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Taking Multiplicity Seriously: Towards new approaches for Intercultural Practitioners

Vielfältigkeit ernst nehmen: Neue Ansätze für interkulturelle Praktiker

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Abstract (English)

The field of intercultural communication is still strongly influenced by an essentialist and reified understanding of culture. In many approaches to intercultural communication for practicitioners, this can be recognized in an emphasis on an assumed uniformity within cultures; although variety within cultures is often acknowledged, this is mostly seen as exceptions and deviations from the norm, and rarely taken as a starting point to analyze or approach intercultural situations.

Drawing on practical experiences from intercultural training and consultancy, the pitfalls and problems of an approach that assumes uniformity are discussed.

In the remainder of the article, an attempt is made to construct an alternative approach to intercultural communication that instead uses multiplicity as a basic tenet for conceptualizing culture.

Keywords: multiplicity, heterogeneity, essentialism, intercultural training, ethics

Abstract (Deutsch)

Interkulturelle Kommunikation wird noch immer stark von einem essentialistischen und verdinglichtem Verständnis von Kultur beeinflusst. Dies ist vor allem sichtbar in den vielen Ansätzen der interkulturellen Kommunikation in denen von einer Uniformität innerhalb verschiedener Kulturen ausgegangen wird. Vielfältigkeit innerhalb von Kulturen ist meistens eher eine Ausnahme bzw. Abweichung von der Norm und dient nur selten als Ausgangspunkt um interkulturelle Situationen zu erläutern oder zu erklären.

In diesem Artikel werden, basierend auf Erfahrungen aus interkulturellen Trainings und Beratungen, die Fallstricke und Probleme diskutiert, die durch diese Annahme entstehen.

Im weiterführenden Teil des Artikels wird ein alternativer Ansatz vorgestellt, der Vielfältigkeit innerhalb einer Kultur als Grundprinzip annimmt.

Stichworte: Vielfältigkeit, Heterogenität, Essentialismus, Interkulturelles Training, Ethik

1. Introduction

The field of intercultural communication has grown considerably in the last decades, both as a scientific research niche and a field for training, consultancy and education. Globalization and migration underline the increasing need for greater understanding of the interaction between people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Interculturalists, as the practitioners of intercultural communication training and advice are often called, have probably made a substantial contribution to what we could call "intercultural tolerance": the recognition that there are many ways to perceive the world, different traditions with meaningful ideas and that human creativity can create a great variety of life, working and communication styles. Yet, intercultural communication's rise to fame has come with the price of increasing criticism from other social sciences (e. g. Hannerz 1999, Nyiri & Breidenbach 2009, McSweeney 2002).

Most criticism in academia revolves around the way that "culture" itself is being conceptualized, where interculturalists are being accused of falling into the traps of *essentialism* and *reification*. Essentialism presumes that "particular things have essences which serve to identify them as the particular things that they are" (Bullock and Trombely 1997:283 in Holiday et al 2010:72). When culture is essentialized, it is presumed that cultures have an invisible and unchangeable essence that defines its' members and makes them *essentially* different from others. Reification is "the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things" (Burger & Luckman 1996:89). When culture is reified, it is seen as a real *thing*, that actually *does* something and that can be categorized, labeled and even measured. Essentialist and reified understandings of culture, that are also dominant in public discourse, present cultures as concrete entities and can be recognized in common phrases about "working with different cultures", "people of another culture" and "behavior that does not fit in someone's culture". Such approaches to culture are heavily criticized for denying the dynamic and complex meaning that culture plays in social life (Dahlen 1997) and for presenting culture as a simplistic explanation for behavior instead of something that in itself is in need of explanation.

In most approaches to intercultural communication, essentialism and reification are reflected in the assumption that culture is a force that creates *uniformity*. It is assumed that, even though individual members can be different due to their personality, deep down there is something essential and specific for a certain culture that is shared by all of its' members. This essence, often in the shape of *core values* or *basic assumptions* that are formed by a culture's history, is then used to explain virtually all phenomena within a culture[2]. The supposed uniformity of cultures makes it possible to draw clear boundaries as to who belongs to what culture and how that culture can be compared to other cultures. This often takes the form of models that compare cultures on a number of dimensions, giving *scores* for their degree of "collectivism" or "individualism" (Hofstede 1991), their preference for "specific" or "diffuse" relations (Trompenaars 1993), or categorizing them as "linear active" or "re-active" cultures (Lewis 1996). Sometimes these models rely on statistical data, where the average 'score' is considered as being representative for a culture (Hofstede 1991, Trompenaars 1993) and sometimes they seem to rely on the personal observations of the authors (Lewis 1996, Pinto 1994). These comparisons create an overview of cultures and their main traits and characteristics, so that one can predict what kinds of behaviors and attitudes one can expect when interacting with its' members. Misunderstandings in intercultural situations can then effectively be explained by looking at the cultural backgrounds of the participants and how their deeper value systems are unconsciously steering their perceptions, expectations and behavior. All of this assumes that there is a high degree of uniformity within cultures; cultural uniformity is then not only a reflection of essentialism but is also the assumption that maintains its

hold on the field of intercultural communication.

