

Mors et resurrectio: Towards ‘realism’ in the (r)evolution of Intercultural Competence (IC)?

Fred Dervin, University of Helsinki, Finland

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Abstract: Despite its short history the concept of intercultural competence (IC) has witnessed a few paradigm shifts over the past 20 years. In this article I propose a meta-analysis of IC by examining four ways of ‘doing’ it. Two of the presented approaches correspond to new perspectives that take into account present criticisms of IC: the dangers of overrelying on culture, a need for more critical reflexivity, and interculturality as an ideology. Referred to as the (r)evolution of IC in the article I argue that these perspectives should also be examined critically in order to avoid that their proponents feel too self-confident about them and that they remain ‘realistic’ rather than ‘idealistic’. The article is of interest to anyone who wishes to know more about the different conceptual backgrounds of IC, but also to those who wish to find new openings for dealing with this important yet polysemic and highly political concept.

Keywords: intercultural competence, liquid/solid interculturality, co-constructivism, non-essentialism, critical reflexivity

Introduction

The quest for a ‘best way of being’ (*mieux-être*) which is always expressed by the imposition of a ‘should-be’ (*devoir-être*), leads inescapably to totalitarianism
(Maffesoli, 1976: 250)

In a recent message to the ‘world’, Sjur Bergan, Head of the Education Department at the Council of Europe, informed us about ambitious “Pioneering work on democratic competences to transform the way we live and work” to be done by the Council (16/03/2015). In the message, one discovers that the democratic competences of the title are partnered with *intercultural competences* and defined as “the values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding that enable us to participate effectively in today’s diverse democracies.” The objective of this ‘pioneering work’ is to find “a universal and objective system to define and measure (the) democratic competences [required to promote human rights and citizenship education].” In order to do so “20 core competences, including: responsibility, tolerance, conflict resolution, listening skills, linguistic and communication skills, critical thinking, empathy and “openness”” have been identified and will be measured to e.g. cite “levels of attainment for ‘empathy’ and ‘critical thinking’”.

An entire article could be written about this message and the ideologies and biases that it contains. Referring back to Maffesoli’s quote at the beginning of this introduction, one could worry first of all about the tone of ‘best way of doing’ – and its acolyte ‘should be’ – contained in this prophecy. One could also look into the unstable use of *democratic* and *intercultural* as words defining the kinds of competences to be achieved. One could review each of the 20 core competences and

criticize both their polysemy and emptiness but also the Eurocentric values hidden behind them (e.g. *tolerance, critical thinking, openness*, etc.). The ‘objective’ and ‘universal’ argument also raises a lot of questions in a postcolonial world like ours. Rereading the message, and pondering over its commonsensical and potentially colonizing discourse of self and other, one easily gets the impression that the Council of Europe is contributing to what I would call the ‘imagineering industry of Intercultural Competence (IC)’. The portmanteau word *imagineering* is composed of engineering and imaginaries. Another feeling is that of a *passé* perspective on IC which tends to ignore recent critiques of the intercultural and what I shall refer to as the (r)evolution of interculturality in this article. Although we live in postmodern intercultural times, my impression is that what the Council of Europe proposes contributes to analyzing our world through categories and perspectives from a different era (Maffesoli, 1993: 8). Finally, I have the impression that the institution is in Plato’s Cave from *The Republic* and can only see shadows on the wall, believing that they are the only reality and strongly resisting looking outside the cave – the shadows that are seen are mistaken for substance...

This will probably sound pretentious to the reader but I feel that the shadows that escape the “Imagineering industry” are represented by the scholars, writers and practitioners who contribute actively to the (r)evolution of interculturality that we have been witnessing over the last decades. These people belong to many and varied fields and subfields that look into interculturality: intercultural/multicultural/social justice education, language education, health care, business, etc. The reader will forgive some namedropping but these are, in my opinion, the most important figures of this (r)evolution: Xiangyun Du, Shi-xu, Zhu Hua, Adrian Holliday, Prue Holmes, Regis Machart, Ingrid Piller, Karen Risager... this selective list doesn’t include all the thinkers, scholars and practitioners from fields that do not have the word *intercultural* in their names (anthropology, sociology, psychology, other subfields of education etc.) without whom the (r)evolution may not have happened. In any case I argue that these individuals are contributing to the current *mors et resurrectio* (death and resurrection) of intercultural competence.

