

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Structural Composition of Ethnocultural Competence: A Conceptual Analysis Based on The Knowledge–Values–Behavior Model

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## Abstract

Ethnocultural competence has become a core educational outcome in multicultural societies because it links academic socialization with respectful communication, civic cohesion, and inclusive professional practice. Despite its frequent use in pedagogical discourse, the construct is often described as an unsystematic set of “knowledge, attitudes, and skills,” which complicates curriculum design and assessment. This article develops a conceptual model of ethnocultural competence based on the knowledge–values–behavior (KVB) triad and argues that competence emerges not from the additive presence of these components but from their functional alignment in real-life cultural situations. The resulting KVB model specifies the content and indicators of each component and describes how internal outcomes (cultural reflexivity, empathy, ethnorelativism) mediate observable behavior in communication and collaboration. The analysis highlights typical mismatches, such as declarative knowledge without value-based commitment or pro-social values without behavioral repertoires, and explains how educational interventions can reduce these gaps. The model supports transparent curriculum mapping, competency-based assessment, and the design of learning environments that foster culturally appropriate and ethically grounded action.

## KEYWORDS

Ethnocultural competence; intercultural competence; knowledge–values–behavior model; cultural reflexivity; ethnorelativism; higher education pedagogy.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education increasingly prepares students for professional and civic participation in culturally diverse environments. In this context, ethnocultural competence is frequently positioned as a priority outcome that helps learners interpret cultural meanings, respect diversity, and engage in communication that is both effective and ethically responsible. International conceptualizations of intercultural competences emphasize that competence is not limited to information about “other cultures” but includes dispositions, reflexive awareness,

and behavioral capacities for interaction in diverse contexts. UNESCO’s conceptual and operational discussion of intercultural competences stresses the interdependence of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and the need to translate them into education and policy.

Yet the conceptual status of “ethnocultural competence” remains uneven across pedagogical literature. In many curricula it is treated as a declarative “knowledge about traditions,” while in other contexts it is reduced to general

tolerance attitudes. A coherent structural model is required because competence-based education depends on transparent constructs that can guide instructional design and assessment. When the construct is vague, teachers struggle to select learning tasks that elicit valid evidence, and students receive fragmented messages: memorize cultural facts, “be tolerant,” and “behave well,” without understanding how these elements form a unified competency.

This article proposes a knowledge–values–behavior (KVB) model to conceptualize the structural composition of ethnocultural competence. The choice of the KVB triad reflects a practical need. In educational settings, competence must be described in ways that can be taught, observed, and improved. Knowledge refers to the learner’s culturally informed understanding and interpretive tools; values refer to internal commitments and evaluative orientations that shape motivation and moral judgment; behavior refers to communicative and collaborative actions demonstrated in real or simulated intercultural situations. The central thesis of this paper is that ethnocultural competence is not simply the sum of these components; it is the coordinated functioning of knowledge, values, and behavior under conditions of cultural difference.

The analysis draws on influential models of intercultural competence that treat attitudes/values, knowledge, and skills as core elements and connect them to internal and external outcomes. Deardorff’s process model, for example, describes intercultural competence as developing through attitudes and knowledge/skills toward internal outcomes (such as adaptability and empathy) and external outcomes manifested as effective and appropriate behavior and communication. Developmental approaches, such as Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, add a dynamic dimension by explaining how individuals’ experience of cultural difference shifts toward more complex, ethnorelative perspectives, enabling more competent interaction.

At the same time, ethnocultural competence often has a more specific focus than the broader term “intercultural competence.” It typically emphasizes (a) awareness of one’s own ethnocultural identity and cultural heritage, (b) the ability to interpret ethnocultural practices and symbols, and (c) ethically grounded interaction with members of different ethnocultural communities. In social psychology literature, a three-part model of ethno-cultural competence is sometimes described in cognitive, behavioral, and motivational

dimensions, which closely resonates with a KVB approach. Building on these foundations, this article formulates a conceptual KVB model and derives pedagogically relevant implications.

This study employs a conceptual analysis methodology commonly used for construct clarification in pedagogy and educational psychology. The method proceeds through four interrelated procedures: delimitation, decomposition, relational modeling, and pedagogical operationalization. Delimitation identifies how ethnocultural competence differs from adjacent constructs such as cultural awareness, multicultural tolerance, and intercultural competence, ensuring that the model is not merely a re-labeling of generic social skills. Decomposition specifies the internal structure of the construct by defining its components in a way that is coherent with competence-based education and consistent with established intercultural competence frameworks. Relational modeling then articulates how components interact, including directional influences and mediating processes that connect internal dispositions to observable actions. Finally, pedagogical operationalization translates the model into educationally meaningful indicators and learning conditions that can guide curriculum and assessment design.

