


# Building an Inclusive Climate for Intercultural Dialogue: A Participant-Generated Framework

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## Keywords

dialogue, empathy, inclusion, reflexivity, intercultural communication, intercultural competence.

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doi: 10.1111/ncmr.12158

## Abstract

This study investigates the question of how to build an inclusive environment for intercultural dialogue. Using the university campus as a context for our research, we conducted a facilitated idea generation workshop in which participants identified a set of dialogic competencies, followed by individual interviews in which we explored participants' perceptions of the relationships among these competencies. Interviews were conducted utilizing a software-assisted, idea-structuring methodology referred to as Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM). Based on our results, we constructed a framework that depicts the overall flow of influence among the set of dialogic competencies identified by the participants. While findings confirm the importance placed in current literature on factors such as listening and empathy, they provide a more sophisticated and nuanced perspective on how to accomplish one of the oft-stated goals of intercultural dialogue, which is to help participants examine their unconscious biases, prejudices, and privileges.

The study of intercultural dialogue is increasingly important as communities, organizations, and nations become more culturally diverse. A multiplicity of disciplines have given attention to dialogue, including anthropology, education, psychology and psychotherapy, sociology, management, political theory, philosophy, linguistics, and religion (see Cissna & Anderson, 1998). In conflict resolution, researchers have studied dialogue in negotiation and intergroup relations (Cheldelin, Druckman, & Fast, 2003; Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 1999; Deutsch & Coleman, 2000; Fisher, 2005; Kriesberg, 2001; Sandole & van der Merwe, 1993; Zartman & Rasmussen, 1997), peacebuilding, reconciliation processes, and coexistence programs (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Broome & Collier, 2012; Byrne, 2001; Fisher, 1993; Glenn & Kuttner, 2013; Hadjipavlou, 2007; Köse & Beriker, 2012; Kuttner, 2017; Richmond, 2010; Schirch, 2005), and inter-religious conflicts (Abu-Nimer, 2001; Coward & Smith, 2004; Gopin, 2005; Groff, 2002; Herzog, 2006; Lederach, 2015; Omer, Appleby, & Little, 2015).

Dialogue is a dynamic, transactional, and relational process in which participants create “third culture” knowledge and understandings which are unique to the relationships that develop between the participants (Broome, 2009; Casmir, 1999; Collier, 2006; Matoba, 2011). Dialogue allows

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We would like to express our appreciation to the anonymous reviewers and especially the editor, Dr. Wendi Adair, for their thoughtful and thorough review of the initial submission and subsequent revisions. Their comments significantly clarified and strengthened the paper. We would also like to recognize the contribution of Dr. Judith Martin, Professor Emerita at Arizona State University, who read an earlier version of our manuscript and helped us better articulate our theoretical framework.

communicators to explore the different ways that they and others interpret and give meaning to experiences and events. From a communication perspective, dialogue represents a form of discourse that emphasizes listening and inquiry, with the aims of fostering mutual respect and understanding. In dialogue, there is a focus on the quality of the relationship between participants, making possible learning and change in both self and others. Through dialogue, participants can explore complexities of their own and others' perspectives, navigating their differences in interpersonal, organizational, community, and public realms.

In spite of its potential benefits, attempts to promote dialogue face formidable obstacles, including what Makau (2018) calls individual adversarialism, in which people tend to place their own interests above those of the other. Particularly in Western societies, protecting one's own point of view and winning the argument often become paramount and is viewed as rational, instrumental, and morally justified. When taking such an approach, communicators sacrifice understanding, creativity, and possibilities for collaboration. Indeed, a challenge that confronts all types of dialogue is how participants can productively engage with diverse opinions, experiences, and arguments without becoming overly defensive (Guttman, 2007). This is particularly the case in a contentious political climate that is highly charged, divisive, and uncompromising.

In recent years, more attention has been given to cultural considerations in dialogue and to the dynamics of intercultural dialogue, in which issues of culture, ethnicity, race, and other differences tend to create divisions between people (see Adair, 2008; Adair, Taylor, & Tinsley, 2009; Adler & Aycan, 2018; Broome, 2013; Dasli & Diaz, 2017; DeTurk, 2010; Ganesh & Holmes, 2011; Groff, 2002; Holmes, 2014; Jackson, 2012; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2015; Ramasubramanian, Sousa, & Gonlin, 2017). Although there are challenges inherent in any dialogic setting, intercultural dialogue is often characterized by tension, anxiety, defensiveness, and misunderstanding. Participants can feel awkward, unsure of what to say, and fearful of being attacked. As Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, and Lin (2009) notes, difficulties such as these arise because dialogue can bring awareness to conflicting worldviews, evoke emotional responses, expose biases, and present the threat of being challenged during the exchange. Several scholars have described the complexity of intercultural dialogue and the difficulty in managing the tension that invariably arises when differences are confronted (Black & Wiederhold, 2014; Gayles, Kelly, Grays, Zhang, & Porter, 2015; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Sue et al., 2011; Tully, 2014).

The tension associated with intercultural dialogue may also be related to the limited experience and interaction that many people have with diverse populations (Gayles et al., 2015), and with the lack of awareness, knowledge, and abilities in dealing with racial, ethnic, and cultural differences (Kelly & Gayles, 2010; King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Issues such as these have been a focus of research in intercultural communication generally (Croucher, Sommier, & Rahmani, 2015), and they have received particular attention in the study of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2011, 2015), intercultural sensitivity (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Chen, 1997; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), and cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003; Thomas et al., 2008). While all of these lines of research can inform the study of intercultural dialogue, the research on intercultural competence is particularly relevant.

Intercultural competence scholars have focused on identifying individual characteristics that are important in intercultural interactions—including empathy, interaction involvement, respect, motivation, global attitude—and mapping these along cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (see Arasaratnam, 2016; Bennett, 2015; Deardorff, 2009). For example, a study by Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) identified 5 dominant themes—positive attitudes toward people from other cultures, experience in and motivation to interact with people from other cultures, empathy, and ability to listen—which they later confirmed in a follow-up study (Arasaratnam, Banerjee, & Dembek, 2010). In a similar study, Deardorff (2006) identified 25 specific components of intercultural competence, including understanding others' world views, cultural self-knowledge, adaptability to new cultural environments, skills to listen and observe, general openness toward intercultural learning and to people from other cultures flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and deep knowledge of culture.