In this article, I would like to discuss this (r)evolution in order to revise the concept of intercultural competence. I would also like to offer some criticisms of the (r)evolution as well as some ideas for the future.

1. (De-)(Re)constructing intercultural competence

There appears to be something magic about the concept of intercultural competence. Polysemic, IC is often a victim of groupthink which relies on ‘faulty’ terms such as culture, respect, open-mindedness, tolerance, etc. Thanks to many influential voices from English-speaking countries (BBD: Bennett, Byram, Deardorff for example), the concept travels the world and ‘contaminates’ the way it is defined by scholars, practitioners, decision-makers, etc. During my stays at universities around the world I have always been surprised at the ‘symbolic power’ that these models seem to have.

IC has also become a marketing tool, embraced as a holy mantra by e.g. the business world and teacher education. It is rarely put into question and is accepted as such. The problem with that is that it can be easily manipulated and used to chokehold discourses about today’s intercultural encounters. IC too easily categorises the world

into haves and have-nots, competence/incompetence, cultures, democracies/non-democracies, etc. These are deemed to be dangerous hierarchies today.

My starting point about IC is that everybody has it, especially as the boundaries between “the normal and the abnormal, the expectable and the unexpected, the ordinary and the bizarre, domesticated and wild” are blurred, as are those between “the familiar and the strange, ‘us’ and the strangers” (Bauman, 1997: 25). No one as such should be thus more of a target for IC learning or development. Martine Abdallah-Preteille (1986) had already prophesied about Intercultural Communication being a tautology, i.e. both words composing the phrase are synonymous. In the 2010s the boundaries between the ‘inter’ and the ‘intra’ are becoming fuzzier than ever. Who is thus considered part of either notion? Who decides? Does this make intercultural competence a thing of the past or a concept that simply applies to all human interaction?

2. Four ways of constructing IC when researching/teaching (about) it

The concept of IC has led to different models and conceptualisations. In what follows I propose a meta-analysis of ways of constructing IC in research and teaching: ‘solid’, Janusian, ‘liquid’ idealistic and ‘liquid’ realistic. These categories are based on a decade-long acquaintance with the field and discussions and cooperation with the most influential figures. Much critical work has been published about the ‘solid’ approach to IC so I won’t spend too much time on this perspective. In my opinion this approach is already moribund and represents the *mors* of IC. The ‘liquid’ approaches represent applications of the (r)evolution of interculturality. The metaphors of the ‘solid’ and ‘liquid’ are borrowed directly from the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman who describes our world as being ‘liquid’ (some would say postmodern) versus the ‘solidity’ of the modern world of the Nation-states (Bauman, 2014).

A ‘solid’ approach to IC consists in pigeon-holing individuals into static identities related to national cultures or languages. In his critique of the use of the word diversity, Peter Wood (2003: 21) describes nicely what this pigeon-holing consists in: “we are drunk with the idea that every difference of ethnic custom, every foreign or regional accent, every traditional recipe and every in-group attitude betokens a distinct worldview”. As an example let us consider a commercial service called *Cosy Finland*, which is described as follows:

Cosy Finland provides you an opportunity to learn about the Finnish lifestyle. We have an original way of doing so by organizing you a local who introduces you the everyday life. You can even be invited to Finnish home or other private environments! MEET THE FINNS IN FINLAND - all year round and in all weather conditions. Concept includes many different services for solo travelers and groups, in business or leisure; all are based on to get the travelers and the local people together. The most popular service is Cosy Finnish Evening, a three-hour dinner visit to a Finnish Home. It is a perfect venue to experience Finnish lifestyle. You have a unique opportunity to ask questions and learn about the culture and everyday life in Finland. There are multiple language choices. Cosy Finnish Evening can be organized for Individuals as well as for Groups.