In spite of the criticism of the essentialism and reification in intercultural theory and practice, also increasingly by scholars of intercultural communication themselves (e. g. Jensen 2004, Holiday 2011, Pillar 2011), it seems that this rarely leads to a re-evaluation of theories, models and methods. In many cases, essentialism is rejected only to be replaced with a "neo-essentialism" (Holiday 2011:6) that emphasizes that cultures are dynamic and heterogeneous yet continues to generalize and categorize them. There seems to be a lack of real alternatives that fundamentally change the way that intercultural issues are addressed. I believe that essentialism and reification are mainly reflected in the assumption of cultural uniformity, so that problematizing and reconstructing this assumption creates a route for exploring true alternative approaches to intercultural communication. The main question for the intercultural field that follows from this is: *how can the assumption of cultural uniformity in approaches to intercultural communication be replaced, and what are the implications of this for intercultural practice?*

In the following article, I will first explore where and why the assumption of cultural uniformity can lead to problems for practitioners in the field of intercultural communication, drawing mainly on my own experiences as an intercultural trainer and consultant. I will then try to explore an alternative approach that takes the multiplicity within cultures, as opposed to uniformity, as a starting point. This exploration will take place on three levels: its' main assumptions, its' implications for discourse and its' implications for interaction.

2. The problems of cultural uniformity

Drawing on my own experiences and observations as an intercultural trainer and consultant, I notice several shortcomings and pitfalls that come with dominant approaches towards intercul-

tural communication based on cultural uniformity. I will mention some of the main undesired consequences of such approaches as I have encountered them in practice.

Most models and approaches assume uniformity on the national level: it is often taken for granted that countries 'possess' traits, patterns and customs that set them apart from other countries. More often than not, the supposed similarities between a country's inhabitants are being emphasized in order to create a manageable overview that can be contrasted with the trainees' "own" national culture. Although this can lead to meaningful reflections, it is also often a serious simplification of reality. The diversity within national cultures, where regional, company and class differences create a variety of perspectives and behavior within, or sometimes across, nation states, is systematically overlooked. This idea of national cultures as homogeneous and natural is often traced back to early nation building, when countries were assumed to have a unique *national personality* or *Volksseele* that legitimized a primary identification of people with their country over regional, religious or class identifications (Risager 2012). In other words: the idea of "national unity" on a cultural level was politically and historically constructed, but still serves as a basis of most intercultural theory. Whereas many intercultural trainers and consultants are aware that in reality, cultural differences are in no ways confined to national borders, this variety is rarely the starting point of any intercultural analysis.

The assumption of uniformity within cultures can often lead to stereotyping. Descriptions of norms, patterns and styles then become descriptions of individual people, who in reality will not always conform to the image that was created. Information about Dutch, British or Chinese culture then creates an image of *the* Dutchman, *the* Briton or *the* Chinese. Aforementioned dimension-based models of cross- or intercultural communication then provide information on the average scores of countries, but provide little help for

interacting with the vast amount of people that do not behave *averagely*. Although such general guidelines can often give trainees a reassuring feeling of *knowing what to expect*, this can prove to be a false sense of security when these stereotypes are challenged by reality; how to deal then, with the Chinese person that is very outspoken and opinionated, or with the Finnish person who turns out to be very expressive and outgoing? *Averages* provide little guidelines for interaction when the individual encountered turns out to be "untypical" for their group.

Adversely, an approach that invites to see people merely as representatives of their culture can effectively hide more situational explanations. This perspective, sometimes referred to as "culturalization" (Hofman 2014), then masks the influence of power differences or organizational factors. A culturalizing approach[3] implicitly encourages people to rely on cultural factors for understanding where there could be other explanations that are more plausible. A professional football trainer can then assume that his new Liberian forward played egocentrically "because of his culture" without considering the pressure that this player was experiencing due to the short time period he received to prove himself. An NGO can request a workshop about "Venezuelan culture" to improve their troublesome working relationship with their local office, while overlooking the distrust that an integrity investigation shortly after opening the office had caused. When culture is assumed to be a one-shaped and inescapable thing, it can easily overshadow other causal factors at play.

