

Factor Structure Specificity of Intercultural Competence Among International Relations Students: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

Introduction. This study focuses on intercultural competence of students of international relations and aims to determine the characteristics of intercultural competence in the group of Russian male and female students of international relations.

Methods. The ideas of the Council of Europe document on key competencies underlying the culture of democracy were the source material for the study of intercultural competence. We interviewed 54 students of international relations aged 17–23 years using the technique of M. Barrett who operationalized this conceptual model of the Council of Europe. This paper represents a first effort in comparing the factor structure of theoretical and empirical models of Russian respondents' intercultural competence (taking into account their gender) in relation to their values, behavioral attitudes, practical skills, and knowledge necessary for intercultural interaction.

Results. The study involving Russian respondents confirmed the hypothesis that there are no differences in the number of factors in the theoretical and empirical models of intercultural competence. In the group of Russian female students the rating of factors of intercultural competence was as follows: 1 – practical skills, 2 – tolerance, 3 – empathy, and 4 – civic consciousness. In the group of Russian male students the rating of factors of intercultural competence was as follows: 1 – respect and responsibility, 2 – adaptability, 3 – empathy, and 4 – tolerance.

Discussion. The findings obtained from the Russian sample suggest that while maintaining the four-factor structure in the theoretical and empirical models of intercultural competence, the content of factors differs significantly from the theoretical model. In our research, the respondents showed semantic and instrumental diversity in the components of intercultural competence. Women associate the success of intercultural interaction with skills, self-education, skills for listening and understanding, willingness to cooperate, and tolerance. For men, the success of intercultural interaction depends on respect and responsibility, adaptability, knowledge and its critical understanding. The conceptual model for the development of intercultural competence should be improved taking into account gender and professional characteristics of students and should be implemented in educational programs.

Keywords

intercultural competence, competence model, intercultural interaction, education, students of international relations, gender, factor analysis, values, behavioral attitudes, professional activity

Highlights

- The development of intercultural interaction is especially relevant for students of international relations.
- There are various approaches to understanding intercultural competence.
- The most operationalized model of intercultural competence proposed by M. Barrett suggests the following four factors: values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and its critical understanding.
- A four-factor model of intercultural competence is characteristic of Russian students of international relations. However, its meaning content differed from the model of M. Barrett.
- In the group of female students the factors of intercultural competence were as follows: practical skills, tolerance, empathy, and civic consciousness. In the group of male students these were respect and responsibility, adaptability, empathy, and tolerance.

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Introduction

The theory of professional education has been transforming in recent years, which has far-reaching consequences (Liferov & Kostikova, 2017; Gonina, 2017). The aspect of intercultural interaction is considered to be very important in a future specialist's professional culture. The ability of specialists to understand people with different cultural backgrounds is recognized as a part of professional culture (Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios, & Liu, 2016; Voevoda, 2016). They should be able to better interpret and coordinate the phenomena in the field of their professional communication (Kostikova, 2018; Chuganskaya, 2018).

Migration and global processes in the world are of scientific interest for specialists in intercultural interaction (Berry, 1997), which results in numerous studies of intercultural dimension in higher education (Lantz-Deaton, 2017). Academic adaptation of students of international relations to the culture and educational environment of universities has gained increasing attention. Psychological, social, linguistic, and cultural adaptation of students of international relations are considered from various points of view (Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoin-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2014; Makhmutova, 2019).

In modern society there is a trend towards gender depolarization, which manifest itself in the variability of male and female behavioral models and various levels of implementation of gender norms and values (Aivazova, 2017; Kletsina & Ioffe, 2017). Values disclose the true meaning of gender roles both in a wide context at the level of large social groups and in the form of

individuals' self-realization, their personality traits (Bartel-Radic & Giannelloni, 2017). In some European countries, the humanization and mutual enrichment of public relations are facilitated by the convergence of standards of behavior in terms of male and female gender roles (Bowen, 2020). Along with family roles, professional activity is an important part of life of many modern women; it has significantly expanded the possibilities (capabilities) for personal self-realization and, accordingly, subjective well-being of women (Radina, 2012). Thus, the studies of intercultural interaction that construct the knowledge of intercultural competence indicate the influence of global social, professional, educational, and gender factors.

