

Why does the Current Debate on Interculturality Prevent the Development of Intercultural Communication?

A Critical Note on the Interculturality Discourse

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In the last years the term “globalization” has become one of the most frequently used words and an umbrella term to describe the ongoing changes that accompany not only the end of the cold war and the breaking down of former strict boundaries, especially the iron curtain, but also the latest technological progresses. According to Robertson (1997) ‘globalization’ stands for the overlapping of global and local factors. The development of new communication and information technologies as well as improved transport systems resulted in the reduction of spatial and temporal distances. One consequence is an increasing number of intercultural contacts: More people than ever are confronted with foreigners, e.g. students, business men, tourists. In general, this development towards an increasing amount of cultural encounters includes great chances as well as a potential for conflicts, too. While the chance to learn from each other is quite obvious, a rather problematic aspect, that influences this learning process, is not always seen clearly: As the confrontation with different cultural backgrounds is an essential feature of all cultural encounters, the effect *may be* a tendency to strengthen the boundaries between oneself and ‘the other’, perceived as alien, because it is a widespread attitude to view ‘the other’ as a threat for one’s own identity.

In this context the renewed interest in the practical aim of ‘intercultural understanding’ is one of the most pressing tasks, and its realization today is at least as important as it was in the grounding year of SIETAR in 1975. Despite of the fact, that – compared to the actual situation - the context of the SIETAR’s foundation was very different, its main objective, namely to cope with cultural diversity, still has remained the same. On the one hand, this opens up the chance to reflect on the efficiency of the tools, which the ‘intercultural enterprise’ so far has developed to promote ‘intercultural understanding’. On the other hand, the question is to be posed, whether the connotations of cultural diversity are still the same: Is cultural diversity still considered to be responsible for a “culture shock”? And if the answer to this question is “yes”, there is yet another question to be asked, namely: Under these

circumstances, is there any chance for an ‘intercultural understanding’, especially the mutual understanding of two persons with different cultural backgrounds? Both questions coincide in the reflection on the nature of the conditions, that have to be established, if *mutual* understanding, that goes beyond ‘coping with cultural diversity for the sake of reaching the optimum of efficiency’ becomes the leading principle.

Over the last years there is an increasing amount of publications on intercultural topics, especially intercultural discourse and meetings (e.g. Auernheimer 1995, Bennett, M. 1998, Brislin / Yoshida 1994, Brocker / Nau 1997, Cesana 1999, Demorgon 1999, Gudykunst / Mody 2002, Hampden-Turner / Trompenaars 2000, Hofstede 1997, Kim 2001, Landis / Bhagat 1996, Luchtenberg 1999, Maletzke 1996, Matthes 1999, Samovar 2000, Samovar / Porter 1999, Thomas 1996, Thomas: im Druck, Ting-Toomey 1999, Ting-Toomey / Oetzel 2001). Intercultural Communication has become a standard topic of research.

The most popular publications postulate unbridgeable differences between two different cultures, but on the face of this discourse appears a cultural relativism which implies an equality of *all* cultures and *all* members of a culture or nation. But the appearances are deceptive: Under the cloak of this relativism and equality can be discovered a hidden universalistic tendency based on ‘western’ normative concepts like ‘intercultural’ competence, ‘intercultural’ understanding, human nature and so on. Such basic assumptions shared by the majority of approaches in the intercultural field already prevent ‘intercultural communication and understanding’ in its basic foundations. All in all a few indicators can be found, that hint at the development of a ‘new cultural imperialism’, that follows one universal logic, namely the maximization of efficiency and success (see Kalscheuer 2001; 2002). This central argument of one of our master theses will be outlined in this paper and illustrated by the works of the intercultural psychologist Alexander Thomas as well as Geert Hofstede, a representative of the intercultural management field. The paper envisages a critical reflection on the current debate on interculturality in order to prevent neocolonial or imperialistic outcomes as well as scientific and practical dead ends and because self-reflexivity is the first step towards the development of intercultural competencies.