Sometimes, the images that we as interculturalists invented to create understanding and empathy can even have counterproductive effects. In my experience, this happens when they have the unintended effect of replacing people's ethnocentric worldview with one-dimensional and simplistic categories of others, leading to conclusions like: "Participative management doesn't work with Indians. They're used to *hierarchy*, so it is best to boss them

around", or "Since Moroccans are from a *shame culture*, you need to humiliate them in front of their own people to change their behavior", (as was a serious policy suggestion by a Dutch alderman to counter criminal behaviour by Moroccan-Dutch youngsters).

The emphasis on nationality is sometimes replaced with ethnicity or religion, especially in discussions of diversity, multiculturalism and migration. The effect is the same, when such discussions revolve around *the* Muslim or even *the* immigrant; people's behavior is implicitly externalized, as it seems to be caused by their alien, seemingly irrational culture instead of by the human needs and emotions that govern our own behavior. The damage this creates to trust and empathy is something that should not be underestimated.

Additionally, the emphasis on cultural uniformity can have the downside that it leaves little space for people to connect. Attention for cultural differences is frequently associated with building bridges between people and bringing people closer together. Unfortunately, it can also have the opposite effect; a discourse of cultures as homogenic and separate islands can discourage people from seeing even the most obvious similarities, because they are to occupied with focusing on their assumed "otherness" (Holiday 2010). If people are told that they belong to a single cultural tradition, this can lead them to overlook even obvious commonalities that could create the space for understanding or connection. A neighbor can conclude that is too much of an effort to relate to the veiled mothers at the playground because of their *alien culture*, not realizing that their concerns are no different than those of the mothers that sat at the same playground to watch their children one generation ago.[4] A woman that was involved in– but not responsible for- a tragic car accident in which a young Moroccan man lost his life, can be told not to offer her condolences to the family since- due to their collective culture- this will inevitably lead to a violent response.[5] The experience of cultural difference can then sometimes

serve as a reason or an excuse (Hoffman 2014) not to engage with, empathize or trust others. The problem with building bridges, then, is that it can have the unintended effect of maintaining a cliff.[6]

This lack of space for connection extends from connections *between* people to connections *within* people. Many of my training participants over the years have been children of mixed parents, individuals that grew up and lived in several countries or children of immigrants that identified with several countries and traditions at the same time. I have found many of them having problems recognizing themselves in a worldview of separate, monolithic cultures, and getting especially irritated if they are "assigned" to a specific cultural orientation, style or dimensional *score*. The solution in labeling these people as *bicultural* or even *multicultural* is undoubtedly well intended, but upholds or even strengthens the impression of separately operating cultures (even within one individual!).

Perhaps it is the most pressing shortcoming of the dominant understanding of culture, that it provides little help when it comes to the actual *interaction* between people of different cultural backgrounds. Many theories and methods are *cross-cultural* rather than *inter-cultural*; from the assumption of uniformity within cultures, they categorize and *compare* cultures but they rarely actually look at what happens in the *inter*action between them. Cross-cultural theories, from the premise that people within uniform cultures are hardly ever exposed to people with different styles or ideas, present these interactions as the inevitable collision between different cultural representatives. They hardly seem to give any credit to the human capabilities of reflection, empathy or flexibility. Not only can this induce an unrealistically large fear with trainees to make "mistakes" it also induces power-questions into intercultural situations, since it begs questions of the *who is going to adapt to whom*-kind.

This shortcoming is possibly felt strongest in the field of ethics. From the assumption of cultural uniformity one is tempted to presume that cultural norms are never questioned or problematized within cultures, and the ideal of intercultural tolerance strongly discourages people to judge any behavior outside of their own culture.[7] In some cases, this can lead to "culture" being used as a justification of clear cases of abuse, like in the following excerpt from a textbook about international business, on the mistreatment of foreign workers in the Middle East:

> "The frequent reports of abuse by their employers are widely known. This derives from the fact that Saudi-Arabians and Arabians from the Emirates strongly value inequality in social status (...). In a society where one of the basic assumptions of a culture is the inequality of humans based on social or ethnic status, the abuse is an abuse for the victims, but a right, or something natural, for the perpetrators" (Huijser & Huijser 2011:85).

Presenting violations of human rights and physical integrity as a natural part of a culture is not only offensive to the victims, that are withheld a legitimate opportunity to protest against such acts, but also to the members of the "culture" in question that is apparently inevitably prone to produce such behavior.