Although it is essential to understand individual attitudes, behaviors, and actions, we need to give greater attention to the *process* of intercultural dialogue. This is particularly important in order to build an inclusive climate for intercultural dialogue. In this study, we use a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to construct a *participant-generated framework* that depicts the *flow of influence* among the individual characteristics/competencies of dialogic communication. Employing a systems methodology, we explore the mental models of dialogue held by individuals, in particular how they view the ways in which various dialogic competences are related to one another.

Rather than start with an established list of competencies, we used a *dialogic approach* to ask participants what *they* see to be key factors in building an inclusive climate for dialogue, and we explored with participants their perceptions of the interrelationships among these factors. We employed a unique approach to data collection by adopting a methodology from group problem solving and system design. Using results from this methodology, we developed a meta-structure to depict the flow of influence across ideas identified by the participants, resulting in a framework for intercultural dialogue that represents participants' overall view of the system of dialogic competencies for fostering an inclusive environment for dialogue in intercultural settings.

Our findings have practical implications for teachers, researchers, and practitioners, particularly for those who work with peacebuilding programs in conflict zones. Although special care must be taken when applying results from studies conducted in a particular cultural context, the influence of various dialogue competencies can inform and help guide facilitators of dialogue groups that are seeking to build understanding and trust in conflict situations. In addition, the methodology utilized in this study could be useful to those studying inclusion and dialogue in conflict situations that occur in a multitude of contexts. As a compliment to or in place of traditional surveys, standardized interviews, and focus groups, the methodology employed in this research can help researchers uncover the complexity of participants' perceptions about connections among underlying variables.

In the following sections, we will describe our overall research design, including our primary methodology, present the results of our data collection and analysis, and discuss the significance and implications of our results.

## Research Design

### Context of Study

The context for our study was a university setting, where intercultural dialogue can play an important role, particularly in the politically charged climate that exists in the United States (and elsewhere). Universities are some of the most culturally diverse organizations, often bringing together students and faculty from dozens of countries and across multiple ethnic groups. For many students, college is the first opportunity for significant intercultural contact, and large public universities provide many opportunities for interaction with those who hold attitudes, beliefs, and values different from their own. As higher education has experienced a continued shift in demographics, universities are actively seeking effective strategies to approach diversity and create more inclusive campuses.

Recent conflicts and incidents on U.S. college campuses readily point to the need for intercultural dialogue: fraternity parties where members are invited to dress up and “go back to da hood”; offensive statues (and building names) honoring 19th-century white supremacists and pro-slavery graduates/benefactors (Dickey, 2016, May 31; Spinella, 2015, November 19); bananas hung on rope fashioned into nooses—a symbol of racial terror and intimidation against black Americans—on the campus of American University in Washington, DC, along with confederate-flag posters with cotton stalks pinned to bulletin boards. All these coincide with a recent and unprecedented increase in white supremacist activity. In addition to racially based tensions and conflicts, there have been open confrontations over free speech

issues on campuses. That is, those who want to restrict hate speech and provide “trigger warnings” for controversial course content in order to ensure a safer environment for marginalized minority groups, have been in open conflict with those who view such restrictions as encroaching on academic freedom and denying students the opportunity to face uncomfortable ideas and grow from pondering them (Howard, 2017). The increase in these recent tensions and conflicts, and the growing cultural diversity on college campuses, points to the need for effective intercultural dialogue and sets the stage for this investigation.

## Participants

Our study was conducted in two parts, both at a large university in the southwest of the United States. We used purposeful sampling (Tracy, 2013) to recruit participants from undergraduate and graduate communication classes, as well as from personal networks of members of the research team. In part 1, we brought together a group of students for a half-day idea generation workshop focused on intercultural dialogue. In part 2, we interviewed students with an expressed interest in intercultural dialogue, some of whom had participated in the part 1 workshop. The students’ interest in the topic of intercultural dialogue came from personal experiences and/or because they were taking a class in communication and were sensitized to the difficulties of intercultural dialogue. We did not ask participants to provide written demographic information, but we are able to report basic characteristics of the participants based on self-introductions during the workshop, as well as visible cues such as photographs taken (with permission) during the workshop. Participants in both parts of our study varied in race, gender, and national origin, with approximately half of the participants of European Caucasian ancestry and approximately half of the participants students of color.

In part 1 of our study, a total of 23 participants attended the idea generation workshop (16 female and 7 male). Using visual cues and photographs taken of group activities during the workshop, we estimate the average age of participants to be in the low to mid-20s. This age range is in line with aggregate demographic statistics for the typical university communication class. In part 2 of our study, we recruited participants from two sources. First, we sent a follow-up email to those who participated in part 1 of our study, offering them an opportunity to be part of a follow-up interview. Six of these individuals agreed to participate in the interviews, and we recruited additional participants from classes taught by the research team. A total of 29 participants (18 female and 11 male) took part in either an individual or group interview. For their participation in the interview, they received a \$10 Amazon gift certificate.

## Research Methodology

To achieve the primary goal of our research, which was to construct a participant-generated framework of dialogic competencies, we sought a collaborative and interpretive approach to data gathering. The methodology we adopted, Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM), was developed by Warfield (1976, 1994) for application in group design and problem solving. The roots of this process lie in systems thinking, and it was originally developed to help groups resolve complex issues. ISM has been applied in a variety of situations over the past 40 years, including developing instructional units (Sato, 1979), designing a national agenda for pediatric nursing (Feeg, 1988), developing computer-based information systems for organizations (Keever, 1989), improving the U.S. Department of Defense acquisition process (Alberts, 1992), understanding large-scale system issues (Christakis, 1987; Christakis & Brahms, 2003), designing well-being measures (Hogan et al., 2015), and understanding the role of the marine ecosystem in society (Domegan et al., 2016). ISM was a key methodology in Broome’s (1995) work with Native American Tribes, which investigated ways to promote greater community involvement in tribal governance, and in his conflict management work with Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot peacebuilding groups in Cyprus (Broome, 2004).

For this study, we adapted the ISM methodology for use in an individual interview format, using it to guide a set of structured interviews in which participants constructed their individual “mental models” representing their perceptions of relationships among the factors that had been identified by the initial workshop participants. ISM is a qualitative and interpretive approach that is particularly valuable in helping researchers understand how participants view the influence among a set of variables/factors/ideas. As a software-assisted methodology, ISM guides participants in identifying relationships among ideas, based on their perceptions and experiences. The software supports the structuring process and displaying the graphical output of participants’ work.

