as well as differences between groups. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that no two ethnic individuals may possess similar identical personal attributes including ethnic characteristics and their subjective identification with the ethnic group. Singer (1998) echoes in that identity is not established by being born into a particular family, it is the learning process that occurs through socialization in the group that makes a person being able to distinguish between her/his in-group and out-group.

Ethnicity is one of the most salient self identities and individuals may enact their ethnic identity as part of social behaviors (Hecht, et al., 2003; Hecht, Larkey, & Johnson, 1992). Therefore the term ethnicity and ethnic identity interrelate with one another. Collier (1988) posits that ethnicity connotes the heritage with which individuals identify and trace their history. Ethnic identity refers to a pattern of communicative conduct that emerges within context such as messages, meanings, norms, and rules of behaviors that prescribe “how they do things”. Hecht et. al (2003) suggest that communication is problematic in that people always differ in their interpretations and need to negotiate meanings. If people hold different ethnic identity, the process can be even more difficult due to differing rules, norms, and symbols. Previous research has provided evidence as to how ethnic cultures differ in their communication rules and how they perceive satisfying communication (e.g. Collier, Ribeau, & Hecht, 1986; Dillon & McKenzie, 1998; Hecht, et al., 1992; Hecht & Ribeau, 1984). Due to ethnic differences, researchers have pointed out challenges faced by ethnic individuals to communicate (Halualania, 2010; Holmes, 2005; Lin, 2007). To reduce and manage challenges due to cross ethnic barriers, interethnic communication competence is the key.

#### Delineating interethnic communication competence from multiethnic perspectives

Although the western based models of intercultural/ethnic competence provide understanding of the concept, there is a caveat toward the utility of the models. Much of the competent models reflect findings of mainly Euro-American communities or the dominant ethnic group in the United States (Chen & Starosta, 2008; Deardorff, 2009a, 2009b; Martin, 1993; Stiftung & Cariplo, 2006). Chen (1993) argues that the indicators for competence strongly reflect western culture bias which show obsession with personal control, power, and the concern on the message over people. In the similar vein, Parks (1994) echoes that placing interpersonal control at the heart of communication competence represents a western cultural perspective. However, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) argue that it is difficult to determine whether western concepts of competence may bias or shift of emphasis. They provide an example that individualistic orientation prioritizes assertive skills in the west but collectivistic stresses empathy, sensitivity, and conformity. Yet, even within U.S. social scientific approaches to social skills, assertiveness is not emphasized whereas empathy serves as important in most models of intercultural competence regardless of the authors’ cultural origins.

Several researchers began to study competence from the perspectives of groups other than the mainstream U.S. culture in the mid late 1980s (Hecht, et al., 2003; Hecht, et al., 1989). For example, Hecht, et al., (1992) investigate salient issues in satisfying interethnic conversations from the perception of African American and European American. The issues involve acceptance, expressiveness, authenticity, negative stereotyping, understanding, goal attainment, powerlessness, relaxation, relational solidarity, and shared worldview. Moon (2008) asserts this decade paves the way for more scholarly work that considers other specific cultural perspectives. For example, Chua (2004) found that communication competence construct in Malaysian work context stress more on relational aspect than task. Chen (1993) proposed that Chinese perspective of perceived “harmony” is the key to smooth communication which leads

them to avoid conflict and pursue group oriented system of human relations. (Deardorff, 2009b) points out that Arab, African, and Latin American perspectives place a focus on the relationship when viewing intercultural competence. She further notes that Arab stresses the importance of relationship building, Africans highlights the notion of relational identity, and Latin Americans emphasize equality in relationships.

One important concern that needs to be considered is whether intercultural competence can best be understood from specific cultures standpoint or identification of more universal concepts (Koester, et al., 1993). Previous researchers often conceptualize intercultural competence from specific cultures. Hecht, Ribeau, and Jackson (2003) argue that there is little research about what makes intercultural contact effective or ineffective from diverse cultural perspectives. Asaratnam and Doerfel (2005) responded to this call and conducted a study of intercultural competence from multicultural perspectives. Their research found that knowledge and motivation were perceived as important components among participants from 15 different countries. Despite this research effort, it is important to note that much of the current research outside the U.S. in the extant literature was still based on national affiliations rather than ethnicity. Collier (2006) suggests that national cultures refer to socialization process that a person of same nationality in the country may share that promotes and reinforces particular values, beliefs, and norms. Since national cultures are contributed by many people, prediction about communicative symbols can only be generalized and may not represent the complexity of multiethnic societies. Since the idea of nation state is de-emphasizing because of new immigrant arrivals and the emergence of complex multiethnic societies, the need for more research on the basis of ethnicity is paramount. Therefore, conceptualizing competence that incorporates ethnicity is of practical importance to address the emergence of multiethnic societies.