The norm of cultural relativism, that claims behavior can only be judged within its own cultural context and that was once applied to argue for the autonomy of colonized people (Van Asperen 2001) seems to fall short in a world where people interact physically, mentally or digitally all over the world. The status quo of interculturalism provides very few guidelines for discussing the most sensitive intercultural issues, and provides a far too easy way out of complex moral discussions by using "culture" as an excuse to hide behind. Interculturalists' blind spot for the ethical dimensions of their field may be one of the most urgent reasons to re-evaluate their concepts.

3.   Towards multiplicity

Considering the extensive criticism and discussions, reconceptualizing culture is a challenging and complex task. Milton

Bennett (2005) makes the fair point that the act of defining culture can in itself be considered culture; this implies that is difficult to find a definition that suits everyone for all conceivable situations. As interculturalists we should rather, according to Bennett, pursue a definition that suits our interactional goals. Considering the flaws of a uniformity-based conceptualization as mentioned above, is seems worth the effort to reconceptualize culture and intercultural communication from a perspective that stresses *multiplicity* instead.

If we were to replace the assumption of uniformity within cultures with the assumption of multiplicity, where would this lead us? Instead of seeing cultures as uniform, coherent entities to which exceptions are thinkable, they would be seen as a platform that host a variety of positions, perspectives and concerns. If we could differentiate endlessly within cultures, however, this begs the question how we could ever say anything meaningful about them. It also conflicts with many people's experiences, where they can on the one hand express an endless amount of differences and nuances about their *own* cultures whereas at the same time find a sense of belonging and familiarity that makes them feel *"at home"*. It is exactly these two apparently opposing perspectives that provide the basis for an alternative conceptualization of culture that centralizes multiplicity without denying the sense of stability that cultures provide.

The interculturalist Stefanie Rathje (2007, 2009) reconciles the dilemma by claiming that it is exactly the sense of normality with inherent differences that expresses culture. Culture is consequently what creates cohesion in spite of differences or even conflicts that we feel familiar with; it is not a mold that cuts everyone up to the same size and shape, but rather the glue that keeps differences together. To an outsider, these differences can feel strange and unfamiliar, but to its' members they feel *normal*, however their own positions in it may diverge. Rathje gives the clarifying example of a person visiting Thai-

land, where he sees an election poster of a political party. Even if someone would explain to him in detail the slogans on the poster or even the position and ideology, this would still not give him a sense of familiarity or normality with Thai culture and society, not even if he would agree with it fully. In his *own culture*, he would obviously also not agree with all political parties that are present. Yet he would understand how they relate to one another, hence experiencing a sense of normality with the differences in political views available. In the words of cultural historian Klaus Hansen (in Rathje 2009:49):

> *"We recognize [...] [divergent] points of view, and when we hear them, we know that we are at home."*

This does not deny the existence of dominant or common behaviors or views within a group, but to be part of that group one does not necessarily need to share them: being used to them is more than enough. It means that whereas going camping and eating raw herring can be considered common behavior in The Netherlands, I do not need to actually engage in these activities to feel just as *Dutch* as people that do. Feeling that these behaviors are "normal" is fortunately enough for me to feel at home.

A key element of acknowledging the multiplicity of *cultures* would be to acknowledge the multiplicity of *people*. If we see cultures as entities that are comprised of many different elements, this means that the members of those cultures consequently have memberships of more identity groups than just their national or ethnic belonging.[8] This implies that people, depending on their class- or political position for instance, can take up very different positions within their national culture. Instead of only accounting for the *primary collectivity* of nationality or ethnicity, *multicollectivity* can be assumed in any human being. It can be argued that it is a natural, even empirical phenomenon that people are members of several groups and consequently have several identities and even loyalties. Children of mixed parents, immigrants and

third-culture kids may be more extreme examples of this, but essentially everyone needs to function in a diverse array of social environments where values, expectations and behavior may differ. Dealing with cultural differences then, starts with dealing with the different identities, roles and sides we carry within ourselves. The experience of *bi-* or *multicultural* people in being part of different collectives is hence at most *gradually* different from those that only belong to one national or ethnic culture (but to many other collectives based on different identities). At the same time, an acknowledgement of the multicollectivity within all people opens up the space to see differences *and* similarities in any individual encounter; neighbors with different ethnic backgrounds could focus on the shared neighborhood and living concerns instead of the differences in ethnicity that potentially divides them.