The ISM methodology asks participants to make judgments about the relationship between paired items. The ISM software uses mathematical algorithms developed by Warfield (1976) that minimize the number of queries necessary for exploring relationships among a set of ideas. These algorithms are based on matrix algebra and transitive logic (e.g., if A influences B and B influences C, then it can be inferred that A likely influences C). The length of time and number of necessary queries required to finish discussion of all necessary pairs of ideas depends on the total number of ideas in the set, but generally, with sets of 10 or more items, the ISM software infers between 60 and 80 percent of the judgments involved in relating the complete set of ideas. This reduction in the number of queries saves considerable time in the interview process, making it unnecessary to pair all ideas with one another. This significantly reduces the fatigue that would otherwise be unavoidable in exploring the relations among a large set of elements, making ISM an invaluable asset in the process of exploring the interrelationships among a set of ideas.

The ISM process typically entails four steps: (1) identifying and clarifying a set of ideas to use in the structuring session; (2) identifying a relational question that will be used for exploring relationships among the set of identified ideas (i.e., “Does idea A relate in X manner to idea B?”); (3) engaging participants in exploring connections/relationships between pairs of ideas, using the relational question; and (4) displaying and reviewing the resulting graphical/visual structure, providing participants with the opportunity to amend the structure, if desired.

Step 1 of the ISM process, to identify a set of ideas, was accomplished through the half-day workshop described earlier, in which participants were asked to propose keys to building an inclusive and supportive climate (for dialogue) on a university campus. Five groups of 4–5 participants in each group worked independently, guided by one or two facilitators per group. Following a welcome and overview of agenda presented to the full group, participants provided self-introductions in their small groups. The facilitators in each group posed the following guiding question: “What are keys to building an inclusive and supportive climate (for dialogue) on a university campus?” Individuals worked silently and independently to write their ideas in response to the guiding question on four-inch by five-inch post-it notes. Facilitators asked each person to select one of the ideas in their set of responses to post on the marker board or wall next to the group, and each person was given a chance to explain the statement they wrote on the post-it note. Other group members were able to ask questions for clarification, but they were asked to withhold judgment and evaluation of a person’s statement. The second and third rounds were conducted in similar fashion, and then, participants were given the opportunity to post any additional ideas in their set that had not already been covered. This process resulted in 15–20 ideas per group (varying by the size of the group and how many additional ideas were proposed after the third round of clarifications).

Across the five groups, participants generated 106 total ideas, 89 of which were unique or nonduplicative ideas. Each group presented their ideas in plenary to the other groups. Following the plenary presentations, each person was provided a set of five sticky notes to place on their individual top five ideas from across all the groups. Twenty-two ideas emerged from this multi-voting process as the set of top ideas. Following the workshop, our research team consolidated ideas that were close in wording and/or meaning, resulting in a set of 15 factors that can be considered enablers of intercultural dialogue. These 15 factors were further tested by discussing these ideas with a group of students enrolled in an intercultural communication class. Students were asked to review each of the ideas and indicate the extent to

Table 1  
*Factors that Enable Intercultural Dialogue*

Item	Factor	Description
1	Taking time to listen	Ensuring there is enough time in dialogue for hearing the person and understanding what they are saying. Dialogue should not feel rushed or hurried
2	Bringing into the dialogue all the voices that represent the campus environment	It is easier to leave voices out by accident than to include them. We must include a diverse collection of voices that represent the campus environment who can speak to a variety of experiences
3	Emotional awareness	Your capacity to identify and to be attentive to not only your own emotional states (and feelings therein), but the emotional states of others. Your ability to be mindfully perceptive
4	Willingness to engage perspectives different from your own	Rather than living in a comfortable bubble of likeminded individuals, we have to be motivated to interact with those who hold different beliefs from ourselves
5	Becoming aware of ways I exclude	Awareness of how I construct the social groups that I am a part of, and how easy it is to maintain distance from others because they are not part of my group
6	Open conversation	Create an environment where people of divergent views can discuss differences in a productive manner
7	Being patient	Recognize that dialogue takes time to develop and can be messy; be persistent, allow mistakes to happen, and do not give up easily
8	Recognizing that others may not share my assumptions	The understanding that we all have our own values, beliefs, and worldview and how they shape our worldview
9	Offering emotional and psychological support to others when needed	Recognize when someone needs to feel validated and comforted by listening to their feelings, concerns, frustrations, etc.; demonstrate that you care for them and their well-being
10	Acknowledging the experience of others	Being aware others have experiences that cannot be denied
11	Recognizing the other as a person, not an object	Being vulnerable to the humanity of others
12	Avoid trying to change people to be or think more like you	Understand that others will not hold the same values or worldview as you, and that you cannot force them to adopt your values or worldview
13	Embracing your uniqueness and the uniqueness of others	Know who you are and what makes you unique, such as your experiences and beliefs, and recognize that others have unique experiences and beliefs as well
14	Encouraging others to share their story	Rather than make assumptions about who a person is, ask questions to learn their background, worldview, and motivations. Only by asking questions can you have an opportunity to learn about who a person really is and understanding them
15	Recognizing your own privilege	Your capacity to identify and be watchful of your unearned opportunities

which it could help them engage in more productive dialogue about campus issues. Students confirmed that all 15 ideas would be useful in helping them discuss differences in an intercultural setting. This process resulted in some small wording changes suggested by the students. These 15 factors became the set of ideas used in our ISM-guided interviews. The list of factors and their descriptions are shown in Table 1.

In step 2 of the ISM process, we used the following relational question to guide the structuring process: “In the context of building an inclusive climate for intercultural dialogue, does Factor X (one of the 15 ideas) *significantly support* Factor Y (another of the 15 ideas)?” Factor X and Y were ideas from Table 1. We defined *support* as enhance, promote, enable, or make it easier/more likely.

In step 3 of ISM, we conducted structured interviews with our participants (see earlier description of our sample). We followed the usual protocol of interviewing, in which we continued interviewing students until we found that more interviews did not add additional information or change the results significantly (Tracy, 2013). Seventeen of the interviews were conducted with individuals, while three of the structuring sessions were with small groups (3–4 per group) from the intercultural dialogue class described earlier. For all of the interviewees, we first introduced them to the set of 15 factors by carefully reviewing each factor and allowing the opportunity for them to ask clarification questions. In the interview, we stepped participants through the set of paired comparisons. Participants sat side by side with the interviewer/researcher and viewed the screen of a laptop or PC monitor on which the pairs of ideas were presented with the relational question (see step 2 above). For each question, participants were asked to consider the pairs of ideas shown on the screen and make a judgment about the strength of the support relationship between the two factors. They were instructed to indicate Yes if they believed the relationship was significantly strong in the positive direction, that is, Factor X significantly supports Factor Y. Each time they indicated Yes, they were asked to provide a rationale for their answer, providing a personal story or other evidence of their thinking about the relationship. This helped ensure that participants were providing a thoughtful response whenever they made a connection between pairs of ideas.