Researchers in the past have shed light into understanding competence from intra and interethnic perspectives in a domestic culture (e.g. Collier, 1988; Hecht, et al., 1989; Martin, Moore, Hecht, & Larkey, 2001). Much of the previous research in intra and interethnic competence tend to use a state approach to their studies. For example, Hecht, et al., (1992) investigate salient issues in satisfying interethnic conversations from the perception of African American and European American. The issues involve acceptance, expressiveness, authenticity, negative stereotyping, understanding, goal attainment, powerlessness, relaxation, relational solidarity, and shared worldview. The study found the issues apply equally well to African Americans and Euro Americans. Using a state approach has certainly enlightened knowledge about competence in interethnic communication. However, it presents challenges to researchers. As the state approach evaluates someone's competence in a specific interaction, not much can be discerned about a person's ability to consistently behave in an appropriate and effective way( Arasaratnam, 2009). Studying interethnic competence from a trait like approach seems viable to address this inadequacy. Asaratnam (2009) argues that "a person who is competent in one intercultural exchange possess something within herself/himself that enables her/him to engage in a different intercultural exchange competently as well" (p. 3). Parks (1994) maintained that successes or failures in communication that are attributed to internal causes are more likely to generalize from one situation to another. People who expect to succeed in a situation will actually succeed in more and more situations. Thus, it is possible that individuals who possess trait-like competence to foresee positive outcomes in many interethnic interactions.

The trait like perspective would be useful to understand the perception of interethnic competence among university students from various ethnic groups. The question is how researchers should carry through a study that takes into account various ethnic perspectives on

competence? Asaratnam and Doerfel (2005) contend that people of all cultures would hold notions of competence and even though they are different, there are common competent characteristics understood by people of different cultures that could derive from shared experiences as human being. The rational way to start exploring the commonalities is to extract vernacular understanding of intercultural competence from participants. Asaratnam and Doerfel (2005) defined vernacular meaning as “perceived meaning in day-to-day intercultural interactions, speaks volumes about people’s understanding of subjective reality in that situation” (p.12). In this sense, it is possible for researchers to uncover elements of interethnic competence that may rest in vernacular meaning by people of different ethnic cultures. Since interethnic competence is a phenomenon that occurs in human’s everyday life, Asaratnam and Doerfel’s vernacular meaning can be further explained by a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology investigates the meaning of lived experience (Manen, 1990; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Historically, phenomenology derives from a specific term developed by the nineteenth century German Philosopher, Wilhem Dilthey -- *verstehen* which means "an attempt to empathically understand another's experience". (Lindolf and Taylor, 2011, p.36). In its simplest sense, phenomenology studies a person's experience and how s(he) articulates such experience (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Mannen (1993) points out that the basic assumption of phenomenology is to question the way we experience the world and to know the world we live in as human beings. Phenomenological researchers ask the what-ness of experience. In this sense, the fundamental question is oriented on “what is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced by human? What is it like to have a certain experience?” Lindolf and Taylor (2011) describe Edmund Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology. Based on his philosophy, phenomenology sought to describe the essence of human perception and consciousness that orders the way we "see" the world as we encounter something. Mannen (1993) illustrates that phenomenology emphasizes understanding and describing the very nature of phenomenon by asking “what makes a something what it is without which it could not be what it is”(p.10). As such, it aims to gain deeper understanding by describing one’s experiential meanings in his or her everyday existence. Taking this perspective, interethnic competence can be explicated by understanding a person’s experience when engaging in everyday interethnic interactions and how characteristics of interethnic competence plays role in such interactions.

It is important to note that researching lived experience is retrospective -- it is a reflection of one's consciousness of the experience that one lived through (Manen, 1990). As such, phenomenological study is carried through a reflection to reveal the essence of the experiential meaning (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Taking this standpoint, interethnic competence can be investigated by asking participants to recall their experience communicating with ethnic others and give meaning to their experience. Based on their lived experience interacting with ethnic others, participants orient researchers into understanding their view of “what interethnic competence is like” or “what interethnic competence means to them”.