Lastly, accepting multiplicity would also mean a multiplicity of *outcomes*. Of course discussions of culture will involve mention of general patterns and the prediction of certain behaviors and responses. Frequently, however, there seems to be a tendency to desire and provide exact and definite answers about cultures: the Chinese would *always* choose money over leisure time, Arabs would *never* accept a woman as their superior and the Dutch will *always* give you direct and honest feedback. In practice, cultures do not always give exact guidelines about how to handle, but several scripts that can be followed (or not) depending on the specific situation and individual. Sometimes a Chinese person can prioritize spending more time at home, many Arabs will accept a female boss (even if it was only out of strategic concerns) and, most certainly, there are many situations where the Dutch will shy away from telling others what they are *really* thinking.

What characterizes *intercultural* interactions is the lack of a sense of familiarity or normality, leading to a sense of strangeness. The approach of Gudykunst and Kim (1996), who describe intercultural communication, as communi-cation between *strangers* is helpful to further understand what happens in intercultural situations. Their research has shown how the experience of strangeness leads to anxiety and uncertainty, preventing an effective interaction. It is also in these situations that one needs to be mindful of potential *in-and-out group mechanisms* that lead to exclusion of and negative attributions to the perceived cultural other and to stereotyping (Gudykunst / Kim 1996) This strangeness is a gradual concept and in the end a subjective one: for some, going to a Turkish grocery shop down the street can feel extremely alien and unexpected, for others, it can be part of the daily routine. *Strangeness* is not limited to international or interethnic contact: an interaction between with a person of a different nationality, but a similar educational background may not be experienced as 'intercultural', whereas talking to a neighbor with the same nationality but working in an unfamiliar job environment might well be. It is the experience of cultural strangeness that legitimizes the attention for intercultural communication and competences, since it is in these situations that these skills need to be applied. But most importantly, it also means that *interculturality* is at most a temporary state in an interaction that can be overcome; if not, friendships and even relationships with people of other backgrounds would be deemed to forever float in intercultural space.

4.   Talking culture in multiples: avoiding single stories

The first implication for us as interculturalists of assuming multiplicity instead of uniformity, relates to how we talk (about) culture and cultural differences. This means adopting the habit of talking about cultures, groups and even individuals in multiples. Considering how the world is organized today and the structures supporting the status of the nation state, it is unavoidable in many cases to talk about 'countries' when talking or thinking about culture. It is neither possible nor necessary to avoid mentioning national cultures at any

cost. Rather, an effort should be made to show the many different sides and faces of a country, preventing what the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie (2009) calls "single stories"; stories that only show one side of a culture, group or person create stereotypes, and "the problem with stereotypes", Adichie says, "is not necessarily that they are *untrue*, but that they are *incomplete*" (Adichie 2009).

By making an effort to tell multiple stories about countries, cultures and people, we can adversely try to understand other cultures or groups by seeing them in the light of multiple traditions, patterns, and positions. This not only gives way to a more nuanced and fair analysis of a situation, but also opens up more possibilities to connect and cooperate. A German yoga teacher that intends to introduce his methods in Russia could explain to his students that his Russian trainees are unlike the Russians they met in all-inclusive hotels, but that there is another side to Russia with a long tradition in ballet and poetry. A French expat-trainee that feels that she just cannot connect to Dutch people, can be helped by trying to identify the kind of Dutch people that she *will* share interests with.

Teaching people about a culture then, does not mean showing them a singular consistent pattern, but rather showing them the interrelations, connections or conflicts between the different groups and positions within a culture. This implies that individual people need not *only* be understood through their conformity to the average or norm in their group, but through their membership of other meaningful groups and the specific position they take within their broader (national) culture. Instead of just considering this as an exception to the (statistical) norm, this can be understood as part of an ongoing discussion within society where people have different positions and concerns depending on (for instance) class and education level. This can- for example- help a football trainer understand that the lamentable work-ethic of his new Japanese player is perhaps not typically Japanese as he expected it, but that it fits into the Japanese football subculture that attracts those that rebel against the conformity and hierarchy in broader Japanese society.

Some of the concepts and dimensions that are often applied can still be helpful in understanding a culture, but instead of making a one-sided account of *individualism*, we can explain to what degree this relates to education level. Instead of stating the degree of *power distance* we can explore how this is experienced depending on one's class position. To explain a culture then is not so much giving someone *a key*, to unveil the hidden secrets so that everything will fall into place, but rather *a compass* that helps to navigate between all the different currents and make sense of the differences and inconsistencies they come across. Considering the multiplicity of outcomes, it means that there are not always definitive answers to questions about how best to behave in another culture; I have personally found that the most truthful and helpful answers to questions about a culture always begin with "it depends".

