

Skills for the global world – inquiring into the evolution and development of intercultural competencies

Margret Steixner

Intercultural perspectives & Ndurance

Intercultural training, coaching and research, Austria

[Intercultural.perspectives@gmail.com](mailto:msteixner@gmail.com); msteixner@ndurance.at

Abstract

This paper deals with the evolution of intercultural learning from pre-existing abilities to developed skills, by linking aspects of cultural theory to the process of intercultural learning. The article rolls out why concepts of culture which focus on coherence are no longer useful to explain the dynamics of the globalized world. Each person acquires culture in a process of active reflection and through permanent negotiation between the members of a cultural “collective” and between those collectives. The aim of intercultural learning is therefore to support individuals in this process of navigating through cultural boundaries by developing specific abilities that foster the development of synergies and the co-existence of different value systems. Intercultural coaching is introduced as one form of learning that creates a structure of skills which go beyond the acquisition of simple cultural knowledge.

1. Introduction

The following three theses will be explored in this paper, linking an understanding gained from culture theory, identity concepts and learning theory.

1. **Individual and cultural identity is strongly interlinked.** Therefore it is not useful to look at these two concepts as separate entities. However, fostering a more integrative perspective on identity and culture is beneficial to understanding which abilities are needed in order to deal with the complexity of intercultural situations.
2. **Intercultural competence can be deconstructed into a set of abilities.** These abilities are not limited to intercultural spheres, but function as enablers for intercultural encounters. To further develop these abilities it is useful to build on existing pre-conditions and create stimulating and transformative learning settings.
3. **Intercultural experiences offer a unique platform for self-development.** Intercultural competence is a learning process resulting from a questioning of one’s own value orientations and existing frames of reference. Values are important assets for orientation and create a feeling of security and group coherence. Putting them at risk causes uncertainty, but also offers the opportunity to gain an integrated cultural identity.

Following the three theses, I first focus on the inter-linkage between culture and identity and its meaning for the concept of competence and its development. Identity concepts are linked to the human need to belong and to be recognized as similar but different at the same time. Exploring and combining these two polarities is a core element in understanding the relation between the individual and the cultural collective to which the person belongs or chooses to belong.

In the second part I will explain the set of abilities that build the “ingredients” of intercultural competence. This will be shown by the “catalogue of intercultural abilities” (Steixner 2007) - a model that structures the abilities into “I, You and We”-skills and argues that the combination of these abilities enables individuals to behave with competence in situations of increased complexity within intercultural interactions.

Thirdly I will look at intercultural learning as a process. Intercultural training is often seen as the major intervention to prepare employees for special assignments in an international environment. Considering insights of learning theory I shall argue that this type of training has a limited scope and can mainly function as a trigger for further exploration and reflection. However the impact increases significantly if reflection is integrated into the day-to-day work routine. Here coaching plays an important role, as it offers a framework for systematic reflection, creating a continued learning process. This is a way to bridge the gap between knowing and doing, a major challenge of intercultural trainings.

2. Understanding the relation between personality and culture

Kluckholm and Murray stated in 1949 that “Every man is in a certain aspect like ALL other men, like SOME other man and like NO other man” (Kluckholm/Murray 1949) and hereby point out the interlinking of human nature, personality and culture. A deeper understanding of this relationship and how it shows in behaviour and human interaction remains a challenge for the intercultural field. In an intercultural learning setting, challenges are often analysed through a cultural lens without taking the interconnection of individual and culture into account. I argue that this separation is harmful for the understanding of intercultural dynamics and does not help the development of adequate strategies for becoming competent in intercultural scenarios. The recurring use of cultural models that put coherence within cultural entities at the centre of understanding also fosters the notion that culture can be described by the common values and beliefs of a specific group. In addition to the overvaluing of coherence within cultural groups, these groups are often described in terms of nation, as one seemingly easy but often inadequate categorisation.