A theoretical and methodological analysis of the studies dealing with the models of intercultural competence showed that these studies differ in the degree of universality of considering the issues of intercultural interaction. In Russian literature, the works of T. G. Stefanenko, V. S. Ageev, N. M. Lebedeva, L. G. Pochebut, G. U. Soldatova, and O. E. Khukhlaev are fundamental for the concepts and theories of intercultural competence. T. G. Stefanenko examined ethno-cultural identity and ways of improving intercultural communication (Stefanenko, 2009; Stefanenko & Kupavskaya, 2010). L. G. Pochebut considered intercultural competence as a part of general communicative competence with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components; it contains the following constituents: cultural knowledge and skills, adequacy in cross-cultural contacts, tolerance, assertiveness, and sensitivity (Pochebut, 2007, 2017).

Constructing a comprehensive model of intercultural competence, O. E. Khukhlaev et al. also emphasize an important role for intercultural communication and interaction (Khukhlaev & Chibisova, 2010; Khukhlaev et al., 2020). 'Intercultural competence is a combination of knowledge, personality traits, motives, and specific skills that contribute to effective goal achievement in intercultural interaction' (Soldatova & Panteleev, 2007, pp. 12–13). However, the theories of intercultural competence either consider a procedural aspect of intercultural communication (Soldatova & Shaigerova, 2015) or an utilitarian purpose of such a theory as a methodological basis for designing various programs of intercultural training (Kornilova, 2012).

Current dissertation researches in intercultural competence are carried out in the field of humanities. With all the variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, culturologists, sociologists, political scientists, teachers, and psychologists consider intercultural interaction within intercultural contacts (Sadokhin, 2009), within professional activity introducing the concept of professional intercultural competence (Pisarenko, 2011), within pedagogical activity forming intercultural competence as an educational result of personal integration (Yankina, 2006), or as an attempt to diagnose psychological characteristics of intercultural competence by constructing "psychological profiles of intercultural competence" (Gridunova, 2018). Regarding psychological components of intercultural competence, all these studies focused on certain aspects, for example, value orientations (Yankina, 2006), stable motivation for intercultural communication (Pisarenko, 2011), self-control, self-consciousness, locus of control, empathy (Logashenko, 2015), etc. Contemporary Russian psychologists are highly interested in tolerance of ambiguity in the context of a specialist's professional culture (Soldatova & Panteleev, 2007). In intercultural contexts, researchers investigate complex situations and subjects who work well in poorly predicted or extreme conditions, cope with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner, and feel themselves comfortable in unfamiliar situations (Oreshkin, Shlykov, Shevchenko, Kostikova, & Belogurov, 2019).

Tolerance for ambiguity is usually analyzed in the following two ways: (a) acceptance of ambiguous conditions and avoidance of ambiguity in order to achieve clarity and (b) varying

intolerance for ambiguity (Kornilova & Chumakova, 2014). However, V. S. Ageev's idea about the lack of psychological knowledge, special research, and elaborations in the field of regulation of interethnic interaction (Ageev, 1990, p. 134) as the basis for intercultural competence remains relevant. Analyzing the processes of acculturation and intercultural relations, N. M. Lebedeva and co-authors carry out consistent development of the issues of intercultural competence (Lebedeva, Luneva, Stefanenko, & Martynova, 2003; Lebedeva, Tatarko, & Berri, 2016). Current works of Russian authors concentrate on various skills that are important for the development of intercultural competence. Thus, the skills of analytical and critical thinking are important for decision-making in situations of dialogue of cultures (Kostikova, Cherniavskaya, Balakhovskaya, & Zakharchenko, 2019), the skills of cooperation, reaching consensus, and maintaining optimistic attitudes among other group members are important for achieving the goals of professional activity in a multicultural society (Stepanov, Andreev, Gavzov, Novikov, & Kostikova, 2019).