The multiplicity within countries and cultures extends to the multiplicity within communities. Immigrant communities for example, are frequently presented as internally homogeneous. In reality, the differences in generation, education and socio-economic position between and within communities have urged many leading researchers of integration and multiculturalism to speak of "superdiversity" (Vertovec 2006, Blommaerts 2011, Prins 2013, Crul 2013). Instead of seeing debates among Turkish Dutch (wo)men around such issues as gender roles and sexuality as conflicts between representatives of "'true" Turkish culture and "integrated" Turkish-Dutchmen or -women, it would make more sense to see them as conflicts between people with different perspectives within an ethnic community, comparable to the differences in perspective between a middle-class Amsterdammer and an orthodox Christian from the Dutch *Bible belt* area. These are not innocent nuances, if one consid-

ers for instance how a Moroccan-Dutch woman who opened a wine bar in Rotterdam (Metro, 2014) received several death threats after a newspaper ran a story where she was portrayed as a traitor to her community that was "doing things that are diametrically opposed to her culture" (Metro 2014).

Assuming multiplicity within cultures means that people are not taken as representatives of their cultural group, but as individuals, that are obviously shaped by their culture's socialization while at the same time having their own unique position in it. From this point of view, one most always be skeptical if people can truly speak in the name of a community or culture, and wonder what specific perspective or concern people claiming to do so represent. Multiplicity then also means a multiplicity of interpretations and experiences of cultural traditions, views and customs. It would see culture, whether on a national, regional, class- or group level, as a dialogue in flux rather than a story written in stone.

5. Culture in(ter)action

As interculturalists we do not only want to talk *about* culture, we also want to have meaningful ideas and advice about how to interact in a multicultural world. The question is what the implications are of assuming cultural multiplicity for intercultural sojourners? How is one to walk the talk of the multiplicity approach?

Assuming multiplicity implies that knowledge of cultures is rarely sufficient to create satisfying encounters; the heterogeneity of cultures leaves little guarantees for interacting with individuals of a certain cultural background, leave alone for interacting in multicultural environments. People do not behave like culturally programmed robots[9] whose behaviors can easily be predicted. If this is the case, what meaningful guidelines can we create in an effort to make intercultural encounters run more smoothly?

First of all, the experience of strangeness and unfamiliarity that creates an inter-

cultural situation, offers a blueprint for approaching intercultural encounters and the skills and strategies involved. The primary challenge is consequently to *create* a sense of normality or familiarity that neutralizes the anxiety, stereotyping, negative attributions and in-out group mechanisms that the intercultural space can bring about. Dealing with cultural differences is then not so much a matter of one side adapting to the other, but rather creating a connection and a common space to interact effectively. If culture is seen as a sense of familiarity with inherent differences, intercultural competence is consequently the capacity to create a new common culture in interaction (Rathje 2007). Obviously, these newly created cultures do not relate to culture on a national or even company level, but to what Adrian Holliday (1999) has coined "small cultures"; the small collectives of daily life where we create culture, in the class room, in teams and in families. This approach acknowledges the perspective of people as not only *products* but also *producers* (Tennekens 1995) of culture; the main implication for interaction then, is that people should be encouraged to actively *produce culture* by creating mutual meanings, habits and even rituals to overcome the perceived boundaries that could separate them.

For example: "Western" people working with the Japanese frequently wonder how to perform the perfect correct bow to greet, assuming that adapting to the "Japanese way" is the most effective way to create a good working relationship with their counterpart. It is not uncommon that this leads to confusion, as their Japanese partners – also in an effort to adapt – will stretch out their hands to introduce themselves, leaving both sides feeling inadequate. Knowledge of interaction codes in "Western" versus Japanese culture, would seem less helpful then the skills to deal with the experienced strangeness constructively and the ability to create a connection and common ground; the mutual experience of surprise and confusion can even serve as a first amusing common reference.

Research by psychologists Karen van der Zee and Jan Pieter van Oudenhoven (2000) sheds light on different response patterns that people can display in intercultural situations. Their research identified five intercultural traits or competences – *cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, flexibility and social initiative* – that influence whether people respond with avoidance, withdrawal or even aggression, compared to taking a more explorative, problem-solving approach. In their view, intercultural situations create a dual challenge: on the one hand to manage the feelings of strangeness, stress or even threat that can arise, and on the other hand to constructively explore the situation. Even though it is ambiguous whether all of these competences can be developed, creating awareness of one's own response to experiences of strangeness can help to manage them- if even it means knowing what kind of situations to avoid or minimize. Training programs can be developed to include simulations or exercises that involve experiencing cultural strangeness and finding ways to overcome it.[10]