Using the ISM software, the interviewer led the participants through the paired comparison process (see earlier description of this process) of structuring all 15 of the factors, moving sequentially from items 1 to 15. To help ensure consistency of understanding across participants, a description of each factor was provided and brought to the attention of participants each time a new item was introduced into the structuring process. Although each interview used the same sequence of ideas (factors 1–15), the specific number of pairs of ideas presented by the ISM software is governed by the algorithms described earlier. This means that over the course of each interview, the number of questions answered could vary based on participants' previous responses. There are 210 cells in a  $15 \times 15$  matrix ( $n \times n - 1$ ), but with the software able to fill in 60–80% of cells through the embedded algorithms, between 40 and 60 questions were posed in each interview. The interviews ranged from 60 to 150 minutes. They were audio-recorded for backup purposes (a often-used safety measure implemented in case of software malfunction or hardware problems).

In step 4 of the ISM interview process, we displayed for the participant the visual graphic that represented the result of their structuring session. The visual structures provide both qualitative and quantitative data of how participants make sense of a complex issue or experience. They can be considered “mental maps” of participants' views. The resulting flowchart was explained to each participant, and they were given a chance to suggest revisions. In addition to serving as a method for structuring a set of ideas, ISM is a learning tool, giving participants a chance to consider the relational meaning of individual ideas. This means that in the process of structuring 15 elements, their understanding of a particular factor may have changed over the course of the interview, and they might view it differently once they see it in the context of the whole. In our study, participants not only generated data that could be used in our research, but they also came away with a greater understanding of intercultural dialogue and their own communication processes. Thus, ISM served as both a research tool and a discovery process.

An example structure is provided in Figure 1. This structure resulted from one of the interviews with participants in our study.

An ISM structure portrays the relative influence of each factor, as judged by the participant(s) in the interview session. Various *paths* in the structure can be followed by starting on the left side of the structure and following the arrows that represent the line of influence. The factors that participants perceived as having the most influence appear on the left side of the structure. Moving toward the right of the structure, factors that appear here are supported by the preceding factors. Factors that have equal or reciprocal influence were displayed together as part of a *cycle* in the structure (appearing as a bulleted list in the same box). By starting with a factor that appears on the left side of the structure and then following its *path of influence*, one can understand the relative potential of that factor, as perceived by the

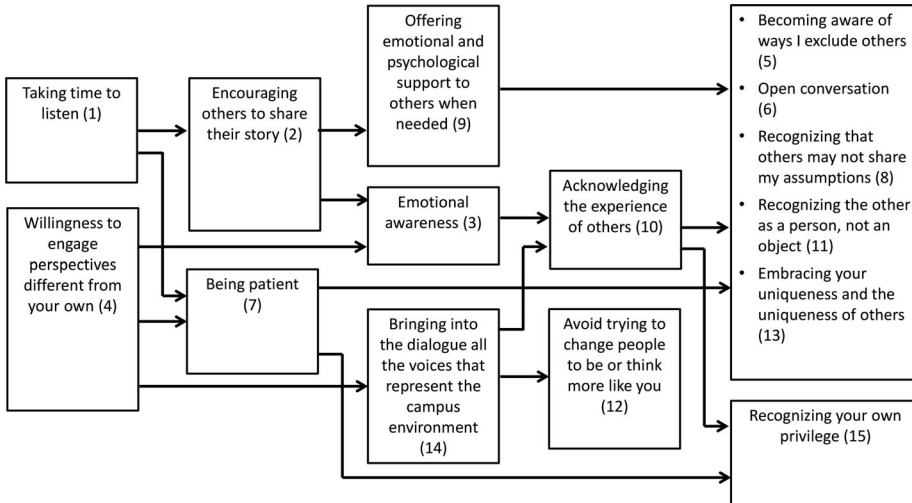


Figure 1. Example ISM structure using the 15 factors in Table 1.

participants, to positively influence the factors along the path. If one started with a factor that appears on the right side of the structure and walked back to the left, one could understand, from the participants’ perspective, which supporting factors need to be in place in order to make it possible for this particular factor to be realized.

In the example shown in Figure 1, the factors that have the most influence on the system (according to this participant) are “Taking time to listen” (1) and “Willingness to engage perspectives different from your own” (4). Each of these factors influences most of the other items in the structure. A large cycle (5, 6, 8, 11, 13) appears on the far right, along with the individual factor “Recognizing your own privilege” (15). These factors are perceived as needing a lot of support from those factors to their left; on their own, they might be difficult to realize, or at least they are made easier by the positive influence of those factors to their left. The two items in the middle of the structure, “Emotional Awareness” (3), and “Bringing into the dialogue all the voices that represent the campus environment” (14), serve as conduits through which influence flows from the right and then out to the left.

Each individual structure can be analyzed by assigning scores to each factor in the structure. The scores represent various aspects of the potential influence of each item/category. We calculated six influence scores for each factor in each of the structures: position score, succedent score, antecedent score, activity score, net score, and overall influence score.

First, each factor was assigned a *position score* (POS). Factors in the leftmost stage (i.e., furthest to the left on the visual structure) were assigned the highest score, and those in the rightmost stage were assigned the lowest score, which is a score of one. The position score of factors on the left varied depending on how many stages there were in each participant’s structure.

For each factor, the *antecedent score* (ANT) is the number of factors lying to the left of that factor in the visual structure that, according to the structure, support or contribute to the realization of that factor. Likewise, the *succedent score* (SUC) is the number of the factors lying to the right of a given factor that it supports, or to which it contributes.

The *activity score* (ACT) for a factor or category is the sum of the antecedent score and the succeeding score. It is usually the case that items with the highest activity score are located in the middle of the structure. Such items can be viewed as the conduit through which influence passes.

The *net succedent/antecedent/(NET S/A) score* is found by subtracting the antecedent score (ANT) from the succedent score (SUC) for a given factor. If the *Net S/A* score is positive, it means that the factor



provides more support (positive influence) from other factors than it receives from them. If the net score is negative, it means that the factor receives more support (positive influence) from other factors than it provides for them. This score is a rough measure of the amount of actual influence adjusted for difference in the total number of items included in the structures.

