THE EXTENSION OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE TODAY: FROM INDIVIDUAL EFFECTIVENESS TO INNOVATIVE, RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

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Introduction

Starting with the origins of intercultural communication studies and of the construction of the concept of "intercultural competence," this paper describes two main ways of looking at intercultural communication, based upon two main concepts of "communication" and of "culture": the "reified" and the "narrative." From these two perspectives of intercultural communication subsequently two different conceptualizations of intercultural competence are derived: one focuses on individual effectiveness, the other on social context's ability to recognize and use the diversity that characterizes its capital. Both perspectives have their rationale, and they are both valid considering the specific contexts, goals and the scope of the social actors involved. However, according to the author, until today the field of intercultural practice has been mainly dominated by one of these two perspectives, the "reified" one. The second perspective, the "narrative" one, has remained in the background, and has been applied rarely and only in rather innovative cases.

Recently, increased cultural changes due to globalization across geographical and cultural boundaries, have amplified the numbers and the modalities of relations with diversity and with different subjectivities. Thus, the traditional vision of intercultural competence, that considers it as an individual's ability to behave effectively within diverse cultural contexts might be limited, especially if we consider the assignment of management roles.

These new global citizens play in a world where global assets have been redefined because of the new economic power of the emerging countries, and where there is a need to consider multi-stakeholder requests, due also to new forms of participation.

In particular, looking at examples of bad and good cases of stakeholder management, this paper will explain why and how, within a "narrative" perspective, intercultural communication and at intercultural competence can be redefined.

Consequently, the role of interculturalists should be more focused on training a new generation of global managers who need to be able to innovate and to create more responsible and sustainable practices in different sectors.

The origin of intercultural communication and of intercultural competence

Going back to the roots of the discipline of intercultural communication, we are reminded that it was born at the beginning of the 20th century, within the field of social studies, at the University of Chicago. In particular, in the Department of Sociology, where researchers were applying ethnographic and qualitative research methodologies to understand the reasons for deviances among migrants and minority groups. Their first research questions focused on discovering if and how cultural differences played any role in facilitating, or hindering, migrants' integration processes into the host society (Giaccardi 2005).

In this same period, Thomas and Znaniecki (1920) analysed Polish farmers' stereotypes; they were interested in understanding how Polish home culture and Polish beliefs could work as an interpretative system for the comprehension of the US foreign culture, through Polish eyes. Some years later, Allport (1954) conducted the first studies on prejudices, and on their influence on intercultural interactions.

Social studies then started to be concerned with intercultural relations, and to develop practices and tools to reduce social problems or conflicts. The term "interculture" was introduced to refer to the relationships between cultural identities.

One of the remarkable changes in the focus of intercultural studies occurred at the beginning of the 1950s, immediately after the Second World War, when the US Foreign Service Institute (FSI) was constituted (Giaccardi 2005). At this time and in this context, intercultural communication concepts began to be used in the Foreign Service Institute employees' training programs, including training for diplomats and

engineers being sent abroad. This occurred especially because many of the US Agency for International Development programs failed; and part of the responsibility for these unsuccessful missions was attributed to the inability of US officials to master the language and the culture of the countries where they were sent, as well as to officials' lack of awareness about local habits and uses.

It was thanks to the book of Edward Hall, *The Silent Language* (1959), that intercultural communication started to focus on micro aspects of culture, and on non-verbal aspects of interpersonal relations and communication (gestures, postures, tone of voice, proxemics, chronemics, and so on). With Hall also the cross-cultural comparisons on communication elements and styles started to appear.

In this same period, the "intercultural competence" construct was introduced, referring to a person's capacity to live and work abroad, the individual ability to recognize and to adapt to implicit dimensions of a foreign culture and of local interpersonal communication rules, including non-verbal codes and proxemics (Hall 1959, 1966), as well as to migrants' and expatriates' ability to overcome a possible *cultural shock* (Oberg 1960).

Over the last fifty years, many intercultural competence concepts and evaluation tools have been developed: multicultural competence, transcultural competence, cross-cultural effectiveness, international competence, cultural competence, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural adaptation index, intercultural sensitivity index, and so on (Fantini 2009). Based on these, many intercultural competence training programs have been developed, too. Stereotypes and prejudices, as well as the verbal and non-verbal elements of cross-cultural communication and interactions, are still nowadays some of the basic concepts on which intercultural training programs are based, with the aim of developing intercultural competence and overcoming possible barriers to deal effectively with cultural differences.