Cosy Finland seems to fit into what I would refer to as ‘informal intercultural education’. Its typical ‘solid’ approach gives the impression to ‘others’ that they will meet the ‘locals’ and learn about *a* singular lifestyle and about people imprisoned in the iron cage of ‘Finnish culture’. The end result is that of intercultural encounters that resemble tectonic plates moving against each other. In more scientific terms, the notions of essentialism and cultur(al)ism have been used to describe this highly problematic perspective that rids people of their agency and ‘blames’ their culture or language(s) for problems in intercultural encounters (Holliday, 2010; Frenkiel & Rocca, 2013). Besides an overemphasis on differences (rather than difference-similarity) contributes to solidifying IC. For E. Said (1978: 349), “cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality”. As such the boundaries between cultures and so-called cultural groups are quite fuzzy in an interrelated world like ours – Subrahmanyam (2013) shows convincingly in his ‘connected history’ that the world has always been interrelated and that the current ‘hybridity’ is far from novel. Finally the ‘solid’ approach is often coupled with other problematic -isms such as *native-speakerism*, *sexism*, *East-Westism*, etc. through which one group of people tends to be implicitly or explicitly privileged over another. These are all ideological fictions and straightjackets that deserve to be critiqued again and again (Davies, 2003).

The second approach to IC is entitled Janusian and tends to oscillate between the previous perspective (“pigeon-holing”) and a postmodern, co-constructivist approach that takes into account, amongst others, identity positionings and the instability of discourses of culture. This often leads to contradictions and incoherence in the way one interprets, analyses and constructs intercultural encounters. Most of the time ‘Janusianists’ are unaware of these problems. A typical Janusian approach resides in phrases such as: “I am not a racist but...”, “I don’t have any stereotypes about Muslims but I think that they are intolerant”. In research, a Janusian approach consists in excusing oneself for generalizing or reminding our readers that we don’t believe in national characteristics even if we have demonstrated by quoting representations of certain ‘cultures’ that they are this or that.

The two next perspectives fall into the same category of ‘liquid approaches to IC’. While the first perspective is referred to as (liquid) idealistic, the second one is (liquid) realistic. The (liquid) idealistic approach has been in the centre of critical discussions of interculturality and IC for a decade now. Its starting point is the idea of diverse diversities (everybody is diverse). It aims at educating about the dangers of non-essentialistic, non-culturalist ideas and to ‘suppress’ them. In the two following excerpts from fiction (1) and media and scholarly discourses (2), the idea of diverse diversities is clarified. In the first excerpt, taken from E. Shafak’s novel *Honour* (2013), the main character, Pembe, reflects on her experience of being an immigrant in England and on Englishness:

She was aware of how different the Topraks [Pembe’s Turkish surname] were from their English neighbours, and yet Turks and Kurds were different from one another too, and some Kurds were completely unlike other Kurds. Even in her tiny village by the Euphrates [name of river] every family had another story, and in every family no two children were ever the same. (Shafak, 2013: 16)

The author clearly questions the ‘easy’ dichotomy of English vs. Turkish/Kurd by reminding us that within these very large groups there are also many differences, or as she puts it, different ‘stories’. In the second abstract, a similar argument is shared by Rezla Aslan, a scholar of Islam based in the US, while discussing the religion with a journalist on an American channel:

Journalist: Does Islam promote violence?

Rezla Aslan: Islam does not promote violence or peace. Islam is just a religion and just like other religions in the world it depends on what you bring to it. If you are a violent person your Islam, your Christianity, your Judaism is going to be violent.

(...)

R.A.: To say Muslim countries... as though Pakistan and Turkey are the same... as though Indonesia and Saudi Arabia are the same... as though somehow what is happening in the most extreme forms of these autocratic countries is representative of what is happening in other countries is frankly – and I use this word seriously – stupid...