The conceptual resources for analysis include: UNESCO’s conceptualization of intercultural competences, which highlights the integration of knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral capacities in response to cultural diversity; Deardorff’s process model, which provides a widely cited structure linking attitudes, knowledge and skills, and internal/external outcomes; and developmental perspectives such as Bennett’s model, which helps explain how competence grows as learners’ experience of cultural difference becomes more complex. In addition, the analysis draws on scholarly definitions of ethnocultural competence as an educational construct, emphasizing its multi-level and educationally oriented character.

The KVB model is treated as a conceptual framework rather than a statistical model. Therefore, “results” in this paper refer to conceptual outcomes: definitions, structural components, and propositions describing mechanisms. The paper aims to offer a coherent structure that can later be tested empirically through instrument development, rubric-based performance assessment, or longitudinal studies of competence development.

The analysis indicates that ethnocultural competence can be

positioned as a domain-specific form of intercultural competence centered on ethnocultural diversity, identity, and interaction. Whereas intercultural competence may include a broad range of cultural contexts (national, organizational, professional, linguistic), ethnocultural competence is anchored in the meanings, traditions, symbols, and norms associated with ethnocultural groups, and it requires reflexive awareness of one's own ethnocultural positioning.

Based on this boundary, ethnocultural competence can be defined as an integrative personal and social capacity enabling an individual to understand ethnocultural meanings (knowledge), to evaluate cultural diversity through ethically grounded commitments (values), and to enact appropriate and effective interaction (behavior) in situations involving ethnocultural difference. This definition aligns with process-oriented models in which attitudes/values and knowledge/skills produce internal outcomes such as empathy and ethnorelativism and are ultimately expressed in observable communication and collaboration.

The KVB model specifies three components and the internal mechanisms that connect them.

The knowledge component includes declarative, procedural, and interpretive knowledge. Declarative knowledge covers culturally meaningful concepts such as ethnocultural traditions, social norms, historical narratives, and the cultural semantics of symbols. Procedural knowledge refers to knowing how to learn about cultural meanings responsibly, including asking respectful questions, verifying sources, and recognizing within-group diversity. Interpretive knowledge refers to frameworks that allow the learner to explain behavior and communication without reducing culture to stereotypes. Within the KVB model, knowledge is not treated as a catalogue of facts but as an interpretive toolkit that supports understanding and reduces misattributions in intercultural encounters. This view resonates with intercultural competence descriptions that place "knowledge and comprehension" alongside skills and attitudes in the development of competent behavior.

The values component includes ethical orientations and motivational commitments that regulate how knowledge is used. Values in the KVB model involve respect for human dignity, recognition of cultural pluralism, and responsibility for dialogic communication. These values are not only abstract declarations; they function as evaluative filters shaping attention, interpretation, and willingness to cooperate. In

Deardorff's process model, attitudes are an essential entry point for competence development, suggesting that openness and respect shape how knowledge and skills lead to internal outcomes and external behavior. In ethnocultural competence, the value component is central because it prevents culturally informed knowledge from being used manipulatively, instrumentally, or in ways that reinforce domination.

The behavior component refers to the observable repertoire of actions in ethnocultural interaction. This includes communicative behaviors, such as choosing appropriate forms of address, managing misunderstandings, and negotiating meaning, as well as collaborative behaviors, such as inclusive decision-making, equitable participation, and conflict-sensitive dialogue. The KVB model treats behavior as the most visible expression of competence, but it also recognizes that behavior is constrained by context and can be performed superficially. Therefore, the model emphasizes that behavior should be interpreted in relation to knowledge and values and, when possible, to internal outcomes such as empathy, adaptability, and ethnorelativism.

A key conceptual result is that internal outcomes mediate the transition from knowledge and values to behavior. Internal outcomes include cultural reflexivity, ethnorelative orientation, and empathy. Cultural reflexivity refers to the ability to examine one's own assumptions, interpretive habits, and identity positions. Ethnorelativism refers to understanding cultural difference as a legitimate variation rather than a deficit, a concept strongly associated with developmental models of intercultural sensitivity. Empathy refers to the capacity to understand others' perspectives and emotional states in culturally situated ways.

These internal outcomes explain why knowledge alone does not guarantee competent behavior. A student may know facts about a community's traditions but still interpret difference through ethnocentric assumptions, producing interaction that is technically "informed" yet socially harmful. Conversely, values alone are insufficient when a learner has no behavioral strategies for communication or lacks interpretive knowledge to avoid stereotyping. The KVB model therefore conceptualizes competence as a coordination system: knowledge supplies interpretive tools, values supply ethical-motivational regulation, internal outcomes supply psychological readiness for interaction, and behavior supplies the actual social performance.

The conceptual model identifies several mismatch patterns that are pedagogically significant.

One common mismatch is high knowledge with weak values. This pattern occurs when students acquire ethnographic information but treat it as exotic content or use it to justify hierarchical judgments. In such cases, knowledge becomes a resource for rationalizing prejudice rather than enabling understanding. The model predicts that behavior may remain superficially polite but will lack genuine inclusion and may collapse under conflict or ambiguity.