A more detailed analysis of scientific research in the field of intercultural competence shows the presence of the following specific features. Firstly, intercultural competence is considered in the general object field of intercultural interaction with the designation of cultural, pedagogical, psychological and other professional subject orientations. Secondly, intercultural competence appears to be a form of implementation, a consequence and a result of various processes of intercultural communication. Thirdly, a comprehensive understanding of psychological foundations of intercultural competence has not been formed. Fourthly, the operationalization of the concept of intercultural competence, including its components and integrative qualities, is still understudied.

In order to develop theoretical aspects and expand the possibilities for applications of the concepts of intercultural competence, we examined complex studies of British psychologists and teachers who investigate the development of intercultural competence in the context of civic identity, citizenship, and democratic culture (Barrett, 2018). Borghetti (2017) explores the importance of ethical issues for assessing intercultural competence. Byram (2008) shows how intercultural competence and citizenship can be formed through language teaching. Byram, Golubeva, Hui, & Wagner (2016) also examine various educational practices that develop intercultural competence and citizenship. In the analyzed literature, the principles of a democratic society are mainly considered through the ideas of intercultural competence and citizenship (Deardorff, 2011; Porto & Byram, 2015). This approach is methodologically justified, since it is based on the international document of the Council of Europe – Competences for Democratic Culture. This document concentrates on interdependence between the culture of democracy and cultural dialogue in today's society characterized by social diversity, where intercultural competence, as a constant dynamic process, is based on the actively and flexibly used psychological resources of individuals in order to respond to new circumstances and to adapt (Council of Europe, 2016). Certainly, the concept of the culture of democracy used in the Council of Europe document is not equivalent to the concept of intercultural competence. However, intercultural competence may be considered as a fundamental criterion for a democratic society. For Russian researchers, the reference to this document of the Council of Europe became the starting point for developing a resource approach to the formation of intercultural communicative competence among university students (Bolshakova, 2019).

In *theoretical terms*, our study was intended to show the relationship of intercultural competence with other factors of intercultural interaction, primarily gender. In our study we understand

gender as a social gender that correlates with conventional manifestations of male and female gender roles. *The aim of our research* was to operationalize the principles of the Council of Europe document and the works of foreign researchers in relation to Russian students of international relations and their more adequate professional training.

We have chosen M. Barrett's model as the most complete and well-operationalized one (see the assessment of this model in Barrett et al., 2014; Wagner, Perugini, & Byram, 2017). In his work, he defined intercultural competence as 'a complex of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and its critical understanding, which are necessary for understanding and respecting those who are perceived as culturally different from us, for effective interaction and communication with them, for establishing positive and constructive relationships with them' (Barrett, 2018, p. 95). The author identified 20 main statements that were combined into 4 factors: values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and its critical understanding (Barrett, 2018).

The preliminary use of the technique for assessing intercultural competence among Russian students in previous Russian works contributed to our study. Researchers examined students' understanding of cultural values in the context of their professional culture (Ilyushina, Prishvina, Shevchenko, Kostikova, & Belogurov, 2018) and concluded that it is necessary to improve higher education to facilitate many-sided personal and professional development (Kostikova, Prishvina, Ilyushina, Fedotova, & Belogurov, 2018). Job-oriented teaching provides both intercultural and professional competence (Kostikova, Prishvina, Ilyushina, Krutova, & Fedotova, 2018).

The *object* of our research is intercultural competence as a socio-psychological phenomenon of a democratic society.

Characteristics of the components of intercultural competence in the group of Russian female and male students represent the *subject* of our research. Intercultural competences were considered as components of intercultural competence.

The aim of our study was to examine the characteristics of intercultural competences in the group of Russian male and female students of international relations. We formulated the following objectives: (a) development of a plan for the study of intercultural competence in the Russian sample; (b) formation of a group of respondents who meet the requirements of the study; (c) preparing necessary materials for conducting surveys and interviews; (d) carrying out statistical processing of the data obtained from the study; and (e) interpretation of findings and formulation of conclusions.