There is a general consensus on including intercultural competence within relational competence. Thus one of the most common definitions describes intercultural competence as the set of knowledge, attitudes and capabilities thanks to which one can behave appropriately, coherently and effectively within the rules and the expectations of a given cultural context, which means being able to succeed in light of one's personal goals and objectives within culturally diverse contexts (Bennett 2004; Spitzberg 2000; Messner and Schäfer 2012).

From this definition, one can recognize values such as individual pragmatism, individual achievement, pertinence and effectiveness,

whether the actor is an individual or a company. These values are rooted in an Anglo-Saxon cultural context, and in general in a Western values framework (Deardorff 2006). This cultural bias influence is quite comprehensible, considering that intercultural concepts have emerged in the US and Anglo-Saxon context, and have consequently been spread among other countries and cultures. We will explore a possible alternative to this intercultural competence conceptualization, considering a shift of paradigm on the conceptualization of "communication" and "culture" later.

The development of a "reified" approach

In order to better understand the development of intercultural communication and of the intercultural competence frameworks and practices, it is useful to consider the theories of "communication" and of "culture" that have had an impact on these concepts.

Indeed, during the 1950s, when intercultural communication started its institutional legitimization through intercultural studies and publications, the most widely spread communication theory was the one by Shannon and Weaver (1949). This communication model describes the communication process based on the analogues of the radio and of telecommunication systems: the pipeline, or the wire, where a communication channel and a code were used to transmit messages from a sender to a recipient, or to many recipients by means of a codification.

Shannon and Weaver's theory made it clear that if the sender and recipient do not use the same code, they are likely to have problems in understanding each other. As for the bi-directionality of the communication process, communication problems are comprehensible by the retroaction feedback: the return signals tell the senders if they have been more or less efficient in transmitting their intended message, or if there were any system failures or misunderstandings.

During the same years, due to the influence of early anthropology, culture was conceptualized by a "reified" perspective (Baumann Gerd 1996). "To reify" means to make an abstract idea or concept more concrete. The reified perspective considers culture as a property of people, groups, or organizations. Indeed, according to this conception, groups "have" or "belong to" a specific culture. Culture is a monolithic reality, made up of traditions, norms, beliefs, values, common principles, and so on. It exists independently and outside the human mind, and homologates and separates culture's members. Human societies are built of culture, whose borders can be defined and described.

As a consequence, this perspective of culture has traditionally led to the compilation of "cultural characteristics" of given groups, and of cultural groups' specificity (Mantovani, Schiavinato and Cottone 2006). According to the reified concept of culture, cultural differences can be measured and compared on a graded scale along the lines of certain values and ethical dimensions. Examples are the cross-cultural dimensions introduced by Hall's studies (e.g., high context vs. low context, direct culture vs. indirect culture, monochronic culture vs. polychronic culture, etc.) (1959, 1966), by Hofstede (1980) or Trompenaars (1997) (e.g. high power distance culture vs. low power distance culture, uncertainty tolerant culture vs. uncertainty avoidance culture, masculine culture vs. feminine culture, etc.).

Most of the "cross-cultural communication and management" training programs and practices, often titled "How to deal with the Chinese," "How to do business with Indians," "Avoiding gaffes and misunderstanding when in Britain," etc., are grounded on the traditional concept of intercultural competence. They are normally targeted to corporates or to small and medium size private enterprises, furnishing their manager's toolkits and providing norm-based rules for acting appropriately and effectively, within the norms of target local cultures. They represent a dominant framework of tools and practices within the intercultural community of practitioners.

The reified approach provides simple explanations of cultural differences and offers sellable solutions. Further, it has other numerous advantages: first of all, it offers a starting point for understanding specific cultures and their related societies; it favours the understanding of certain culture-related sources of misunderstandings; it highlights the need to change one's interpretative framework, and to make behavioural adaptation to the target group. Further, it has the undoubted advantage of reinforcing the manager's beliefs that it is possible to manage cultural differences, and, in turn, reduces their anxiety and uncertainty in encountering a diverse culture.