Many difficulties in the intercultural discourse arise from the underlying concept of culture. As Alexander Thomas’ concept of culture is very influential in the interculturality debate and is often referred to in order to work out cultural differences, his concept will serve as an

illustration for the interculturalists' common view on culture. Thomas defines culture as an universal orientation-system, that is valid for *all* members of a society, nation, organization or group (see Thomas: im Druck) In his opinion every culture has a unique "cultural standard", that distinguishes it from all other cultures. "Cultural standards" define, who belongs to a culture and what is perceived as 'known' and what appears as 'alien' (see Thomas 1996). In this perspective the self' and 'the other' appear as socially and culturally determined. For example Thomas showed, that cultures differ from each other with regard to their management of distances: In contrast to the Germans, who normally follow the principle of maximizing distance, Americans on the contrary tend to minimize distances – a fact that can be underlined by looking at different greeting practices or the space maintained between two interacting persons (see Thomas 1996). Such markers of difference serve to construct a seemingly unbridgeable divide between 'the self' and 'the other'.

Following Thomas' approach, the divergence of various "cultural standards" normally is 'forgotten', when the central challenge is to 'function' within one's own culture. Within the scope of one's own culture the culture-specific orientation-system, that is shared by *all* members, guarantees the functioning of the people's behavior, as it is supposed that they know about each others expectations, that therefore can be anticipated. Quite the contrary in the intercultural context: Because no common orientation-system is shared, that the interactionists, who are embedded in different cultures, can rely on, the divergence of the "cultural standards" firstly comes to mind and causes trouble. At this point, it is argued, a "culture shock" is suffered by people, who are not used to the 'foreign' "cultural standards". Feelings of anxiety, anger and the like, that originate in such situations, are often balanced by blaming the other – a coping strategy, that by the way strengthens existing stereotypes.

A similar chain of arguments is to be found in Geert Hofstede's conception of "mental models". In accordance to Thomas' concept of the cultural particularity of the orientation-systems, in Geert Hofstede's approach "mental programs", that are learned in the early childhood and after that fully internalized and hardly to change, are responsible for 'intercultural misunderstandings'. The reason for the stability of "mental programs" is that once they have been internalized, they become a central component of one's own identity, which can't be questioned because of the need for certainty. In his extensive analysis of IBM-employees from fifty nations, Hofstede found four dimensions of cultural differences, namely power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, masculinity vs. femininity and the reduction

of uncertainty (see Hofstede 1997). Dichotomies like these are also used by Triandis, Trompenaars and Hamden-Turner and many other interculturalists to point out differences between different cultures.

Both approaches, which we have introduced very briefly, are referred to in intercultural training and learning programs. In order to enable people, who have to go abroad (e.g. managers) to get along in the 'foreign' context, numerous week-end courses of different kinds are offered, in which it is argued, that is indispensable to become aware of the 'own' "cultural standards" as well as the 'foreign' "cultural standards", if "intercultural competencies" are to be developed. This argument can be traced back to the grounding figure of the interculturality discourse, the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall. Even in 1959 Hall tackled the problem of temporal and spatial differences between different cultures. Especially in his work *Beyond Culture* (1976) he dealt with the difficulties, that go hand in hand with the process of going beyond one's 'own' culture. At the same time he argued, that leaving one's 'own' cultural prison would be the only chance to overcome misunderstandings, that appear in the 'intercultural' context and that are the result of a "cultural blindness" (see Hall 1976).

A closer look at the mentioned concept of culture, that has been illustrated by the works of Alexander Thomas and Geert Hofstede, but that is not restricted to their approaches, reveals several difficulties, that will be outlined in the following (for a critique of Thomas' approach see: Allolio-Näcke; Kalscheuer & Shimada 2002):

1. First of all it imagines culture as a homogeneous and stable entity. Thereby the findings of recent cultural theory are ignored, that take into account the increasing mixture of cultures and people within each culture. Recently concepts of culture are gaining prominence, which emphasize their hybrid nature (see Bhabba 1994, Hannerz 1987). There has taken place a shift from the original socio-cultural concepts of unity in terms of a homogenous national culture to concepts accentuating difference. This new way of thinking aims at overcoming any kind of bi-polar difference. Especially the anthropologists Hannerz (1987), Pieterse (1994) and Shweder (1990) & Sullivan (1990) refuse to think of culture as homogeneous and stable. Instead they stress the reciprocal influences of cultures, that give birth to the "puzzling form" of cultures in nowadays (see Welsch 1999) and reveals the interpenetration of 'the self' and 'the other'.