In accordance with the aims and objectives of the study, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: there are differences in the content of factors of intercultural competence between M. Barrett's theoretical model empirical data in two groups of Russian male and female students of international relations.

Hypothesis 2: there are differences in the content of factors of intercultural competence in groups of Russian male and female students of international relations.

Methods

The model of M. Barrett (Barrett, 2018), developed according to the recommendations of the document of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2016) was the basis for our empirical study of intercultural competences. This choice was a consequence of the sufficient operationalization of the model of intercultural competence in the questionnaire of M. Barrett, which contains 20 statements that should be evaluated using a 10-point scale. This helps to measure the degree

of manifestation of each of the 20 components of intercultural competence in Russian students. We offered the respondents a Russian-language version of the questionnaire of M. Barrett, which was previously used in the works of Russian authors (Ilyushina et al., 2018; Kostikova, Prishvina, Ilyushina, Fedotova, & Belogurov, 2018; Kostikova, Prishvina, Ilyushina, Krutova, & Fedotova, 2018). The instruction was formulated as follows: 'Dear respondents! Here are 20 statements presented in 4 blocks, which characterize the level of development of your intercultural competence. Rate your level of each of the qualities using a 10-point scale, where 1 and 10 correspond to the minimal and maximum degrees of their development'.

The study involved 1st year students of the Department of International Economic Relations of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). These students already have a certain understanding of the importance of social and intercultural interaction, which they acquired during general education. However, this understanding has not yet reached the level of the development of intercultural communication skills in the form of professional competencies. We carried out a pilot study of the factor structure of intercultural competence in the group of students of international relations, due to the high importance of data for the development of professional skills among future specialists in this field. The respondents were 54 individual participants: 31 women (aged 17–19 years, median = 18 years, mean age = 18.22 years) and 23 men (aged 17–23 years, median = 18 years, mean age = 18.52 years). Thus, the sample comprised 57 % of women and 43 % of men, which corresponds to the ratio of students of international relations.

The statistical analysis of data was carried out using the Statistica 6.0 software. To compare the determining parameters of intercultural competence in the theoretical model of M. Barrett and empirical data in the group of Russian students of international relations, we performed factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation and the Varimax rotation procedure. Data factorization was carried out for 2 groups – ratings for each of the 20 statements of the questionnaire in the groups of female and male students.

The research design consisted of two stages:

1. Analysis of the components of intercultural competence based on the M. Barrett model in groups of Russian female and male students.
2. Determination of the components of intercultural competence by factoring empirical data in groups of Russian students of international relations taking into account their gender.

Results

The results of the empirical exploratory study were obtained in two groups of Russian female and male students of international relations. Using factorization ranks for each of the 20 statements (variables) of the M. Barrett questionnaire, we identified factor structures of intercultural competence for each gender group of students of international relations.

In the group of female students of international relations, we identified 4 factors with a total explained variance of 68 %. The factor structure of intercultural competence in this group corresponds to the number of factors in the theoretical model of M. Barrett. However, their content is different. In the group of female students of international relations, we obtained the following factors:

- factor 1 – 'skills' (43 % of the total explained variance);
- factor 2 – 'tolerance' (9 % of the total explained variance);
- factor 3 – 'empathy' (8 % of the total explained variance);
- factor 4 – 'civic consciousness' (6 % of the total explained variance).

The component composition of each of the factors included from one to five variables (statements of the questionnaire) with a significant factor loading value (Table 1). The table shows the most significant variables that make up at least 70 % of the variance contribution to the factor.