In order to explore the situation from a multiplicity perspective, it should be encouraged to *scan*[11] an intercultural encounter from a broader framework than just a *meeting of cultures*. If cultures are not the all-encompassing straightjackets they are sometimes taken for, this means a lot will depend on the specific individual and circumstances under which the interaction takes place. Aforementioned research by Gudykunst and Kim (1996) showed that applying broad generalizations to situations creates an increase of feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, since this leads to stereotypes that are too often challenged by reality. This is not to say that generalizations can never be helpful, but it is the more *specific generalizations* that are relevant. One is not just interacting with someone from China, but also with someone with small or extensive travel-experience, someone from a small rural farming town or from an urban intellectual family, someone from Hong Kong or Mainland China. This can help create a framework to interpret the other person's feelings and actions, but this framework should constantly be tested against reality, in order to prevent the creation of new, this time more specific, stereotypes. This corresponds with Bennett's (2004) approach to intercultural sensitivity as the ability to construct one's experience of the other into increasingly complex and sophisticated categories.

This *scanning* should also involve an increased sensitivity for the specific context around the interaction (Blommaert 1995). One could take into account for instance the role of language, power differences, and the broader organizational or societal background to which people meet, and the images and mutual expectations that these factors bring into play.[12] For instance: a building corporation that invites the representatives of the local mosque to a brainstorm meeting about the neighborhood, does not only face possible differences in cultural perspectives, but also potential language barriers, unease because of the harsh political discussion about Islam, and inexperience with the specific interaction rules of a brainstorm meeting. Such a broader framework provides more options for understanding the situation but also for interventions, in this case: explaining or setting the rules for the brainstorm, adjusting the choice of vocabulary or paying an effort to reassure or welcome the guests.

The recognition of the multiplicity of identities is also an important element of creating mutuality and commonality. Recognizing one's own multicollectivity as well as others', brings the possibility of approaching a situation from different roles and identities, as well as addressing different roles and identities in the other person. This not only reduces the anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural situations, as Gudykunst and Kim have shown, it also creates the space for mutual concerns. A convincing example of this is a case, as described by my Dutch colleague Edwin Hoffman (2014). A father of Moroccan descent who refused to have his daughter participate in mixed swimming classes at school, was eventually pressed charges and filed to court by the school-board.

As long as they discussed the matter on the basis of their diverging cultural and religious views, no progress was made. Only when the man was approached as a father that is somehow worried about his daughter, did they manage to create a constructive dialogue. By interacting as a father and a teacher, finding common concerns was much easier than by approaching each other through their diverging ethnic or religious identities.

That brings us to the question of ethics. The ethical or moral dimensions of intercultural interactions are at best overlooked and underestimated, and at worst brushed aside. These issues cannot always be resolved on the basis of tolerance, relativism and understanding and sometimes one needs to take position as to what is acceptable and what not, especially in cases of mistreatment, abuse or (human) rights violations. Frequently, controversial practices or traditions are defended with arguments of tradition and custom: both by minorities as well as majorities[13]. One can wonder what the exact purchase of arguments based on "culture" is, if one considers the multiple and dynamic nature of the concept. If cultural traditions change, and if different members of communities can have divergent views of things, then what actually is the value of an argument that a tradition should be preserved to all costs for the sake of *culture*? The multiplicity of culture exposes that in the end, it is people themselves reproducing, re-interpreting or even refusing the practices of their current and previous group members. This means that is possible and sometimes necessary, to create dialogue on cultural practices both within and between communities. This is not to say that arguments on the basis of culture or religion should be swept aside as irrelevant, but that to bring *culture* into the debate should not be the end, but just the beginning of the conversation.

6.   Conclusions: A New Challenge

Criticizing dominant discourse and concepts is one thing, but providing viable alternatives is a possibly even more challenging task. I have tried to argue that is of critical importance for the intercultural community to re-evaluate and re-design the way we look at culture. I have chosen to use the assumption of uniformity within cultures as a 'route' both to criticize and to replace the current intercultural status quo; to blow up, if you will, the traditional monolithic concept of culture into smaller pieces that represent a greater complexity and sophistication. In the end however, it is not conceptual uniformity or multiplicity that I am interested in. Foremost, I believe it is time for interculturalists to move away from renditions of culture that not only endanger the credibility and effectiveness of our interventions, but that unwillingly contribute to a worldview of mutually exclusive and even hostile cultural identities.[14]

We live in a time where mention of *culture* in public discourse and in common sense discussions is abundantly available. *Culture* seems no longer to be a blind spot in the understanding of our social world, and interculturalists to no small extent should be credited for creating this awareness. I believe however that this brings a new challenge to the intercultural community. The main task for interculturalists is perhaps no longer to make people 'aware' that cultural differences can be relevant to them, but to refine their understanding of cultural differences while providing them with realistic approaches to reconcile them. While the multiplicity within cultures is certainly not the only element that deserves more attention, it is a valuable aspect that stimulates us to look at culture in a dynamic and contextual way.