However, recent intercultural literature (Nakata 2009) points out that the reified perspective has the disadvantage of emphasizing the internal homogeneity of a target group, leading to over-generalizations and stereotypes regarding the members of that culture (the Americans, the Chinese, the Japanese, etc., are like this or like that), without taking into account the many differences that are present beneath these labels. Consequently, they risk spreading a stigmatized vision of those who belong to various categories, and at the same time of not considering the multiple belongings and identities that characterize people. It is very

difficult to identify oneself as belonging to a single pure culture, or to a sole cultural identity (am I Italian, European, a woman, a mother, a trainer, an interculturalist, an Argentine tango dancer, or all these things and more?); and further, it is doubtful if it is really possible to offer recipes or exhaustive "dos and don'ts" for each existing culture.

The emergence of a "narrative" approach

Parallel to the development of many intercultural tools and practices grounded on the reified perspective of culture, another intercultural framework started to emerge gradually, starting from 1980s.

Around this time, communication theories shifted their interest from the description of the communication process to the role of participants in the communication event, and on what they do when participating in situated, social rule-based communication. This normally takes the form of social conversations or dialogues (whether face to face, or mediated by technology).

According to conversational and dialogical theories on communication (Habermas 1981; Grice 1975; Gadamer 1976) people do not just exchange information, but they share and intertwine information, linking what is separate, restructuring what is not understood, or misunderstood.

Since dialogues and conversations take place within a social-cultural context, the rules and norms of that context's interaction and conversation structure the conversations themselves. And within contextualized conversations, interlocutors work toward a common framework, not necessarily to elaborate and to attribute a common perspective, but they constantly negotiate and co-construct meanings.

Even when they are just listening, most of the time communication participants have an active role in interpreting and giving sense to the communication events. In this process of meaning construction, communication participants normally use their cultural system of meaning mediation that they have acquired by socialization processes and through their participation at previous social conversations. Communication participants' meaning frameworks influence their meaning construction process, starting from the attribution of information salience and going through the inferential and judgement processes.

Furthermore, during conversations, it normally happens that if interlocutors are listening carefully to each other, the external dialogues they perceive interact with their internal dialogue—the dialogue that people activate within themselves and that creates their self-identity and their belief system about themselves, the world and its events.

If intercultural communication is a communication event characterized by participants with different cultural backgrounds, or with a different system of meaning mediation and attribution, participating at communication events might generate a transformational space—a sort of "third culture," in which processes of reciprocal influences on cultural frameworks or identities are mutually re-defined.

Around the same time, a constructivist and "narrative" paradigm (Vygotskji 1954; Gergen and Gergen 1986; Bruner 1990; Cole 1998) gradually developed in the scientific disciplines. This paradigm considers scientific disciplines and scientific thought as a particular register of narration, recognizing the influence of the storyteller's point of view and of the previous conversations on the scientific output and approach.

The constructivist and narrative approach also enhanced the concept of "culture," highlighting its dynamism and evolution, instead of its proprieties and static definitions. Culture is no longer considered to be inside people's minds, but it is shared and distributed among its community's members as common language, meanings, descriptive and tacit knowledge, tools, social practices, and so on. Instead of emphasizing homogeneity, purity and cultural groups' distinctiveness, the narrative perspective considers diversity, multiplicity and evolution as distinguishing characteristics of any living cultural system. Cultural systems are open and complex relationship systems, where interactions, as well as storytelling, even if narrated from different point of views, might be interconnected (Mantovani 2000).

The narrative approach does not negate the existence of deep cultural differences, but it reduces the use of culture dimensions, as well as of "us vs. you" counter-positions. It considers cultural reality to have porous edges, emphasizing the reciprocity of interactions, exchanges and transformations (Mantovani, Schiavinato and Cottone 2006). Culture itself is a space of exchanges, a mediation system, a polyphonic narration or conversation, where a multiplicity of actors participates in building it (Bachtin 1981; Mantovani 1998).

While the reified concept of culture explains groups' traditions, the narrative concept of culture explains and keeps together both tradition and innovation. Practices—or consolidated activity, which has a socio-cultural sense—such as storytelling and narrations, can influence what is currently happening, and what will be told or shaped in the future.