Factor	Variable (questionnaire statement)	Factor loading
1	10. Ability for self-education	0.743048
	11. Ability for analytical and critical thinking	0.879278
	12. Skills of observation and listening	0.727269
	14. Flexibility and adaptability	0.806847
	15. Communication skills, linguistic abilities, communication skills in different languages	0.724481
2	2. Respect for cultural diversity	0.820015
	4. Openness towards other cultures, beliefs, worldviews, and customs	0.804075
	5. Respect	0.787560
3	13. Empathy	0.782121
	19. Knowledge and critical understanding of language styles in communication	0.725262
4	6. Civic consciousness	0.766050

We should note that in the group of female students the *first factor* included statements 1–3 and 5–6 of the 'practical skills' factor in the Barrett questionnaire. The factor is identical to Barrett's theoretical model and empirical data, with the exception of item 4 of the questionnaire.

The *second factor* included statements 1–2 of the 'attitudes' factor of the Barrett questionnaire, which relates to respect, recognition and openness to cultural diversity. In general, it can be defined as 'tolerance'.

The *third factor* relates to the emotional and evaluative component of intercultural competence – empathy, understanding of communication and critical judgment. We treated it as 'empathy'; it is included in the 'practical skills' factor in the theoretical model of M. Barrett. However, within the framework of empirical research in the group of Russian female students of international relations, it was independently developed.

The *fourth factor* was designated as 'civic consciousness'. It represents an independent factor in the analysis of empirical data in the Russian sample of female students of international relations

and is important in the group of respondents, reflecting their desire for a more complete civic identity.

Our findings enabled us to present a model of correlating the content of factors in the theoretical model of M. Barrett and empirical data in the group of female students of international relations (Fig. 1).