“The most common understanding of culture is one that imagines a high level of internal uniformity within a social system. Previously, this concept was limited to contexts of ethnicity or nationality (e.g. "Italians dress smartly"), while today common characteristics are often ascribed to quite different social systems of various sizes (e.g. "the liberal values of the Christian-European West", "Our customer-oriented corporate culture", "The cooperative leadership culture among women"). These formulations share a similar understanding of culture as an expression of *coherence*.” (Rathje 2009: 35)

Recent scientific discussions on concepts of culture that take the dynamics of our postmodern and globalized world into account (Welsch 2010; Scheffer 2009; Hansen 2009; Bauman 2008), stress the importance of integrating the fact that cultures become more and more “fluid”, meaning that cultures cannot be explained as closed and homogenous entities with fixed values and traditions. Individuals are the ‘active cells’ of culture. Each and every one processes culture in a unique way, which also determines the level of participation in the society as a network of different “collectives”. In this sense the relationship between culture and individual is defined along the polarities of the need to belong and the wish for a unique identity. According to Bozay (2005) identity can be described as an internal framework that ensures continuity and consistency for the individual, but at the same time enables the participation and interaction with the social environment. To answer the fundamental question of “who am I?” the individual relies on a self-assessment based on past experience and on expectations and judgement of the social environment. The critical reflection on cultural expectations and underlying value systems is a process that leads to the integrations of values and attitudes into an identity. Only after this mental “absorption” can values be perceived as binding concepts. Sharing these mental concepts with others enables the person to be part of a society, with the emotional function of feeling loyalty and belonging. (Bozay 2005: 85–86) Cultural identity is therefore a process of active acquisition, rather than an automatic classification of a group of cultural entities whose participants perform specific behaviours.

In a postmodern understanding of culture, each individual de- and reconstructs its identity by taking conscious decisions about value choices and their adaptation; “[...] the traditional perception of culture often excludes the individual completely from examination. It thus avoids dealing with the dilemma that on a group level, the concreteness of cultural phenomena cannot be denied, while each individual member of a culture, however, is equipped with the freedom to process those cultural offers in a completely unique way.” (Rathje 2009: 42) This understanding of culture demands specific abilities to be present within the individual. The active involvement and freedom of choice can lead to a high amount of stress, as the orientating function of culture has to be taken up by the individual. In this view the individual has the chance, but also the burden to consciously choose the “culture” it wants to belong to including the negotiation of joint values and agreeing on behavioural

consequences. Individuals belong to several groups at the same time (Scheffer 2009; Hansen 2009) and are often confronted with numerous requirements and sometimes conflicting values at the same time. (Bieri 2013: 79) To work out ways to navigate between these demands and find a unique way of living in this field of permanent friction is the lifetime's work of each human and cultural being.

The joint mission of intercultural trainers and coaches is therefore much more than providing culture-relevant knowledge. It is to assist people dealing with challenges linked to developing an integrated cultural identity. This includes the conscious reflection of frames of reference and how value orientations influence the participation in, and belonging to, cultural groups. In a postmodern and global society we observe a radical individualisation as the result of increased differentiation. (Rathje 2009: 49) In this understanding I see a need for intercultural research to look for answers on the following question: What abilities does the individual need in order to handle the process of developing cultural identity in an environment of multiple perspectives?

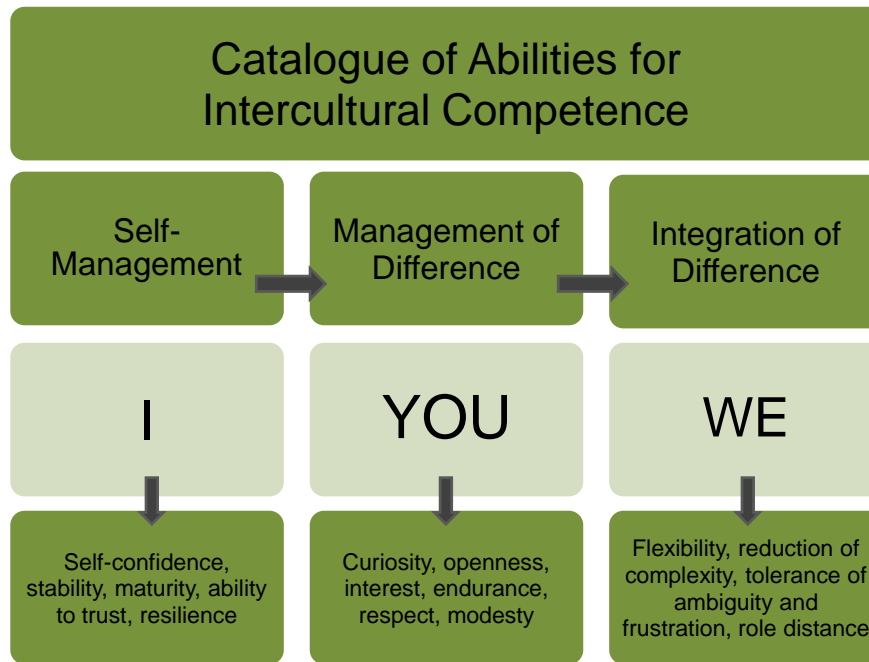
3. The catalogue of intercultural competence