Finally, the overall *influence score* (INF) for each factor in each visual structure is found by adding the *position score* (POS) to the NET S/A score. This influence score reflects both actual (NET S/A) and potential (POS) influence. The potential influence is informative, because other items could be added to the structure at a later time without changing significantly the position score of a particular item relative to the other items on the structure. An item with a high position score tells us that the factor is in a strong position of influence within the system, even as the system changes in small ways over time.

Interpreting scores can serve different purposes of the analysis. *Position score* is an important indicator if one is looking for potential support, but *succedent score* is more important if one is interested in actual support, and *influence scores* provide an overall picture. Generally, interpretation of an influence structure is informed by the analysis of multiple scores. A low influence score can mean that an item needs more support than it provides, whereas a high activity score can mean that the factor is quite active in receiving and dispensing support. In general, the most important score is the overall influence score (INF), since it takes into account all the other scores and gives an indication of the strength of an individual factor on the overall system of factors. It is important to note that influence scores have meaning primarily in relation to one another. Taken alone, no single influence can be judged as high or low, except in relation to scores from other items in the structure or meta-structure (see below).

## Results

As a first step in our analysis, we grouped the 15 individual factors into five themes that seek to capture the essence of the individual items. By organizing the individual factors into themes, we created a more manageable set of concepts that would lend themselves to focused analysis and allow us to tie our results to the literature on these topics. The themes reflect a robust relationship with the intercultural communication competence literature, although they also differ in some ways, as discussed below.

In Theme 1, *Listening*, we grouped four factors related to taking time to focus and engage with others in a way that acknowledges their experience and perspectives. This theme includes factors 1 (“Taking time to listen”), 4 (“Willingness to engage perspectives different from your own”), and 7 (“Being patient”). Listening has been identified as one of the most important behavioral elements of effective intercultural communication and is generally conceptualized in ways similar to the factors that are included in this first theme. For example, “skills to listen and observe” was identified in Deardorff’s (2006, p. 249) study of intercultural competence and in Wang and Kulich’s (2015) qualitative study of intercultural competence among Chinese students. In Arasaratnam et al. (2010), Integrated Model of Intercultural Competence, interaction involvement, a central component, is partly defined as “engaging in active listening by paying close attention to the other person’s communication” (p. 109). As these examples illustrate, listening is a theme that is viewed widely by scholars and everyday communicators as a key component of intercultural communication and dialogue.

In Theme 2, *Openness*, we grouped three factors related to creating an open and encouraging space where people could come together for dialogue. This theme includes factors 14 (“Bringing into dialogue all the voices”), 2 (“Encouraging others to share their story”), and 6 (“Open conversation”). These factors are reflected in intercultural competence research that emphasizes the importance of conceptualizing competence as a process of negotiation in an ongoing relationship (Bryam, 2003; Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989). In the Triangular Model of Intercultural Competence, Chen (2014) notes that intercultural sensitivity, representing the affective component of competence, includes open-mindedness and nonjudgmental attitudes, both closely related to “open conversation.” Deardorff’s

(2006) investigation also identified “general openness to people from other cultures” and “understanding others’ worldview” (p. 249).

In Theme 3, *Validation*, we grouped three factors related to recognizing and accepting others as individuals. This theme includes factors 12 (“Avoid trying to change people to be more like you”), 11 (“Recognizing the other as a person, not an object”), and 13 (“Embracing your uniqueness and the uniqueness of others”). This theme appears predominately in identity-based competence models that emphasize the importance of affirming the other interactant’s cultural identity (Croucher et al., 2015). For example, in Collier’s (1996) study of intercultural competence in friendships, an important component is affirming the other’s cultural identity and understanding one’s own cultural place in the world. Kim (2015) in discussing the theoretical relationship between identity and intercultural communication competence maintains that identity inclusivity—rejecting a rigid in-group–out-group differentiation of others based group membership (e.g., nationality, ethnicity)—is one of the dimensions of synchrony—a foundational aspect of intercultural communication competence. In other words, seeing the other as a unique person, not simply a member of another group, and more likely to accommodate culturally dissimilar interactants.

In Theme 4, *Empathy*, we grouped factors related to emotional awareness of others and psychological and emotional support of others. This theme includes factors 3 (“Emotional awareness”) and 11 (“Offering emotional and psychological support to others when needed”). Empathy is identified as an important affective dimension in every model of intercultural communication competence we reviewed (Deardorff, 2006; Wang & Kulich, 2015) and is central component in Arasaratnam et al.’s (2010; 2005) Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence. Euwema and Van Emmerik (2007) investigated interpersonal conflicts in intercultural contexts and found a significant positive relation between cultural empathy and the cooperative conflict resolution style. The relation between cultural empathy and a more cooperative CCB (conglomerated conflict behaviors) style underscores that concern for others is an important characteristic and motivator for cooperative behaviors. Additionally, empathy is a central concept in effective intercultural communication and intercultural dialogue (Broome, 2009, 2015).

In Theme 5, *Reflexivity*, we grouped three factors related to self-awareness. This theme includes factors 15 (“Awareness of ways I exclude”), 5 (“Recognizing my own privilege”), and 8 (“Recognizing that others may not share my assumptions”). This theme acknowledges the importance of power relations and individual positionality in intercultural interaction, concepts that have been given greater emphasis in recent intercultural competence research (Collier, 2015; Martin, 2015; Yep, 2000). That is, history, politics, economic systems, and ideologies “all affect how cultural group members are positioned and the extent to which individuals will be viewed as competent” (Collier, 2015, p. 10). Wang and Kulich (2015) address the notion of power in their empirical study and identify cultural humility as an important dimension of intercultural communication competence, helping us overcoming cultural superiority, power, privilege, and pride.

In order to assess the relationships *among* these themes, we analyzed the structures by first computing influence scores for each of the 15 factors in all structures. We then averaged the influence scores for each factor across all of the 20 structures. Table 2 shows the average influence scores for each factor.

As a final step in our data analysis, we averaged the scores for the factors in each theme, resulting in 5 theme scores. Using these theme scores, we constructed a meta-structure depicting the overall flow of influence from one theme to another. The resulting meta-structure is shown in Figure 2.