Within this paradigm, narrations, as well as conversations, where normally storytelling takes place, become an intervention tool through which people and organizations can collaborate, reflect on, and co-create new solutions. Thereby, conversations become an occasion—for individuals,

organizations or institutions—to become more aware of their own assumptions, to understand and to consider different values or moral positions—even antagonistic ones. It also allows one to explore antagonisms that different groups, different identities or local cultures (e.g. different institutions, associations, organized groups, and so on) bring to the table (Ochs and Capps 2001).

World Café, the Open Space Technology, together with other participative methodologies used for co-design, are examples of conversational methodologies (Various Authors 2004). They are aimed to: bring together different opinions, experiences and practices, and to facilitate processes of knowledge sharing and practices and tools exchange; jointly define a problem setting with a broader view, and then to find possible multiple solutions to problems that might also be sustainable over time; facilitate the integration of different points of view and the processes of knowledge creation, improvement and innovation.

These methodologies are mainly used with groups of trainees composed of peer colleagues, or with professional heterogeneous groups that may or may not belong to the same organization in contexts such as: peer training programs in the NGO and public administration sectors, especially for co-design projects; in the advertisement sector, to create innovative brand communication campaigns; in the design and engineering sectors, to co-design products, services and processes. These contexts represent new challenges for the application of the narrative approach to culture, as to intercultural competence, as we will see in the next section.

Today's extension of intercultural competence

Considering a narrative approach to culture becomes more and more important if we reflect on the deep social and cultural changes we are living in, over the last thirty years.

Indeed, from the advent of globalization with the opening and the liberalization of markets and the consequent increase in the flow of goods and capital exchanges, also the numbers and the forms of human mobility have increased enormously. Migrant routes have increased, changed their directions and reasons; but also the possibilities of travel have increased, due to the propagation of international jobs and educational carriers, and because of the upsurge in tourism. Intercultural contacts and relationships across geographical and cultural boundaries have grown; this is a fact both in modern and in traditional societies, sped up by the Internet, social media and networking. These changes have inevitably shaped, contaminated and transformed cultures and social actors. On one hand it is vary rare to find a

pure and uncontaminated culture; thus for these reasons as well, the reified concept of culture may no longer make sense. On the other hand, globalization has inevitably influenced the growth of intercultural communication and the diffusion of the need for intercultural competence to deal with and to handle relationships with different people, groups, and institutions, or, to name it more appropriately, with different cultural identities. Globalization has generally impacted the rose of multicultural contexts, and with them, the extension of possible conflicts between different subjective interests, needs and requests.

Today, "culture" is increasingly synonymous with identity, an identity marker or an identity differentiator. Groups, communities, associations, are grounded in and guided by their identity markers. And different people, different groups, different organizations have different needs and demands, and each of these subjectivities is busy spreading this or that aspect of its diversity or cultural identity, promoting practices, or even protesting or struggling for their own recognition. Often, they seek legislative recognition, demand economic resources to protect and to preserve their cultural peculiarity. For instance, women employees' might ask for expanded career opportunities, work and life balance, or parental leave. LGBTQ or disabled employees might set into motion their own petitions in the face of discriminations; LGBTQ, elderly or disabled customers might petition for the satisfaction of specific needs or desires. But also, local organizations such as customer or citizen associations, green associations, NGOs that promote human rights, and others, might raise a voice to make their specific requests, motions or petitions heard.

This fresh rethinking of culture according to the constructivist and narrative approach has also shaped the development of the idea of intercultural competence and the nature of intercultural competence evaluation tools. Indeed, in a first moment, one of the main shifts was in the direction of different perceptions and different ways of building reality by constructing meaning. Consequently, several intercultural competence models have started to consider both the *skillset*, which refers to the practices and the abilities that a person needs to act, and the *mind-set*, which refers to one's representations of reality and of social relations, and the attitudes, or the view of the world that a person has toward being part of and experiencing the diversity of others.

Like cultures, we may consider companies, and in general all the kinds of organizations, open and dynamic systems. Organizations are able to survive and to perform in the market thanks to their ability to emerge, to differentiate and evolve themselves, redefining their strategies, their markets, their products, or their processes as needed.