A second mismatch is strong values with limited knowledge. Learners may endorse tolerance and respect but interpret complex ethnocultural situations using simplistic categories. This leads to well-intentioned but ineffective behavior, such as avoiding discussion of difference to prevent discomfort, which can inadvertently sustain misunderstanding.

A third mismatch is knowledge and values without behavioral repertoire. Students may understand and endorse pluralism yet lack communication strategies, resulting in passivity or anxiety in interaction. This mismatch is especially relevant in educational contexts where intercultural or ethnocultural learning is taught as theory without practice-oriented tasks.

These mismatches align with the logic of process models where attitudes and knowledge/skills must develop toward internal outcomes and external outcomes; weak development in any element reduces the likelihood of effective and appropriate behavior.

Although the present study is conceptual, it yields operational indicators that can be used for curriculum mapping and assessment design. Knowledge indicators include the ability to interpret cultural practices without stereotyping, to explain within-group diversity, and to apply ethical source evaluation when learning about cultures. Values indicators include openness to difference, respect in judgment, and responsibility in representing cultural narratives. Behavior indicators include demonstrated dialogue skills in culturally sensitive scenarios, inclusive collaboration in group work, and constructive management of misunderstandings. Internal outcomes can be inferred through reflective writing, perspective-taking tasks, and structured self-assessment aligned to ethnorelativism progression, informed by developmental sensitivity perspectives.

The KVB model contributes to the conceptual clarity of ethnocultural competence in three ways. First, it shifts the

construct from a loose enumeration of “knowledge and tolerance” to a structured system with definable components and mechanisms. This matters for competence-based education because teaching and assessment require explicit claims about what students should be able to do and why observed performance counts as evidence.

Second, the model reconciles ethnocultural competence with established intercultural competence frameworks while retaining its specificity. Deardorff’s model emphasizes that competence development begins with attitudes and grows through knowledge and skills toward internal outcomes and external behavior. The KVB model adapts this logic by treating values as the core attitudinal regulator and by focusing knowledge on ethnocultural meaning-making. In this sense, the KVB triad can be seen as an educationally simplified but theoretically grounded representation that teachers can use for planning, while still acknowledging the process nature of competence.

Third, the model highlights the mediating role of internal outcomes, which helps prevent common pedagogical errors. One error is over-investing in factual content, assuming that knowledge of traditions will automatically produce respect and appropriate behavior. Another error is promoting generalized moral slogans without supporting learners’ interpretive and behavioral tools. The KVB framework supports balanced instruction: knowledge development must be paired with value reflection and with practice-based experiences that translate internal readiness into action.

The model also has implications for assessment. If ethnocultural competence is defined as coordinated K–V–B functioning, then assessment should not rely solely on multiple-choice tests of cultural facts or on attitude surveys. Instead, evidence should be gathered across methods that reflect the structure: scenario-based performance tasks and dialogic simulations for behavior, reflective narratives and dilemma responses for values, and interpretive analysis tasks for knowledge. The internal outcomes can be triangulated through reflective artifacts and behavior-in-context rather than inferred from time-on-task or superficial participation.

A critical implementation issue is contextual sensitivity. “Appropriate behavior” is partly defined by the expectations of interlocutors and the norms of specific communities, which means that ethnocultural competence must avoid prescribing one rigid behavioral script. Deardorff explicitly notes that effective and appropriate behavior is contextual and relational,

and the same principle should apply to ethnocultural contexts. Therefore, the KVB model should be implemented with participatory validation: educators can refine indicators with community input and ensure that cultural representations are accurate and respectful.

Developmentally, Bennett's model reminds educators that learners may experience cultural difference through progressively more complex orientations and that competence grows as ethnocentric interpretations give way to ethnorelative meaning-making. This developmental view supports the idea that the same learning tasks can yield different outcomes depending on students' starting points. Consequently, the KVB model is best used in a staged curriculum where students repeatedly encounter cultural difference with increasing complexity, receiving feedback that targets not only behavioral correctness but also interpretive frames and value reasoning.

The proposed model has limitations that define a future research agenda. Conceptual coherence does not guarantee empirical adequacy, so instrument development and validation are required. Researchers can test whether K, V, and B indicators form distinct yet correlated dimensions, whether internal outcomes mediate between them, and whether the model predicts real interaction outcomes such as reduced conflict escalation, improved collaboration, or more accurate interpretation of cultural misunderstandings. Longitudinal designs would be particularly useful because competence development is a process rather than a one-time acquisition.

This article developed a conceptual KVB model of ethnocultural competence and argued that competence is best understood as the coordinated alignment of culturally informed knowledge, ethically grounded values, and context-sensitive behavior. Drawing on widely recognized intercultural competence frameworks and developmental perspectives, the paper clarified the boundaries of the construct, specified its components, and described mechanisms that connect internal readiness to observable action. The model offers a practical foundation for higher education curricula by supporting transparent competence mapping, balanced instructional design, and multi-method assessment that respects both cultural diversity and educational accountability. Further empirical research should validate the model in specific institutional contexts and refine indicators for reliable and fair evaluation.

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