Although the scholar’s approach to diverse diversities is broader than Shafak’s – he talks about countries rather than individuals – the message is somewhat similar: an entity (Islam) which appears homogeneous to some people contains diverse diversities. This is what a ‘liquid’ approach to IC is about. The approach understands that “culture does not make people. People make culture” (Adichie, 2014; one can substitute culture with other words such as *religion, gender, social class*, etc.). It thus represents a counter-narrative to the solid approach to IC and, up to a point, to the Janusian one. The (liquid) idealistic approach also recognizes that any perspective on the intercultural is always ideological. This is a major addition to the field. For example scholars of the (r)evolution of interculturality such as Holliday (2013) or Piller (2010) would follow author Taie Selasi’s reaction to the question “where are you from?” in the following interview with a journalist from Aljazeera:

Stephanie Sy: I have read that you do not like to be asked where you're from.

Taiye Selasi: It's not that I don't like to be asked the question. It's just that I've begun to question what it actually means and where that question, where that convention comes from.

I think that when someone says, "Where are you from?" and is waiting to hear a country, that person is not actually accessing information that I think is essential to who I am or to who we are as people. I've said that it's like a code for "Why are you here?" If someone asks me here in the States "Where are you from?" it's exactly as you say. It may mean "Tell me a little bit about your background" or "I'd like to know something about who you are as an individual."

But it may also mean, "Why are you here?" The same in Germany, the same in Italy, the same in England — there is a sense that certain people have to explain their presence and for other people, they're entitled to that presence.

And so I think that question, innocent as it often is in the hearts and the mouths of the questioner, I think has become code for a lot of other conversations that are a lot more difficult to have.

The question of origins, which is central in most approaches to IC (see Dervin & Ragnarsdottir, 2014), often hides ‘codes’ leading to (hidden) discrimination, injustice

and hierarchies. Discourses of culture also hide discourses of discrimination, power, superiority and can easily serve as excuses and alibis (Dervin & Machart, 2015).

But I see a problem in the (liquid) idealistic perspective in relation to ideologies: it tends to ignore the fact that it is itself ideological in the sense that it aims at the unreachable objectives of non-essentialism and non-culturalism. These objectives are, of course, noble and should be borne in mind at all time in intercultural education. However they can be quite unstable as they are negotiated in interaction with ‘complex’ people and in specific contexts which have an impact on e.g. power relations. In some situations, because one feels inferior or simply because one is tired, these noble objectives cannot be met even if one tries hard. Another issue relates to the fact that (liquid) idealistic approaches contribute to creating neo-imagining of IC, which can lead to self-congratulating but also easy patronizing (“I am non-essentialist and you are not”). If I consider that I am non-essentialist (which I cannot really be), does it mean that I ‘won the battle’? Furthermore (liquid) idealistic approaches are somewhat frustrating. Non-essentialism is an ideal that cannot be reached: How do e.g. students react to their constant battle with themselves against it? How do they deal with this frustration?

The (liquid) realistic approach to IC wishes to move beyond this problematic issue by recognizing that essentialism is a ‘universal sin’ and that no one is immune against it. As disappointing as it may seem, the approach accepts that “Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality” (Arendt, 1978: 4). The approach does recognize the importance of non-essentialism and non-culturalism but at the same time urges its supporters to remain aware of the ‘simplicity’ of any act of interaction. Simplicity, a portmanteau word composed of *simple* and *complexity* represents a continuum between the simple and the complex – two processes that we have to face all the time. Complexity has gained in popularity over the past decades in most fields of research. The world is complex, people are complex – we all agree. Yet Can we, *complex people* (researchers, practitioners, decision-makers), examine complexity? Our own complexity makes it impossible to grasp the complexity of others and situations. As much as one cannot reach complexity (and thus e.g. live in a non-essentialistic world), simplicity is unreachable. No one can claim to be able to analyse, understand and/or talk about the intercultural from a complex perspective because sooner or later the complex becomes simplex and vice versa. ‘Simplexifying’ IC consists in accepting that one cannot access its complexity but navigate, like Sisyphus rolling up his boulder up a hill, between the ‘simple’ and the ‘complex’. In a sense the (liquid) realistic approach resembles the Janusian approach presented before, except that one is aware of the defects of one’s approach. Furthermore one tries to pull one’s position towards the complex side of simplicity, bearing in mind that it is impossible to reach it without falling back into the simple. This, of course, can make us uneasy see vertiginous: “no one finds it easy to live uncomplainingly and fearlessly with the thesis that human reality is constantly being made and unmade, and that anything like a stable essence is constantly u’tegies of IC.