The intention of the following catalogue of intercultural abilities is to better understand the abilities that are needed for handling the cultural complexity of our postmodern world. The catalogue divides abilities that build the foundation for intercultural competence into three main clusters. Each cluster comprises of a set of sub-abilities that underline the general purpose of the cluster, namely; the management of self, difference and its integration. The allocation of sub-abilities may seem ambiguous at times and is subject to interpretation and extension.

The catalogue of abilities is based on extended qualitative research using the methodology of Grounded Theory (Glaser/Strauss) in analysing data from interviews and participatory observations. The full version of the research was published in German under the title: "Learning space – Interculture. From intercultural experience to intercultural competence." (Steixner 2007)

The term catalogue demonstrates the assumption that each individual holds a different sub-set of abilities, according to their personality and their experiences. As explained later in the article, this catalogue can be used as a guideline for developing intercultural training trajectories, but also as a framework for intercultural coaching processes.

The order of the clusters demonstrates the developmental sequence. The abilities of self-management build the foundation that individuals need in order to be able to manage themselves successfully, before they are able to open up for any constructive interactions with their surroundings. Only after finding ways to manage the differences experienced within the interaction process, can people move on to integrate these different perceptions and values into their own worldview. In order to get an impression about the characteristics of each cluster, I will explain example items from each cluster before discussing its further use and application.



Adapted from Steixner 2007: 169

I-abilities:

The first cluster focuses on self-management abilities or “I-abilities”. These abilities build the foundation for managing feelings of uncertainty or irritation caused by diverting values orientation experienced in the intercultural environment. The “I-abilities” mark the boundary between stability and change. According to Trimpop and Meynhardt, the human being constantly fluctuates between challenge and boredom. If life becomes too easy, people have a tendency to look for challenges, if people are overstretched and exposed to a high amount of uncertainty, they look for ways to regain security. (Trimpop/Meynhardt 2002:191) Self-management abilities are the abilities which balance the need for stability in situations of exposure to unfamiliar circumstances.

There are several sub-abilities that can be linked to self-management:

1. Self-confidence can be described as the ability to be sure of oneself even if the feedback of the social environment is missing/ different or opposing to one’s own.... In situations of increased complexity due to cultural diversity, self-confidence can be an important asset that allows people to rely on the individual evaluation of a situation, which can oppose the majority. This includes awareness about one’s own values and why they are important.
2. Maturity is the ability to respond to the environment in an appropriate manner. It describes the ability to take different aspects into consideration, weigh them against each other and put them into a broader context. Maturity can be connected to age, but is also a sense for the holistic assessment of situations. This can be particularly important in intercultural environments, as there is a tendency to overestimate certain aspects of a situation due to the lack of a wider perception of the situation.
3. Stability is the ability to remain stable under conditions that are unsettling by nature. Stability is closely linked to self-confidence, but highlights the ability to uphold elements of the identity that guarantee consistency as an antidote to exposure.
4. The ability to trust is the ability to enter a relationship in a situation, where the conditions are vague and unknown. Trust is usually based on the identification of commonalities. In this sense, trust is also linked to the ability to identify similarities, instead of highlighting differences, but also the ability to manage fear or cautiousness in relationships.
5. Resilience or resistance to stress is the ability to deal with situations where the person is confronted with an overload of stress due to overwhelming impressions. It can be described as the ability to activate energy to recover quickly from life-changing experiences and to turn those experiences into opportunities for positive development.