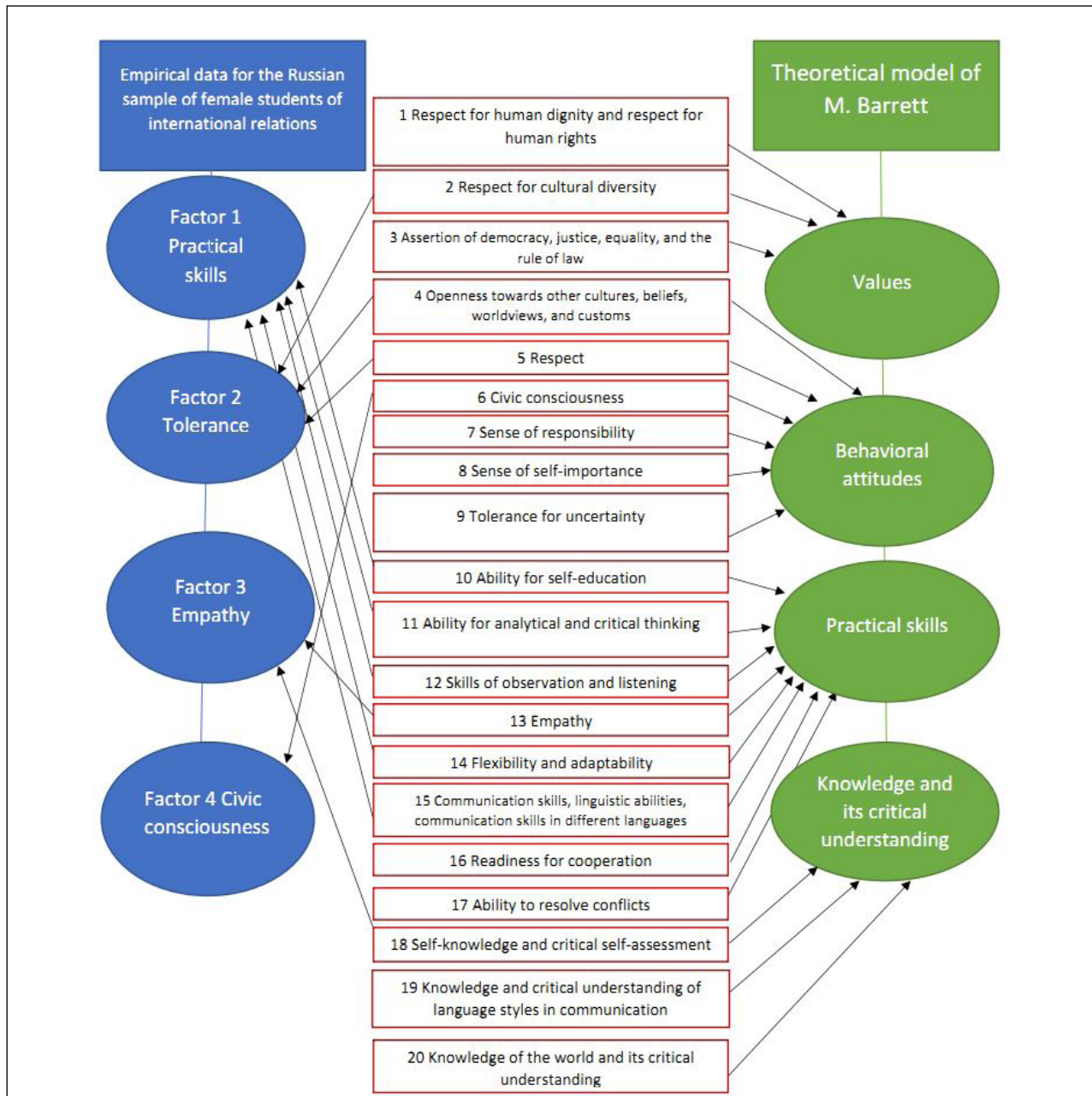


Figure 1. Correlation of the content of variables in the theoretical model and empirical data in the sample of Russian female students of international relations

Thus, factorization ranks for the group of Russian female students of international relations confirms hypothesis 1 of the study about differences between factor structures in the theoretical model of M. Barrett and empirical data due to the presence of their different component content with the same rank (4 factors).

The next stage was rank factorization in the group of male students of international relations. We identified four factors with a total explained variance of 71 %:

factor 1 – ‘responsibility and respect’ (42 % of the total explained variance);

factor 2 – ‘adaptability’ (11 % of the total explained variance);

factor 3 – ‘empathy’ (9 % of the total explained variance);

factor 4 – ‘tolerance’ (7 % of the total explained variance).

Similarly to the group of female students, the component composition of each factor differed from the theoretical model of M. Barrett and included from one to eight variables (statements of the questionnaire) with a significant factor loading (Table 2).

Factor	Variable (questionnaire statement)	Factor loading
1	1. Respect for human dignity and respect for human rights	0.715361
	2. Respect for cultural diversity	0.748787
	5. Respect	0.751309
	6. Civic awareness	0.829318
	7. Sense of responsibility	0.935726
	10. Ability for self-education	0.796722
	11. Ability for analytical and critical thinking	0.746110
2	14. Flexibility and adaptability	0.742992
	17. Ability to resolve conflicts	0.739508
3	13. Empathy	0.876721
4	4. Openness in relation to other cultures, beliefs, worldviews, and customs	0.946386

The *first factor* demonstrated the most informative data. We designated this factor as ‘*responsibility and respect*’; it refers to respect, responsibility, human dignity, self-awareness, critical thinking, and ability to resolve conflicts.

The *second factor* contained statements relating to flexibility, adaptability, knowledge of the world, and critical judgment. This factor may be designated as ‘*adaptability*’.

The *third factor* may be termed as 'empathy'. This factor is formed as an independent one in both groups of students.

We designated the *fourth factor* as 'tolerance'.

Correlation of the components of factors in the theoretical model and empirical data shows differences in the content of the variables in the group of male students of international relations (Fig. 2).