In this meta-structure, the theme of Listening is positioned to provide the strongest overall influence on intercultural dialogue. With an average influence score of 8.40, the factors associated with listening serve as a positive force in making dialogue possible, setting the stage for meaningful and successful interaction. The realization of factors in Theme 1 will make it significantly easier to realize the factors to their right, further along the meta-structure. Themes 2, 3, and 4, Openness, Validation, and Empathy, provide moderate to low degrees of influence, made easier/more likely by the presence of those factors

Table 2  
Average Influence Scores for Individual Factors Across All Structures

Factor	Position	Antecedent	Succedent	Activity	Net	Influence
1	4.60	3.75	9.70	13.45	5.95	10.55
2	3.10	7.80	6.70	14.50	-1.10	2.00
3	2.90	8.05	5.15	13.20	-2.90	0.00
4	4.10	4.85	9.15	14.00	4.30	8.40
5	3.05	7.70	4.70	12.40	-3.00	0.05
6	2.95	8.00	6.00	14.00	-2.00	0.95
7	4.15	3.30	7.70	11.00	4.40	8.55
8	2.75	9.30	4.74	13.80	-4.80	-2.05
9	3.05	5.85	4.20	10.05	-1.65	1.40
10	3.80	5.40	7.70	13.10	2.30	6.10
11	3.05	7.65	6.55	14.20	-1.10	1.95
12	3.00	5.20	4.65	9.85	-0.55	2.45
13	3.15	7.50	5.95	13.45	-1.55	1.60
14	3.40	5.25	6.90	12.15	1.65	5.05
15	3.25	6.45	3.65	10.10	-2.80	0.45

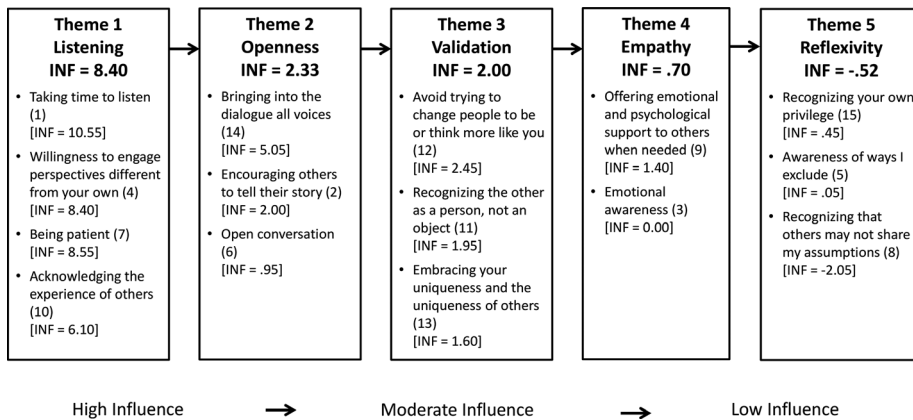


Figure 2. Theme-based meta-structure of factors that enhance intercultural dialogue.

associated with the theme of Listening. Theme 5, Reflexivity, has an overall negative influence score, indicating that it receives more influence than it provides. This negative influence in Theme 5 suggests that the realization of factors in this theme may be dependent on the presence of factors associated with themes 1–4. In other words, it is less likely that they can be accomplished without help from the factors that lie to their left. For example, attempts to help individuals become aware of ways they exclude others may be very difficult unless they feel listened to, encouraged to share their views, recognized as a unique person, and offered psychological/emotional support, with no attempt made to change their views. The following section will discuss these results in more detail.

### Discussion of Results

Our study focused on the *components and process* of intercultural dialogue. Emerging from our results is a participant-generated structure that portrays the flow of influence across a set of thematic groupings of

dialogic competencies that support intercultural dialogue. These results build on and extend the existing literature of both intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence.

First, our findings suggest, not surprisingly, that building an inclusive climate for intercultural dialogue requires many of the elements—listening, openness, validation, empathy—that have been identified by research on intercultural competence. At the same time, our results point to an important difference between general intercultural competence and intercultural dialogue. For example, participants in this study placed little emphasis on the cognitive elements of intercultural competence, which is consistently emphasized in competence models. These models stress the importance of factors such as knowledge of basic factual cultural information, acquisition of cultural values, and sociolinguistic awareness (Chen, 2014; Deardorff, 2009). In our study, the strongest influencer of intercultural dialogue involves listening *behaviors*—taking time to listen, bringing all voices into the dialogue, encouraging others. This emphasis on behaviors indicates that strengthening human relationships may be a more important component of intercultural dialogue than is the case in general intercultural encounters. Intuitively, it makes sense that cultural knowledge and factual information are helpful when conversing and working with culturally different others or adapting to a culturally different environment. But intercultural dialogue is more intense than typical intercultural encounters, and it usually extends over time. Dialogue provides a setting where knowledge about the other can be gained during the exchange, rather than brought to it by the parties. As a relational process (Broome, 2009), dialogue requires listening behaviors that allow the co-construction of knowledge and understanding, rather than relying on pre-existing information about the other.

Second, our research goes beyond existing intercultural competence research, which tends to focus on individual characteristics or specific knowledge, skills, or attitudes that lead to more successful interactions. While such individual characteristics provide useful insights that inform intercultural dialogue, a number of scholars (Arasaratnam, 2016; Holmes & O’Neill, 2012; Kim, 2015; Liu, 2012; Martin, 2015; Ting-Toomey, 2012; Wang & Kulich, 2015; Yep, 2014) have identified limitations to a focus on individual competence and have called for moving beyond the list approach to intercultural competency. Chen and Starosta (1996), in describing the future challenges for intercultural communication competence research, suggested that we need to develop alternative approaches that focus less on individual competences and that rather highlight the “we” of intercultural competence and relational harmony. More recently, Chen (2014) challenges scholars to “go one step further to examine the *relationships* between or among dimensions or components in the compositional model that the hierarchical or determinative order of the dimensions or components toward ICC competence can be specified” (p. 24). Others, like Collier (2015), note the lack of attention to the *process* through which intercultural competence is constructed; and also relationships among individual and group members “as they occur in spaces of institutional influences such as . . . .universities” (p. 10). Our study responds to this call for bringing a process and contextualized focus to intercultural competence by investigating the relative *influence* of a specific set of competencies, focusing on the interrelationships among these competencies, and examining the *flow* of the dialogue process. In this way, it extends the intercultural competence literature and takes it beyond general intercultural *interaction*, giving it more relevance to intercultural *dialogue*.