For these reasons, it is very important for organizations to be able to recognize, integrate and effectively manage different cultural identities—or what we can call internal and external stakeholder diversity—into their policies, strategies and practices. Examples of "internal stakeholders" are: financial partners, diverse employees (in term of gender, age, nationalities, hierarchical levels, business units, geographic localization etc.), unions, committees, etc. While "external stakeholders" are all the environmental variables that an organization has to consider: the market, customer niches, competitors, suppliers, local authorities, laws, professional associations, centres of research and universities, civil society and customer associations, local or international NGOs, etc.

For organizations today it is becoming more and more important that their managers are able to recognize and to strategically integrate the points of view and the expectations of their internal and external relations systems in order to keep their competitiveness successful and maintain a high reputation (Morri 2009).

Considering organizational stakeholders as a system of multicultural identities that need to be managed can bring us to extend the concept of intercultural competence, going beyond the individual engagement on competence (Surian 2008).

Cultural identities do not exist inside people's minds, but they are distributed and shared among a social context and its actors. The same goes for cognitive processes (Hutching 1995), including knowledge, intelligence and competence, too. Again neuroscience and genetics are telling us that the discourse and narratives are written in the whole human being, not just in mental patterns.

Within this paradigm shift we can no longer consider intercultural competence as something that a person possesses to a certain degree, but as a socially distributed ability or potential within a social context (or within a community of practitioners, or a system of stakeholders). It can be seen as cultural capital made up of differences that need to be recognized and used for transformative purposes: for instance to maximize and distribute in the medium and long term, and in a sustainable manner, its advantages and benefits among a community's members; or for contributing improved development in a social context, stimulating, for example, ongoing innovation.

Considering this extended concept of intercultural competence, it becomes important to include within the range of intercultural abilities such items as:

- being sensitive to diversity, which means to be able to recognize and to map diversity;
- listening actively, being open to different sense-making frameworks without getting stuck in a rigid perspective or fixed identity;
- being capable of activating and facilitating inclusive and dialogical processes;
- being able to integrate different perspectives, different points of view, different visions of the world, diverse values and opinions;
- making it possible to create alternative narratives, bringing about new knowledge construction, and eventually re-design practices, policies, processes.

The application of the "narrative" approach to innovative, responsible and sustainable practices

Everyday, newspapers, internet web pages or TV programs show thousands of examples of organizations that are unable to consider different points of view and to integrate them in their company's strategy, policy or practices design. The Lehman Brothers case and the Wall Street financial crisis are striking examples, as well as the bankruptcy of Greek financial institutions, the scandal of the Parmalat milk production company, as well as Foxconn's handling of employee suicide, and many other cases. All these worst-case scenarios have in common a tale of unsuccessful strategies, resulting in a huge loss to their company's brand reputation and of their customers' fidelity and trust, as well as the loss of a lot of money.

Luckily, there also exist some examples of organizations that have shown careful concern for stakeholder diversity and interests; sometimes from their very foundation, sometimes as an answer to emerging conflicts with some of their stakeholders.

All of us know McDonalds, at least from the advertisement and communication campaigns of McDonalds' products. Over the last years, McDonalds has increased the variety of its products, on one hand to integrate in local menus, habits and tastes of the countries where it has opened; at the same time it considers the requests of increasing health-conscious client niches that demand lighter, slower and more natural food. In particular, the new green-oriented values have been communicated by the means of the green logo.

Barilla, the Italian pasta company, has done the same by increasing product variety, changing the colour of its packaging, and catering to wheat allergic customers as well the health-conscious ones.

These two examples show how customers' opinions, tastes, values, and points of view are increasingly considered not just in terms of customer satisfaction, but also from a precautionary perspective, during the idea generation phase of a product or service cycle, or during the pre-launch testing phase. By including customers in the idea generation phase they can help product and service developers create innovative, more responsible and sustainable practices.