Consequently the limits of the universalism as well as relativism can no longer be overlooked. Despite all their distinctiveness both positions fail to recognize the reciprocal influences that cultures have on each other. As example Milton Bennett's comparison of sympathy and empathy can be cited: On the one side the "Golden Rule" is by nature universalistic, because it implies an essential similarity and the equality of *all* people with its connection to the term "sympathy" – meaning "the imaginative placing of ourselves in another person's position" (Bennett 1998: 197). On the other side, the acceptance of a multiple reality, that is essentially based on difference, is deeply obliged to the term "empathy" – standing for "participating" in other "perspectives" (see Bennett 1998: 207) - and therefore represents a rather relativistic position. The important point is, that Bennett's opposition doesn't fulfil the conditions of the contemporary complexity of cultures any longer. As Bennett's approach is not the only one being out of date, it is an indispensable challenge for all interculturalists to respond to recent findings in cultural theory. While accentuating this problem we don't want to conceal that even in hybrid approaches the dichotomy of universalism and relativism hasn't been overcome yet: Imagined "third spaces" (Bhabha 1994) or "in between"-positions aren't stable; actually persons become – any time - involved in situations where they have to position themselves. There is no individual existing in a powerfree space; in each situation it is part of power relations (see Foucault 1994, 1996; Näcke & Park 2000). Insofar we think that it is an utopian enterprise to gain a way out of the dichotomy of universalism and relativism. In this perspective it is more important to position oneself on the background of one's particular political and scientific interests (see Spivak 1988, 1990, 1993).

2. The following difficulties directly can be deduced from the former treated concept of culture. First of all the assumption of a homogeneous concept of culture and human nature, that derives from a fixed concept of identity and systematically ignores the cultural diversity originating from the increasing mixture of people and cultures, leads to an essentializing of cultural differences and a strengthening of the boundaries between different cultures. As cultures are homogenous in themselves it is relatively easy to make out differences in the 'intercultural' perspective, because in the cross-cultural contact people rather recognize 'the other', which seems different, strange and alien to them, than 'the common', the similar. Images of 'the other' tend to evoke, e.g.

strengthen stereotypes, especially when they are diametrically opposed to the 'own'. Moreover cultural differences, that are usually conceived as dichotomies (e.g. Hall's distinction of monochronic vs. polychronic time, Triandis' opposition of individualism and collectivism and other polarized cultural differences to be found by Trompenaars & Hamden-Turner) evoke the impression to be ontological and therefore hardly or never to overcome. One could call it the establishing of an "imaginative geography" in the sense of Edward Said (1994). In this manner the cultural boundaries shift in nature: They aren't viewed any longer as what they really are, namely constructions of protagonists, but as ontological boundaries that are manifestations of a special psychic structure. By referring to ontological boundaries the interculturalists create the conditions, which apparently require 'intercultural education'. If it is assumed, that cultural differences are unbridgeable for ordinary people – who are pronounced as minor and therefore need professional help from outside. Interactionists in cross-cultural contexts have to be trained and educated to cope with intercultural situations. The consequence is an immense job creation, especially in the prosperous field of management training programs, which costs are extraordinarily high. All in all you can say that is *one* strategy to legitimizing themselves offers – *another one* is the reciprocal citation in relevant journal. The effect is that the protagonists' responsibility for the success of interactions is underestimated (see Kalscheuer 2001; 2002).

3. A further function of artificial cultural boundaries obviously is the construction of a distance, symbolized by the boundary, that is established between oneself and 'the other' not only undresses the 'foreign's frightening strangeness, but guarantees the 'self' at the same time. Maybe this fact can be described as a fundamental ambivalence of cultural boundaries: While the construction of boundaries inevitably brings about artificial identities of the unknown 'other', the establishment of boundaries is a central tool and a precondition for the constitution of the 'self'. Insofar it is no secret, that the 'other' is *used* for the sake of reestablishing one's 'own' uncertain self, like Lacan (1949), Kristeva (1972) and others have outlined. It is not exaggerated to postulate that the other is instrumentalized in the interest of the 'own'. A fact, that becomes extraordinarily clear, when you have a look at intercultural training programs, that don't hesitate to encourage people going abroad by claiming that 'the other' potentially can be useful. For this reason it is legitimate to say that the interest of many

managers, who go abroad, primarily is to expand ‘western’ management strategies to the ‘foreign’ terrain and not to *really* understand the other.