Third, our study provides a more nuanced and sophisticated view of one of the primary goals of intercultural dialogue, *reflexivity*. Although intercultural dialogue can serve many purposes and take many forms, one of the goals that underlies most approaches and settings is to help participants recognize the position they occupy vis-à-vis the other. Through dialogue, individuals can become cognizant of ways they treat others, and engaging in dialogue is one of the best ways to become aware of one’s own assumptions and the fact that others may not share them. Unfortunately, few people welcome challenges to their long-held assumptions about how the world works and their place in it. In spite of its potential, dialogue can exacerbate the emotions that thwart understanding and negatively affect relationships. Rather than fostering engagement and learning, dialogue can lead to anger and withdrawal. Instead of promoting

mutual exploration and appreciation of diverse perspectives (Black & Wiederhold, 2014), dialogue can serve to create tension, anxiety, and awkwardness (Gayles et al., 2015).

Reflexivity does not happen automatically or easily, particularly for members of the dominant group, who are often fearful and defensive discussing any privileged identity, from sexual orientation to religion (Henry et al., 2007). Silence and inaction frequently result when difficult topics are brought up in conversations and discussions (Sue, 2015). Defense mechanisms such as denial, deflection, and rationalization often occur when discussions focus on privilege, unearned advantages, and conferred power that occurs because of a dominant identity (Gayles et al., 2015). Discomfort, defensiveness, fear, and a feeling of being under attack are common reactions when identity is challenged (Reason, 2007).

Our study, while not definitive, helps shed light on how defensiveness and threat can be lessened. Participants in our study recognized that reflexivity does not occur as a stand-alone activity. It is not easy for any of us to examine our assumptions, unearned privilege, and ways we exclude others. Perhaps we are more receptive to information that challenges our identity if the realization of bias comes from within, rather than being pushed from outside. Of course, the process of self-realization rarely happens immediately, as the result of a one-time or forced confrontation. Although there is no guarantee it can happen even with persistent encouragement and support, it is important to recognize that self-awareness is the result of an *ongoing process*, rather than an outcome brought about by direct challenges to identity.

Fourth, our results suggest that *listening* is the starting point of this process that leads to reflexivity. Factors associated with listening (including patience and engagement) provide the strongest overall influence on the intercultural dialogue process. It is not surprising that listening emerged as the strongest influencer in the meta-structure, as it is regularly included as a critical component of intercultural dialogue methods. Makau (2018) believes that the search for mutual understanding through dialogue relies heavily on the will and ability of interactants to listen openly and attentively. He writes that participants in dialogue “make efforts to be fully present and to listen empathically, endeavoring to understand what the speaker is seeking to convey rather than listening for faults, errors, or other grounds for challenging what is being said” (Makau, 2018, Dialogic Communication section, para 2). Likewise, Nagda and Zuniga (2003) view listening as critical to the early stages of dialogue, helping participants become more comfortable in communicating across differences, as well as more motivated to bridge these differences. Listening sets up participants to learn from their fellow discussants, and it is necessary for sustained dialogue.

Fifth, our results suggest the facilitative effects of listening for those factors in the meta-structure that have moderate influence: openness, validation, and empathy. None of these factors happen easily, and they can be quickly derailed even with the best of intentions and with the best efforts of those attempting to engage in dialogue. But listening can have a powerful effect on the dialogue process, and it encourages others to tell their story, helps recognize the other as a person rather than an object, and can be an important way of providing emotional and psychological support to others. Gayles et al. (2015) believe that participants in intergroup dialogue may be more likely to think deeply about diversity issues as they gain greater exposure to stories of privilege and power. Once individuals become aware of the ways in which privilege and oppression work in individual lives and in society more generally, they may start to recognize their own privileged identity. In the logic of our participant-generated meta-structure, listening to others and being listened to by others significantly increase the likelihood that this awareness can develop. As Friedrichs (2016) notes, all people crave for recognition and self-worth, and when the other party listens carefully, it is a sign of respect, signaling to the speaker that they care about him or her. In this way, listening sets the stage for openness, validation, and empathy, and taken together, these factors can build an environment in which individuals are able to examine their own assumptions and prejudices without defensiveness, silence, or withdrawal.

Overall, the results of our study raise questions about the commonly held assumption that promoting self-awareness is always the best starting point for intercultural dialogue, while at the same time pointing to the powerful effects of listening and the behaviors it makes possible. Our analysis suggests that

reflecting meaningfully on one's own assumptions and ways of relating to culturally different others is best accomplished with support of variables related to listening, openness, validation, and empathy. Although self-reflection about one's position and identity can certainly enhance intercultural dialogue, our findings suggest that self-reflection needs to be supported by interaction that creates a challenging yet nonthreatening environment in which awareness results more naturally from the flow of communication.

These findings do not dismiss or invalidate the importance of understanding the self, nor do they challenge the value of positioning one's identity as part of intercultural dialogue. Rather, our findings suggest that self-awareness and self-understanding can be supported by a variety of practices that precede a push for reflection on one's own prejudice and bias. It is important to note that this sequence may not be the best in all settings or with all populations. For example, with some individuals or groups it may work better to start with a more direct and confrontational approach, in order to push them out of their comfort zone. Expectancy Violation Theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) provides theoretical support for this possibility, and recent empirical research (Goćłowska, Crisp, & Labuschagne, 2012; Prati, Crisp, & Rubini, 2015) suggests that confronting stereotypes can promote more flexible thinking and reduce intergroup bias. However, even in cases where expectancy violation could "shock" individuals into examining their assumptions, listening could help mitigate the tendency for immediate defensiveness or counterattack to having one's beliefs challenged. There may be other moderating variables that could also affect the sequence, but this study, conducted with participants with experience and interest in dialogue, suggests that listening is a strong starting point, and if it leads to openness, validation, and empathy, then a person is more likely to be willing to examine their own privilege and power and ways they exclude others.

## Practical Implications for Conflict Management

Dialogue plays a critical role in conflict management. It can serve as a forum for more productive discourse about differences (Agne & Tracy, 2009), reaching across religious divides (Abu-Nimer, Welty, & Khoury, 2007), transforming conflictual relationships (Saunders, 2008), promoting reconciliation in divided societies (Lederach, 1997), and building cultures of peace (Bar-Tal, 2009; Broome, 2013). Those who are involved with conflict management instruction and training often use dialogue to help participants become more aware of their assumptions, privilege, and effects of actions and behaviors on others. Indeed, many of our activities as conflict scholars are designed to promote reflexivity, helping participants think deeply about bias, power relations, and cultural diversity. But such reflection often results in either outright resistance or a polite reliance on intellectual argument, surface level admiration of differences, or simply silence. Results from our study suggest that listening and engaging in open, validating, and empathic dialogue might be the best starting point for reflection and self-awareness. However, this takes time, patience, and knowledgeable facilitation, all of which may be in short supply, especially immediately after a crisis.