Approach	‘Solid’	Janusian	(Liquid) idealistic	(Liquid) realistic
Components	-pigeonholing -Miraculous recipes based	-pigeonholing and constructivism	-interculturality is always ideological -belief in full change	-interculturality is always ideological -simplicity

	on acritical, individualistic and stereotypical elements -overemphasis on difference		-failure is still not acceptable,	-acceptance of failure
Impact	Essentialism, culturalism, hierarchies, injustice	Contradictions, implicit injustice and incoherence	Idealistic positionings but feelings of frustration	-Disappointment and 'vertigo' -can be viewed as a pessimistic approach to interculturality

3. (Liquid) idealistic/realistic approaches to IC: principles

In this section I am interested in how (liquid) perspectives deal with intercultural competence. First of all they both move beyond programmatic and 'recipe-like' IC. Simple progression ("stages") in the development and/or acquisition of IC is rejected. As asserted earlier I believe that everyone has intercultural competence – meaning they have the capacity to interact with others regardless of where they come from. (Liquid) realistic perspectives propose that, like any other social phenomena, IC is composed of contradictions, instabilities, and discontinuities and that its main goal is to "get used to the rolling and pitching" of human life (Bergson, 1934). In concrete terms this means avoiding "fixed points of attachment for thought and existence" (ibid.) and placing instability at the center of any intercultural activity: instability of identifications, instability of discourses of culture, instability of power relations, instability of feelings towards each other, etc. According to Lifton (1993: 1), even if we are "schooled in the virtues of constancy and stability" we "turn out to be surprisingly resilient" towards the inconsistency and unpredictability of the world. Awareness of instability can help people to accept that the world and especially self and others are neither programmed nor better than others.

Another important issue relating to IC is to get used to discomfort, to appreciate entering risky territory and to accept that some degree of 'pain' is involved in dealing with intercultural encounters. The current 'industry of Imagineering IC' often wishes to protect individuals from these phenomena by creating 'interculturally correct' situations and/or educational content. Critical reflexivity should thus be central to IC in order to allow "other narratives" to "form" and "emerge" (Said, 1993).

As (liquid) approaches to IC take a critical stance towards the flawed concept of *culture* the now widely recognized need for intersectional analysis is taken seriously into account in work on IC (Collins, 2009). As such socio-economic and politico-historical categories are given as much – see more importance – than the usual problematic frameworks of e.g. culture, ethnicity or race. This also contributes to simplifying interculturality.

I have noted elsewhere that most IC models tend to be overly individualistic and thus lack dialogical perspectives (Dervin, 2011). One aspect of (liquid) realistic perspectives to consists in taking this element into account. IC is co-constructed by individuals in specific contexts, which means that dialogues need to be central to any approach to IC. For Shi-xu (2001: 290), misunderstanding, non-understanding, communication breakdown, etc. "is a joint, co-ordinated, commonly consequential

effect. No individual person, group, nation, culture, region and such like can alone be responsible for anything or achieve maximally possible success". The idea of 'collective ego' as proposed by the sociologist M. Maffesoli (1993) is very useful to counter-attack this major flaw. Putting an end to individualistic perspectives can allow us to examine the interdependence between I and others when interculturality takes place. The dialogues between different selves also matter in intercultural encounters. For Watkins (2000: 2), the self is "the collection of different characters (or "self- and object representations") who can be said to populate an individual's thoughts, feelings, an actions. In other words, the Self is that world of characters whom one entertains and identifies with." This is essential in considering IC. Too many models have 'blamed' one of the participants for being not competent enough, while her competence depends on the presence of another (physical or virtual individual). For example one meets someone from abroad and that person bears a striking resemblance with an acquaintance or a friend or shares the same features. This 'intertextuality' can have a big influence on how interculturality will be constructed between these individuals. This is why the usual approach which consists in the mere 'ventriloquation' (Valsiner, 2002) of what people say as proof of their IC is problematic if one does not make an effort to identify the influence of others – those present in the act of interaction or in the individual's discourse. Collectivising IC should be a priority in order to treat people fairly and to allow them to share responsibilities for what happens. That also applies to researchers and educators of IC as they are not invisible omniscient characters merely observing others interacting with others or narrating about their encounters. Their own presence do have an impact on what is negotiated, constructed and performed which needs to be fully acknowledged and taken into account.