Even if the multiplicity perspective provides signposts for a way ahead, I am the first one to admit there remains much work to be done. A multiplicity-point-of-view could potentially enable intercultural researchers to provide more refined analyses of interactions, so that we could understand with more detail the interplay between variables like ethnicity, gender, age, social class and professional background. For intercul-

tural trainers and consultants it would be a great challenge to find approaches that on the hand accept the complexity of today's world, while on the other hand provide feasible guidelines.

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Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Maarten Bremer, Deborah Abrahams and Alice Johansson for their feedback on earlier versions of this article. All remaining flaws are obviously my responsibility only.

2. A German interculturalist in an interview with the Sietar Europa Journal accidentally illustrated the arbitrariness of *consistent* historical explanations of culture by first giving a very extensive historical explanation of the *German* separation between work and private, only to add that "it's based on extreme hypothetical thinking that seems very logical and consistent but that doesn't necessarily mean it's the absolute truth. If a real historian were to question me, he could tear my points apart."

3. Sociologist Willem Schinkel (2008) even speaks of *culturalism* on a societal level as something that replaces racism, where *culture* is seen as a direct cause for criminal behaviour and other social problems.

4. As was the conclusion of a participant in my training once. After we had extensively made the case for acknowledging cultural differences he said that this confirmed his view that "these women have this completely different culture" and that in order to understand them he would have to *plunge into their culture*, which seemed like such an effort so that he'd rather just let them be.

5. Hoffman (2014) mentions the case of a lecture by intercultural communication specialist who receives a question about a tragic accident, where a woman killed a man of Moroccan descent but was freed of charge since she could not have prevented it. The specialist is asked whether the woman should be advised to contact the parents to offer her condolences, to which he answers swiftly that this would inevitably lead to an *eruption of violence*, claiming that the grief of a Moroccan family after losing a child is incomparable to that of a Dutch family.

6. Nobel Prize Laureate Amartya Sen extensively makes the point in his essay *Identity and Violence* (2006) of how a one-sided emphasis on ethnic or religious identities creates a premise for conflict since alterna-

tive identities that could harbor similarities are made invisible.

7. Wasif Shadid, emeritus professor and one of the pioneers of intercultural communication in The Netherlands makes the case for relativism by quoting the anthropologist Schweder: "Those who have three gods and one wife are obviously different from those who have one god and three wives. But, is there really a criterion worthy of universal respect that ranks any of these beliefs the more rational and advanced?" (Shadid 2007:56). A possible reply could have been: "you could at least ask the wives."

8. The idea of multicollectivity is in line with the ideas on multiple identities and intersectionality as developed by critical theorists like Stuart Hall (e. g. 1992) and Patricia Hill Collins (e. g. 1986) to analyze the oppression of e. g. people of colour and women in modern societies.

9. As Hofstede's (1991) definition of culture as *collective programming of the mind* can make you expect.

10. Preferably without falling into the trap of presenting *other cultures* as completely alien with their representatives holding on to stereotypical and irrational behavior, as happens often in popular intercultural role-play games.

11. The metaphor of intercultural communication as *scanning* was coined by my former colleague Nico Vink in his book *Dealing with differences* (2005).

12. Edwin Hoffman's TOPOI model offers a comprehensive method to analyze situations from a broad framework of possible factors leading to miscommunication. Edwin is currently working on an English publication about his model.

13. An example of the *culturalization* of a discussion by the ethnic majority is the tradition of Zwarte Piet on Sinterklaas, the main Dutch Children's holiday. People dress up like Zwarte Piet, who is Sinterklaas assistant, by painting their faces black, using lipstick to make big red lips and wearing curly wigs. The argument that this is interpreted by many as having offensive historically shaped racist notions, is easily dismissed by claiming that this happens to be *culture* and is off limits to be discussed.

14. Consider for instance how the perspective of Samuel Huntington's famous *Clash of the Civilizations*, in which he argues that global conflicts are the result of the meeting of different civilizations that are bound to clash due to their differences, coincides with an essentialistic – uniformity based approach to intercultural communication.