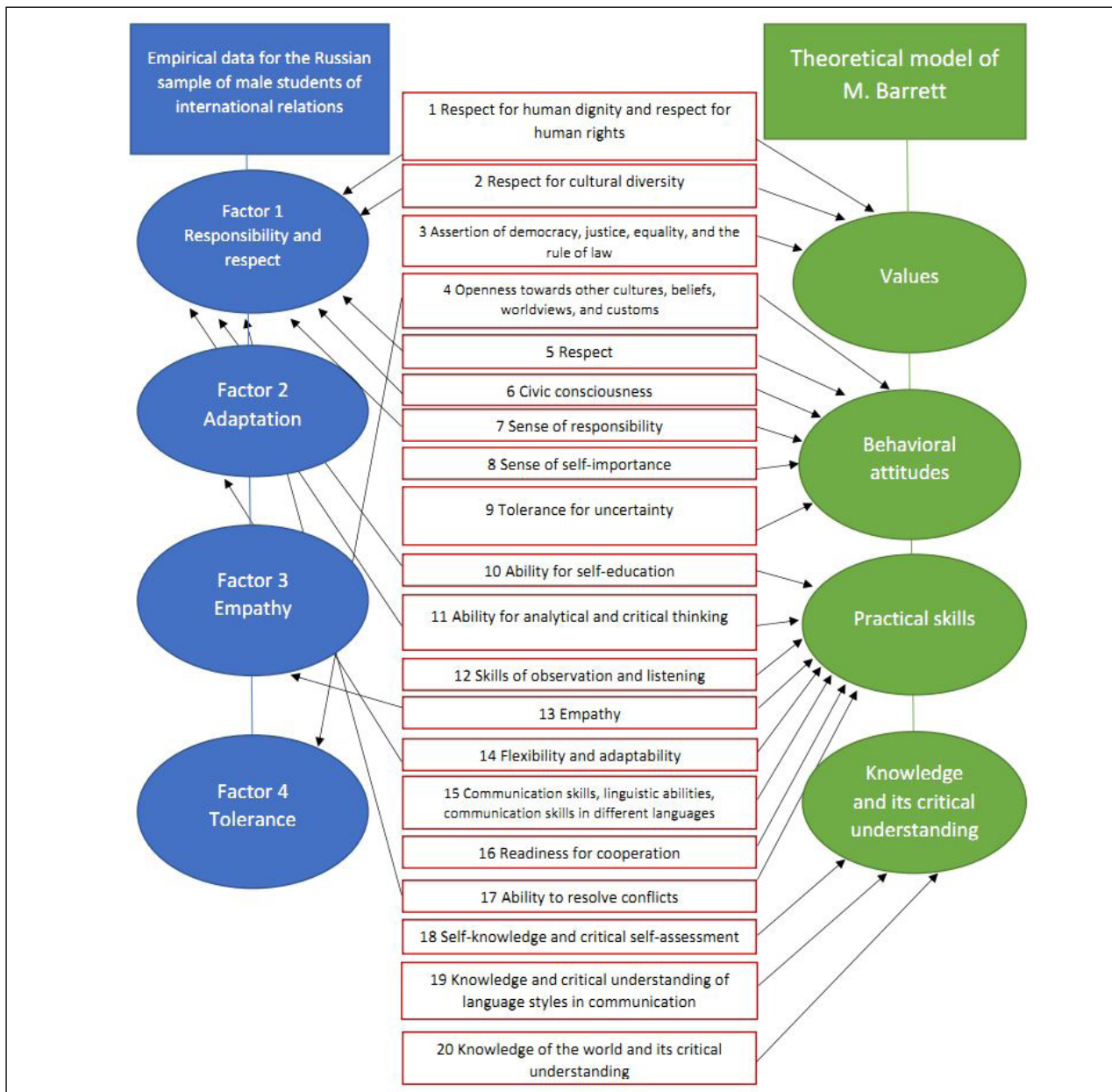


Figure 2. Correlation of the content of variables in the theoretical model and empirical data in the sample of Russian male students of international relations

In the group of male students, the factorization of empirical data helped identify four factors, which, in terms of meaning, do not coincide with the components of the theoretical model of intercultural competence (values, attitudes, practical skills, knowledge and its critical understanding). This confirms hypothesis 1 about the presence of differences in the factor structure of the M. Barrett theoretical model and empirical data in the group of male students of international relations.