Another major principle for IC contained in (liquid) realistic approaches lies in the centrality of Imagineering (engineering of imaginaries, see Härkönen & Dervin, 2015) in intercultural encounters. Jokingly, Mikhael Bakunin (1979: 178) claimed that "in all history there is a quarter reality, at least three quarters imagination". Realistic approaches accept that a lot of intercultural phenomena depend on playfulness and dreams, which must be recognized and accepted. Most models of IC 'available on the market' fall into the trap of 'success only' – a problematic feature of our times. The proposed perspective believes and accepts failure – and in a sense promotes its beneficial aspects. Talking about her art, the performance artist Marina Abramovic (2014) explains perfectly what failure could mean in IC: "You never know how the experiment will turn out. It can be great, it can be really bad, but failure is so important, because it involves a learning process and it enables you to get to a new level and to other ways of seeing your work." Too often IC resembles some kind of technology that is used to control what is happening during encounters and prevent failure. Jokingly again we could also learn from the CEO of Supercell (2013), a gaming company, who explained while revealing his strategy to produce a £2.5 billion company in 2 years: "You have to eliminate the fear of failure. If a game goes wrong we throw a party for its developers and give them champagne to celebrate what they learnt. As a company we have failed far more than we succeeded. We have killed five games and launched two. You need to take risks to succeed and for that you must take fear away from that risk." Celebrating failure – as much as success – should be a 'natural' component of IC.

In order to summarize the points made about IC, in relation to the suggested (liquid)

realistic approach to interculturality, I shall refer to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi's (2012) discussions of research on Othering regarding women in poverty. I believe that the points that they make are highly complementary with critical discussions of IC. Their discussion revolves around four keywords (ibid. 300): *objectification*, *decontextualisation*, *dehistorization* and *deauthorization*. These could serve as four main learning objectives for training to develop IC but also as the main components of IC. In other words, by being able to discuss and examine these phenomena, students can move towards a more (liquid) realistic approach to IC. The first aspect *objectification* relates to a need to move away from an approach that ignores people's individual perspectives and leads to the declension of inferior and negative features. *Decontextualization* insists on taking the context of interaction, and contexts of policy and socioeconomic structures into account when examining intercultural encounters. For the authors: "Decontextualization contributes to the portrayal of certain behaviors as having no reason or rationality. Behaviors and occurrences become generalized features of many rather than specific characteristics or specific responses to particular circumstances." (ibid.: 302). *Dehistorization* puts the emphasis on the present, while ignoring the past and individual histories of people – which limits one's understanding of people. Finally *Deauthorization* relates to the problem of 'erasing' one's own subjectivity and that of others in representing participants (e.g. people whose IC we are trying to assess or critically review).

Conclusions

This article has presented the (r)evolution of IC that is currently taking place by offering critical perspectives on both canonical and more recent approaches. It is clear that the fields working on IC are currently undergoing paradigmatic changes that seem to limit the (moribund) programmatic flavor that IC has had since its inception in the 1950s. The article has also suggested that critical approaches to interculturality and IC should/could move towards a more realistic and less 'frightening' perspective, which tends to set overly optimistic goals (e.g. *one can become non-essentialistic and get rid of culture as an excuse fully*). The realistic (and modest) approach will surely sound too lenient and too pessimistic to many critics of IC work. Discourses of failure are not appreciated in academic worlds today. Yet by remaining on the fragile pedestal of success in everything, we might make more harm than good and frustrate those who take our words for granted. The 'rolling and pitching' of everybody's life should urge us to step off that pedestal and to consider that this very act is one of social justice. It is my strong belief that the more people are able to see instabilities around them – about their lives, their identities, and about those of others – the more they are ready to face our postmodern intercultural worlds.

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