Lindolf and Taylor (2011) assert that phenomenology requires extensive engagement with persons through in-depth, intensive, and iterative interviews. The research may investigate life history (i.e. a person’s experience of life world and how he/she constructs meaning of experience) and narrative analysis (focuses on people's storytelling as a means for explaining personal & social experience). Mannen (1993) points out that phenomenological research is of value because it stems from our everyday practical concerns of certain phenomenon. As such, what drives the author to carry a phenomenological study is the concern that educators are still far from understanding how to develop intercultural competence (Bok, 2009). How educators

can give students such competence and how they can impart something as subtle as “interethnic competence”? One of the ways to answer these questions is to include and understand the concept of competence from various cultural perspectives. Such effort is important to fully comprehend what it means to relate effectively with those from other cultures. Therefore, this research attempts to understand multiethnic students’ conception of what interethnic competence means to them based on the phenomenological approach.

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants*

Data for this study involved ethnically diverse groups of local and international students in an American university. Participants were adults (over the age of 18) who had friends and engaged in frequent interactions with ethnically different others. The study used snowballing sampling. It began with a convenient sample of a participant who then referred the researchers to others whom they perceived as competent interethnic communicators.

#### *Method*

An-depth interview was used to collect data from participants. Interview is considered as one of the preeminent methods in phenomenological studies (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). An interview can be broadly defined as “face to face exchanges of information between two people” (Abrahamson, 1983, p.332). This definition connotes that interview may reflect conversations. However, interview is different from conversation because it serves for a purpose. The researcher determines the reasons as to why interviews should be conducted and finds best suited people to realize his or her purposes (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). Although interviews may function as a “tool” that the researcher used to achieve certain purposes, it is a joint production between a researcher and a member (Neuman, 2000). The researcher and participant “co-construct” meaning as they develop deeper understanding through dialogues in the interview (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Interviews enable researches to understand participants’ experience, knowledge, perspectives, and worldviews of a particular topic or situation (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The researcher asks questions that would elicit concrete examples, stories, accounts, and explanations in order to gain insights into a participant’s experience (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011; Neuman, 2000). Participants would articulate their experience in words and their “talk” is valuable for understanding how they perceive their worlds (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Since all people have the innate ability to narrative, Lindolf and Taylor (2011) suggest that qualitative interviews provide an opportunity for people to tell their stories that help them to illustrate and shape their understandings.

In relation to this study, interview is an appropriate method to allow participants articulate their experience on interethnic communication competence. Participants are able to describe events that have affected their interactions due to ethnic differences and how competence may improve their interactions with their ethnic other friends. In terms of structure, interviews occupy a range of points between highly structured interviews to the unstructured interviews (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Structured and semi-structured interviews were used in this research because each one serves a different purpose that contributes to the findings, discussion, and recommendations in the study. The structured questions would give useful background information on the students such as ethnic origin, the number of months/years spent in the university, staying with family or single, accommodation, type of program etc. In the semi structured interview, students were asked follow-up questions, with responses to the original questions serving as prompts. Subsequent questions were built upon the students’ responses to

develop a richer understanding of the students' perception toward interethnic communication competence.

*Data analysis*

The research analyzed participants' responses to these questions:

- Q1. Based on your experience interacting with your ethnic other friends, how would you conceptualize interethnic communication competence?
- Q2. Can you identify some qualities or characteristics of competent interethnic communication?
- Q3. Why do you say such qualities or characteristics as competent interethnic communication?
- Q4. What are aspects of good communication in your ethnic group?
- Q5. What are aspects of bad communication in your ethnic group?

Question 1 was designed to identify the "essence" of participants' understanding of interethnic communication competence. The responses can be used to derive interethnic communication competence meaning from participants' lived experience. Question 2 was asked to identify specific qualities or characteristics that are perceived as competent interethnic communication. The question allowed participants to illustrate what are the qualities or characteristics that they perceive as competent when interacting with their ethnic other friends. Researcher then extracted behaviors associated with competence from their responses. Question 3 allowed participants to elaborate further on question 2 by describing as to why they perceive certain characteristics as competent and provide their stories to draw their insights upon. Question 2 and 3 help to elucidate characteristics or qualities of competent interethnic communication as well as an opportunity to understand as to why they perceive such qualities indicate interethnic competence. Question 4 and 5 were devised to elucidate good and bad communication in participants' own ethnic group. The questions provided insights on intra ethnic perspective about communication competence in which allowed researchers to compare similarities and differences on what is considered as competent communication among and between ethnic groups.

The unit analysis was themes that respondents uttered to express their perceptions about intercultural communication competence. In this regard, the researcher analyzed the recurrent and emergent themes that occur throughout participants' responses.

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