Often the response to a conflict crisis is a call for dialogue. Although this can help reduce tension and can provide an opportunity for involvement, our findings suggest that dialogue needs to be set up as an ongoing process rather than as a crisis communication response. We believe that if people in a community or across an organization are accustomed to intercultural dialogue practices, there will be a more natural development of self-awareness. Building inclusive climates is not something that can happen quickly, nor is it something that can be dictated from above (Dobbin & Kaley, 2016). If enough people in a community or an organization are participating regularly in dialogue groups, they will be ready to help defuse crises when they happen, and they will also help educate the larger population of the organization about diversity and inclusion issues. As Ramasubramanian et al. (2017) points out, intercultural dialogues "provide multiple voices, at different levels, the opportunity to enter the conversation" (p. 540). She recommends that instead of a prescriptive response created by officials, dialogues should be a

collective process in which multiple parties are involved in addressing issues and finding ways to deal with them.

As both Lederach (1997) and Saunders (2011) point out, dialogue is an extended process and needs to be sustained over time in order to bring about transformation. Especially in conflict situations, it is important to create environments for dialogue before issues become toxic, widespread, or damaging. This is well illustrated by Broome, Anastasiou, Hadjipavlou, and Kanol's (2012) description of the way in which dialogue groups in Cyprus responded to a crisis situation that occurred along the United Nations-patrolled Green Line. Clashes had brought the island to the brink of a regional military confrontation, and the toxic atmosphere afterward was filled with nationalistic and uncompromising rhetoric. Years of peacebuilding work was in danger of quickly unraveling. But a group of individuals from both communities, who had been involved in several years of dialogue groups, took steps to promote reconciliation, leading to a calming of the tension and even an increase in interest among the general population in participating in cross-community dialogue. The actions taken by these individuals were made possible by their experience in dialogue groups, which allowed them to listen to the concerns of each community, demonstrate openness to new ways of seeing the situation, offer validation and empathy to one another, and engage in reflection about mistakes that were made by all sides. Without their work, it is likely that the two communities would have remained caught in a cycle of blame, recrimination, and hostile rhetoric.

For dialogue to be an ongoing process, we recommend that persons across communities and organizations are trained in intercultural dialogue practices to create a culture of dialogue. Although the current study was not designed to test any particular training methodology, it might be possible to use our results as framework for training. Thus, workshops on dialogue might include components built around listening, openness, inclusion, empathy, and reflection, perhaps incorporating the 15 factors that we used in this study. But regardless of the type of training utilized, it is important to provide the training at multiple levels within communities and organizations, including those in leadership positions (Reitz, 2015). Effective dialogue is more likely to occur when there are numerous potential sites of dialogue, and dialogic attitudes and practices are more likely to become part of the culture when dialogic encounters happen regularly, not just after a crisis.

In sum, dialogue is a critical component of conflict management across interpersonal, intergroup, organizational, community, and international contexts. Participants in our study indicated that dialogue sets the stage for people to sit with others, to practice patience, and it seems to put people in a position to listen and to be heard. Participants in dialogue are able to co-create knowledge, and when implemented appropriately, they gain a sense of ownership over the process, making them more invested in both the procedures and the outcomes. In this way, dialogue comes full circle back on itself, creating the conditions for further dialogue and increasing the possibility for building inclusive environments, in which conflicts can be managed and potentially resolved in a more effective manner.

## Limitations and Future Research

Our findings should be interpreted in light of the characteristics of the sample, the method employed, and the cultural context in which the study was conducted. First, our study was conducted using a grounded approach and through qualitative research methodologies, meaning the sample size was limited. Furthermore, our interviewees all brought with them an interest in intercultural dialogue, either because of personal experiences and/or because they were taking a class in communication and were sensitized to the difficulties of intercultural dialogue. Although we believe their interest in intercultural dialogue strengthened our study, allowing us to draw upon a population with experience in intercultural dialogue and likely to give careful thought to the research task, we also recognize that we might achieve different results with a population that has less interest or experience with, or less concern about, intercultural dialogue. It could be instructive to conduct a similar study with individuals without a recognized

interest in dialogue, although the implications that could be drawn from such a sample would probably be different.

Second, although the methodology we used in this study, Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM), has been used for over 30 years in a wide variety of contexts with problem-solving groups (see earlier description and references), it has only recently been used for individual interviews. We found that ISM functions well as an interview guide, and it results in a product that provides a structural representation of participants' views about a topic. In fact, it is one of the few methodologies available that is capable of guiding interviewees through a careful, systematic process of examining influence relationships among a set of variables. We believe it has significant potential as a qualitative research methodology. At the same time, it may not be familiar to researchers and may raise questions that are difficult to address within the limited space of a journal article. Hopefully, the uniqueness of the method will serve as a motivator for further exploration of its use as a research tool.

Third, it is important to keep in mind that our findings must be interpreted in light of cultural differences that exist in ways that our themes may be interpreted and implemented. The specific suggestions of the students about dialogue were made in the context of a university setting in the United States, and even though the participants represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds and included several international students, they were asked to consider dialogue in the university setting. And even though we did not specify they should focus on a U.S. American university setting, it is likely they were drawing from their experiences at the university where they were studying. Both the statements they generated in the initial workshop, as well as the supportive relationships they perceived among these statements, might be different in another cultural context. This is a question for future research, but in the meantime, it is advisable to interpret our results accordingly.

Finally, it is important to point out that this is a single study that raises questions rather than offering definitive answers. On the one hand, it confirms much of what we know about factors that enhance dialogue, while at the same time it raises questions about the starting point often used in intercultural dialogue. Importantly, this study is one of the few that examines the flow of influence among factors that make intercultural dialogue possible. We need to give greater attention generally to the influence among dialogic competencies, and we need more studies, conducted in a variety of contexts, that explore how participants connect competencies to one another. By shifting our focus from compiling lists of characteristics to exploring perceived relationships among competencies, we can develop a systems view of intercultural dialogue that is more attuned to the complexities of the process. In today's increasingly divided world, where behaviors such as listening, openness, validation, empathy, and reflexivity are critical, we need more than ever to approach the study and practice of dialogue from a holistic perspective.

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