You-abilities:

The “You-abilities” summarize the attitudes that the individual demonstrates towards the experienced otherness. These abilities enable the person to enter into an interaction and understand the details and background of decisions taken in order to see the link to specific behaviour.

Curiosity/ openness and interest are similar in intentions but different in their form.

1. Curiosity is the ability to interact without pre-assumptions and intentions. Curiosity is often referred to as an ability that children naturally have and use to explore the world around them. (cf. Bennett, J. 2005: 9; Bennhold-Samaan 2004: 372) In adults, curiosity is often limited due to an existing frame of reference and the control factor that comes with it.
2. Openness, in comparison, is described as a conscious act of exposing oneself to unfamiliar worldviews and the effort of sense-making by finding links to existing experiences. Interest is a more cognitive driven form of openness, with the intention of gaining knowledge and widening one’s own framework of understanding.
3. Endurance is the ability to maintain the openness towards the newness over an extended period of time. Research suggests that in cultural learning processes, the learning curve is steep at the beginning but evens out quickly. (Kim 2004: 341) Maintaining the openness and interest is important to reach a level of integration.
4. Respect can be described as an attitude towards otherness. This attitude enables a neutral evaluation of a situation and the withholding of judgement. Furthermore it shows as an appreciation of differences as an enrichment of perspectives. (Clement/Clement 2002: 163)
5. Modesty is the ability to stand back and observe, as a way to act appropriately or even with humbleness in settings which are new and unknown. It is an ability to observe and integrate oneself in a group, as a way to understand the hidden dynamics.

We-abilities:

The “We-abilities” mark the abilities that serve as the resources for integrating new types of behaviour and different value orientation into the self. In this sense the “We-abilities” not only nourish the intercultural interaction, but lead to feelings of satisfaction for the acting person, as a result of the process of integrating the conflicting orientations.

1. Flexibility is a willingness to try different strategies, even if they sound irrational based on one’s own experience.
2. Reduction of complexity is an important ability in the process of negotiating and orientating meaning. In the intercultural context, people are confronted with a variety of interpretations and therefore need the ability to reduce complex situations by creating adequate systems of understanding.
3. Tolerance of frustration is the ability to accept the situation if results of an interaction are different to the initial expectation. This ability enables the individual to allow for a trial and error or learning by doing approach, in which the people involved continue to reflect on the dynamics and outcomes.
4. Tolerance of ambiguity marks the ability to accept ambiguous circumstances whilst maintaining the capacity to act and take decisions based on seemingly vague or contradictory conditions.
5. Role-distance means to distinguish reactions linked to role and person. It enables the person to discern whether a specific behaviour is linked to the role a person has in a specific situation. It is an analytical ability that helps to deal with the emotions of oneself and others.

4. Intercultural learning as a process

In terms of learning theory, the learning that has an effect on existing frames of reference is often described as transitional or transformative learning. “Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change.” (Mezirow 2009: 92). The starting point of intercultural learning is usually a situation in which people realize that their existing frame of reference is questioned by an action or an interpretation of others. This causes a feeling of disorientation or irritation. Solving this situation requires some reasoning with behavioural patterns that cause misunderstanding. The circumstances that touch deeper layers of our personality can be experienced as an

identity threat or attack. Strong emotions can be the result and often complicate the intercultural encounters. (Ting-Toomey 2004: 225) Taking the described dynamic into account, it is not surprising that intercultural learning is often experienced as a challenging endeavour. "Transformative learning is thus both profound and extensive, it demands a lot of mental energy and when accomplished it can often be experienced physically, typically as a feeling of relief or relaxation." (Illeris 2009: 14)