The analysis of the assessment of intercultural competence according to M. Barrett's questionnaire helped to identify the following factors in the group of male students of international relations: *respect and responsibility, adaptability, empathy, and tolerance*. At the same time, the group of female students demonstrated a different structure of factors: *practical skills, tolerance, empathy, and civic consciousness*. With the general coincidence of the number of factors, there were differences in their content. In both groups, there were common factors – 'tolerance' and 'empathy', as well as 2 different factors. The data obtained from the study partially confirmed hypothesis 2 about the presence of differences in the factor structure of intercultural competence in the group of female and male students by two out of four factors.

Discussion

The comparison of the empirical data with the theoretical model of M. Barrett helped identify the main components of intercultural competence in the group of Russian male and female students of international relations aged 17–23 years.

When comparing the structures of the factors in the groups of male and female students, we should note their independent priority choice of statements that made up the content of 'empathy' and 'tolerance' factors. In our opinion, this result experimentally confirms the 'tendency for gender depolarization', which was mentioned in the theoretical part (Aivazova, 2017; Kletsina & Ioffe, 2017), and shows the general value and meaning basis of intercultural interaction among the respondents. However, the severity of this value and meaning basis for female and male students is different. With the same ability to empathize, female students turned out to be more competent in knowledge and critical understanding of language styles in communication (statement 19).

This conclusion confirms the importance of knowledge of foreign languages and cultural awareness as components of intercultural competence noted by other authors (Shevchenko, Bugrova, Cherniavskaya, & Kostikova, 2018), and clarifies the gender specificity of manifestations of this quality. Studies of the role of empathy in intercultural communication have been conducted earlier (Chen, 2013; Fedotova, Makhmutova, Kostikova, & Gugutsidze, 2018). However, this study considers the psychological phenomenon of empathy as a leading structural component of intercultural competence.

In the manifestations of tolerance, male and female students were found to be open to other cultures, beliefs, worldviews and customs (statement 4). Meanwhile, this factor was further strengthened by respect for cultural diversity (statement 2) and respect as a common behavioral attitude (statement 5) among female students. The obtained result is consistent with the position of other authors who consider tolerance, along with trust and sensitivity, as a component of intercultural communicative competence (Pochebut, 2013).

In our previous work we partly analyzed emotional, cognitive and behavioral manifestations of flexibility and adaptability of students as components of intercultural competence (Makhmutova, Kovtun, Kostikova, & Revkova, 2018). This study focuses on the gender aspect. The differences found in 'practical skills' and 'civic consciousness' in the group of female students, as well as in 'respect

and responsibility' and *'adaptability*' in the group of male students, may indicate gender-specific grounds for intercultural interaction and, accordingly, different mechanisms for the formation of intercultural competence in female and male students.

The conducted research has confirmed that the formation of models of constructive interaction between representatives of different cultures requires pedagogical and methodological support. In a multicultural society, the most urgent is the development of curricula when students learn to use their mental qualities in constantly changing situations of intercultural interaction.

The acquisition of intercultural competences is important for personal and professional development, especially in professions related to humanitarian, political, economic international relations. This is a significant component of the professional world image of future specialists in international relations. Our research has shown that male and female students in international relations aged 17–23 years show semantic and instrumental diversity in terms of values, behavioral attitudes, practical skills and knowledge. In other words, correlating the statements of the M. Barrett questionnaire with their behavioral and ideological priorities, our respondents form gender-sensitive intercultural competence as the basis for the implementation of future professional activities in the field of international relations.

Despite the constructive message of the Council of Europe to develop and implement general mechanisms for the formation of intercultural competence as a part of the culture of democracy, we should recognize the existence of value-semantic specificity of these mechanisms. The results obtained in our study may be considered promising for further research of intercultural competence in the field of theoretical substantiation of the existence of systemic competences in the structure of intercultural competence and in practical diagnostics of characteristics of intercultural competence, which can be either an obstacle or a catalyst for intercultural interaction in the future professional activity of students of international relations.

Our results and conclusions draw attention to the importance of gender specificity for improving pedagogical methods for the development of intercultural competence in future specialists in international relations.

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