Recently, the Campbell Soup Company created the aspirational mission of "building the world's most extraordinary food company by nourishing people's lives everywhere, every day." They launched several ambitious initiatives, such as cutting the environmental footprint in half by 2020 and establishing a partnership with the American Heart Association to address consumer concerns over cardiac health related to diet. In partnership with the Campbell Soup Foundation, Campbell Soup Company built a long-term program to address childhood obesity and hunger in communities where the company operated major facilities. By including its stakeholders in co-designing its responsible strategy, Campbell Soup contributed to add social value to the communities around it. At the same time, it was able to engage more of its employees, increasing their performance (Conant 2013).

Illy Caffè, the Italian coffee company is another instructive example. Through its sustainability chart, Illy Caffè has made it clear who the producers of its coffee beans are and what kinds of relations the company has with them. Illy Foundation finances social projects for local people who are involved in coffee production, especially for women entrepreneurs, with the aim to contribute in developing the local community. It also sustains research for better quality coffee bean production that is sustainable over the time, in relation to the production cycle.

The case of Nike's lost reputation during the 1990s is probably known by all. After having opened a productive branch in emerging countries, due to the protests and the bad reputation provoked by international human rights NGOs, the company felt obliged to change its HR policy and its hiring practices, and particularly to avoid child labour. If the company had not listened to its external stakeholders, it would probably have suffered a more severe loss. On the contrary, changing its strategy, the company was able to improve its reputation (Perrini and Tencati 2008).

Nike's case is a reminder to companies that, when they internationalize, they need to consider whether to use local law as an opportunity to

redefine their policy, or whether to harmonize with the company's head-quarters policies, or to international legislation agreements. These decisions could have an impact on stakeholders' perception and a possible strong influence also on company reputation.

The cases mentioned above are just a few examples within possible new contexts, such as the corporate and private sectors, of the application of the extended sense of intercultural competence as a shared and distributed ability among different social actors in light of the "narrative" perspective. All these cases are indeed examples of alternative stories, about how diverse stakeholder viewpoints and interests may affect organizational decision-making, and how organization strategies have been designed or modified through inclusive and conversational methodologies to integrate their point of views.

These cases also show that the success of an organization depends more and more on their managers' ability to manage multi-stakeholder interests, as well as being able to implement more socially responsible practices and to engage in decision-making that can be sustainable over time.

Stakeholder management and conversation methodologies are used in order to generate new organizational knowledge, and to stimulate alternative ideas or sustainable strategies in order to answer customers' and different stakeholders' new needs or requests. The redefinition of products and of production processes takes into consideration customer niches; it encourages re-thinking of communication campaigns, even the redesign of a company logo; it extends to the redefinition of HR policy, and so on.

However, it is important to highlight as well the risk that the process of including different stakeholders might have. Indeed, stakeholder inclusion may be used less in the process of designing and implementing truly socially responsible or sustainable organizational policies and practices, but may be used more often in the process of designing and implementing socially responsible or sustainable communication campaigns. It is important to remember that contradictory communication and coherence gaps between what the company says and does can create a damaging effect on its reputation, especially among critical clients.

Conclusion

In this paper we have considered how today it is possible to reframe the concept of intercultural competence by taking into consideration the shift from a reified to a narrative approach to culture. The impact on this shift in intercultural competence moves the focus from individual

effectiveness to a social context and an entity's ability to recognize and to use its diversity for transformative purposes. In particular, the new perspective on intercultural competence has been applied in the framework of stakeholder management and in contexts where its aim is to create innovative, more responsible and sustainable organization strategies.

Both positive and negative cases have been explored to support this perspective. The worst practices in stakeholder management show what to avoid, and how to prevent organizational failure and damage. The best practices teach us how different stakeholder inclusion processes might be strategically handled, with the aim of organizational improvement and innovation, through co-designing the company's product, services or processes.

There is undoubtedly a need in today's society for managers with greater intercultural competence. This is required not only for managing relationships within multicultural and international working environments, but also to enable the inclusion of different interlocutors in the conversational processes, to integrate their different points of view into innovative, responsible and sustainable organizational decision-making and its implementation.

This alternative perspective on intercultural competence, although grounded in a constructivist and narrative approach, has not been able, at least until now, to break the ceiling of the intercultural framework with a consolidated development of literature to develop and support its practices.

Interculturalists can contribute in the training of new generations of global managers, helping them to develop both traditional and extended intercultural competence, thereby helping the global society to grow alternative narrations and further possible good practices.

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