The unconscious fear that is connected to the intercultural learning process comes with the challenge of deconstructing concepts. The concepts are those which function as stabilisers of our identity and also of our society. Intercultural learning is therefore not only a process of understanding different value systems and accepting them, it is a process of integrating them into a system where they can co-exist, interlink and lead to new forms of being in the world. The experience of a possible co-existence of difference within oneself and the society is therefore an important perception that reduces fear of forced adaptation; "Our willingness to be changed by new cultural learning should increase when we understand that most (if not all) of us are capable of absorbing and integrating new and even incompatible elements into our existing mental perimeters without being destroyed by them." (Kim 2004: 350)

The development of intercultural competencies is a process of consolidating identity questions by building on a "double loop of reflection- reflection on one's psychological process and actions (insight), and oversight, reflection on social structures and roles in a situation." (Armstrong 2011: 35) In intercultural settings, the individual lacks the backing of the group and has to stand in for their own interpretation of reality, which leads to a friction and a feeling of discrepancy that seeks to be resolved. Negotiating a shared system of evaluation with others is a strenuous but reaffirming process. "Integrative agreements are especially interesting from a constructivist perspective because they involve reconstructing the problem [...] as well as dialectic integration [...]." (Evanoff 2006: 430) In this process of deconstruction and integration, synergies develop as a result of conscious negotiation and reaching agreement.

To accommodate the type of learning that is evident in intercultural environments, it is necessary to have learning settings that enable learners to bridge the gap between knowledge and emotion. Intercultural competence development is an ongoing process of reflection that cannot be limited to intercultural training (Bennhold-Samaan 2004: 378). Training can address the cognitive level of learning, but has many limitations, for example the sustainability of short-term interventions. To reach the level of identity, the learning needs to take place over a longer period of time and in an environment that enables reflection and raises awareness. Reflection is the core element of coaching and offers better opportunities to think about the intercultural situations which have been experienced. "Intercultural [...] coaching is different [...] as it is intended to increase the client's awareness of other cultures and systems where fundamentally different processes are at work. 'Awareness' not only means 'knowledge of' but also a deep understanding and acceptance that even what seems to be the most evident for the client is also part of a certain personal, social, organisational and cultural understanding." (Verhulst/Sprengel 2011: 163)

Coaching can be understood as a systematic process of reflection in which the person is supported by a professional outsider who encourages the person to take on different perspectives by using a variety of methods and tools. The introduced catalogue of abilities for intercultural competence can serve as an overall framework for an intercultural coaching process. Assessing the pre-condition and abilities as well as identifying developmental goals are characteristic elements of a coaching process. (Krämer/Nazarkiewicz 2012: 278) The catalogue of abilities can also be used for developing tools that support the improvement of the described clusters of abilities. In turn, this can enable the understanding that the development of these abilities will increase a person's skills in integrating cultural differences. Consequently the expansion of synergies as a product of integration is also enabled, which changes the frame of reference. Deconstructing intercultural competence serves the purpose of identifying entry points into reflection. If people get a better understanding of these sub-abilities, it will be easier to identify strategies that can be helpful in resolving the experienced challenges.

5. Conclusion

Referring back to the initial theses of this article, I argue that understanding the link between cultural and personal identity and the challenges each individual faces in the process of reaching an integrated cultural identity, is a core element in the development of intercultural competence. Intercultural interactions offer a platform upon which the friction of contradictory frames of reference can become apparent. The learning that comes out of these situations can be enhanced by supporting the individuals through structured forms of reflection. This also avoids the fall-back into mechanisms of defending one's own worldview as the only source of security. Developing an integrated cultural identity allows people to take on the role as 'active cells' in our fluid and global culture.