This results directly from the used scientific paradigms: behaviorism and its cognitive turned equivalent. For instance Alexander Thomas directly uses the vocabulary of behaviorism paradigm that was successful in the time, in which the cultural debate was born too. Others, e.g. Geert Hofstede, use the cognitivistic turned vocabulary, especially the computer metaphor, that means he uses expressions such as “mental model” and “software of the mind”; expressions that are not more illuminating than the concept of the “black box” (for argumentation see Chapter I II in Holzkamp 1995). As both approaches rely on the concept of conditional behavior they can’t conceptualize mutual understanding. The main goal is to gain quick and effective behavior, so that the outcome of the cultural contact is more important than the internal process of mutual understanding. Consequently intercultural training programs focus primarily on negotiations of behavioral instructions, such as “Don’t give an umbrella as a gift to the Taiwanese, because it signalizes separation.” So these programs aim at analyzing situations by abstracting from the concrete protagonists but *not* on the processes of communication and understanding. Instead of dealing with mutual understanding of two people behavior is interpreted. If they would seek for mutual understanding in the succession of Dilthey (1992), they couldn’t abstract from individuals and specific situations, because mutual understanding means ‘trying to walk in someone else’s shoes’ or in other words to be imaginatively in *his* position. As a consequence the other isn’t regarded as a fellow but rather functions as a vehicle in reproducing ‘western’ prejudices, because he is interchangeable. His subjectivity or the particular relation between the protagonist, go beyond the frame of reference.

In sum, there can be extracted *one* universal logic in the intercultural management field which is not reduced to this specific sector but goes throughout the entire debate on interculturality with its increasing range of research areas – e.g. school and university exchange, consultants in social and health organizations and developmental aid. This is not surprising because these approaches originate from the management field they are *all* based on the logic of success and efficiency and not on the logic of *real understanding*. Americans and Europeans only instrumentalize ‘the other’ insofar,

that they can manage their lives there without detailed knowledge of the specific contexts.

4. Beside the already mentioned difficulties, the application of concepts, that are deeply rooted in ‘western’ culture and its particularity, to ‘non-western’ contexts is problematic (e.g. Kim 1997). One reason is the underlying concept of human nature. European and American (‘western’) values – such as equality – are seen as necessary and valid for *all* cultures. Similarly ‘western’ scientific concepts – such as the underlying concept of culture (with its regard to the concepts of nation and race – (see Balibar 1998), ‘intercultural’ competence and understanding, individualism vs. collectivism and so on – are seen as valid for *all* cultures, too. This means a hidden universalism that ignores fundamental asymmetries concerning the distribution of power; a point which can be underlined by the fact that ‘non-western’ cultures now have to participate in an “intercultural discourse”, that is entirely dominated by ‘western’ concepts. ‘Non-western’ cultures have to involve in the intercultural communication debate, because otherwise they get cut off from the economic development, so that there remain no resources to force the indigenous development. In so far as indigenous concepts already exist that won’t be cited by ‘western’ scientific community. An attitude, that doesn’t seem to care about the ‘other’ as human at all, but only seeks for the other’s support in order to be efficient, can be titled as an indicator for a “new cultural imperialism”. (see Kalscheuer 2001).

These difficulties are to be found throughout the majority of intercultural approaches , theoretical as well as practical – and they can be seen as indicators for a specific “cultural blindness” that prevents *real* intercultural understanding.

In our paper we didn’t want to evoke the impression, that these models of ‘intercultural communication’ are right or wrong. We wanted to initiate a reflection on the world views which are created by these models. The question is not whose ideas are the better ones, it is rather the challenge to cope with divergent cultural believes and assumptions. The basic decision has to be to recognize all cultures and members as equal and human beings. Not the models themselves have to be questioned, but one has to position himself concerning the role of alternative world views. And if the die is cast one must not hide his perspectives on the world behind blurring placebos. Definitely the implications of various models and their

effects on the construction of reality – in the sense of Michel Foucault (see Jäger 1999) - have to be outlined.

At the end we recommend an interpretation of the “R” in the term SIETAR: The first step has to be research on intercultural phenomena. The second step has to be a reflection on the own underlying worldview and ones own view on the human nature. Last but not least the third step will be to the recognition of consequences that result from the own approach. That also means to evaluate and assess the previous debate on interculturality for the sake of developing adequate tools for the contemporary as well as the prospective world. ‘Til now in our opinion the “R” in the term SIETAR was interpreted in a different succession: First research, second recognition and then reflection in the sense of abstraction. Hopefully we gave you an interesting impulse for further studies.

Thank you for your interest.

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