Literature

- Armstrong, Hilary (2011): Cultivating a Cultural Sensibility through Executive Coaching. In: Geoffrey Abbott; Michel Moral (Ed.): *The Routledge Companion to International Business Coaching*. London, New York: Routledge (Routledge Companions), 34–44.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (2008): *Flüchtige Zeiten. Leben in der Ungewissheit*. 1. Aufl. Hamburg: Hamburger Ed.
- Bennett, Janet M. (2005): *Designing Intercultural Training. Skills and Tools for the Practitioner*. ICPT. Winterthur (Workshop Material).
- Bennhold-Samaan, Laurette (2004): The Evolution of Cross-Cultural Training in the Peace Corps. In: Dan Landis; Janet M. Bennett; Milton J. Bennett (Ed.): *Handbook of Intercultural Training*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 363–394.
- Bieri, Peter (2013): *Wie wollen wir leben? Ungekürzte Ausg.* München: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verl. (dtv, 34801).
- Bozay, Kemal (2005): "--ich bin stolz, Türke zu sein!". Ethnisierung gesellschaftlicher Konflikte im Zeichen der Globalisierung. Schwalbach/Ts: Wochenschau.
- Clement, Ute; Clement, Ulrich (2002): Interkulturelles Coaching. In: Klaus Götz (Ed.): *Interkulturelles Lernen/ Interkulturelles Training*. München, Mering: Rainer Hampp Verlag (Managementkonzepte, Band 8), 155–166.
- Evanoff, Richard (2006): Integration in Intercultural Ethics. In: *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 30 (4), 421–530.
- Hansen, Klaus P. (2009): *Kultur, Kollektiv, Nation*. 1. Aufl. Passau: Stutz (Schriften der Forschungsstelle Grundlagen Kulturwissenschaft, Band 1).
- Illeris, Knud (2009): A Comprehensive Understanding of Human Learning. In: Knud Illeris (Ed.): *Contemporary Theories of Learning. Learning Theorists ... in their own Words*. 1. publ. London: Routledge, 7–20.
- Kim, Young Yun (2004): Long-Term Cross-Cultural Adaptation. Training Implications of an Integrative Theory. In: Dan Landis, Janet M. Bennett, Milton J. Bennett (Ed.): *Handbook of Intercultural Training*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 337–362.
- Kluckholm, Clyde; Murray, Henry Alexander (1949): *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Krämer, Gesa; Nazarkiewicz, Kirsten (2012): *Handbuch Interkulturelles Coaching*. Description based upon print version of record: Vandenhoeck et Ruprecht.
- Mezirow, Jack (2009): An Overview on Transformative Learning. In: Knud Illeris (Ed.): *Contemporary Theories of Learning. Learning Theorists ... in their own Words*. 1. publ. London: Routledge, 90–105.
- Rathje, Stefanie (2009): The Definition of Culture: An Application-oriented Overhaul. In: *Interculture-Online* <http://www.interculture-journal.com/> 8 (8), 35–58. Available online: <http://www.interculture-journal.com/index.php/icj/issue/view/19>, last checked on 19/08/2015.
- Scheffer, Jörg (2009): Entgrenzung durch neue Grenzen. In: *Interculture-Online* 8 (8), 19–34. Available online: <http://www.interculture-journal.com/index.php/icj/issue/view/19>, last checked on 19/08/2015.

- Steixner, Margret (2007): Lernraum Interkultur. Von interkultureller Erfahrung zu interkultureller Kompetenz. Wien: Südwind (Forum).
- Ting-Toomey, Stella (2004): Translating Conflict Face Negotiation Theory into Practice. In: Dan Landis, Janet M. Bennett; Milton J. Bennett (Ed.): Handbook of Intercultural Training. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 217–248.
- Trimpop, Rüdiger; Meynhardt, Timo (2002): Interkulturelle Trainings und Einsätze. Psychische Kompetenzen und Wirkungsmessungen. In: Klaus Götz (Ed.): Interkulturelles Lernen/ Interkulturelles Training. München, Mering: Rainer Hampp Verlag (Managementkonzepte, Band 8), 183–211.
- Verhulst, Monika; Sprengel, Rebecca (2011): Intercultural Coaching Tools. A Constructivist Approach. In: Geoffrey Abbott; Michel Moral (Ed.): The Routledge Companion to International Business Coaching. London, New York: Routledge (Routledge Companions), 163–178.
- Welsch, Wolfgang (2010): Was ist eigentlich Transkulturalität. In: Lucyna Darowska; Claudia Machold (Ed.): Hochschule als transkultureller Raum unter den Bedingungen von Internationalisierung und Migration. Eine Annäherung. Bielefeld: Transcript (Kultur und soziale Praxis), 39–66.