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From Othering to Understanding: Perceiving 'Culture' in Intercultural Communication, Education and Learning

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Abstract – This chapter investigates the concept of 'culture' in intercultural education and learning (IEL). Anthropologists have for decades argued for re-thinking of bounded categories such as ethnicity, culture and nationality. When nation states can be described as 'imagined communities', traditions, customs, values and belonging are frequently negotiated and re-negotiated. The paper discusses the challenges of teaching and learning about culture in the context of transnational mobility, cultural hybridity and super-diverse societies. While in theoretical discussions most authors recognize the difficulty of forcing the concept of culture into a solid, geographically bounded entity, practitioners – e.g. teachers, students and intercultural workers – have few methodological tools to apply these theories in practice. Without denying the importance of culture in contemporary societies, it argues for new methods in IEL which would respond to 21 century's needs in diverse societies.

Keywords: intercultural education, multicultural education, cultural learning, transnationalism, diversity

Introduction

In today's world intercultural competency is said to be crucial for all those who work in ethnically diverse contexts. In fact, intercultural training is a continuously growing field. However what is actually meant by 'culture' in the context of intercultural education and learning? In social sciences and cultural studies, recognition of highly complex cultural patterns in today's post-migration societies have urged scholars to think about culture in a non-essentialising, flexible and contextualised manner. In this paper I am asking how such concepts as 'culture' and 'ethnicity' are understood in the theoretical debates around intercultural education and learning, and how the practices of intercultural training are challenged by debates on culture in social sciences. Studies on transnational migration for example has brought into question the conventional way of thinking about immigrants' integration and raised the issue of double or multiple belonging as a serious alternative perspective to perceive national and cultural identities as geographically bounded. What are the theoretical and conceptual foundations of intercultural training, education and learning? Finally, I am suggesting that the theories and practices of intercultural education should be analysed in a wider context of socio-political discourses on immigration, ethnicity and multiculturalism.

Background of the theoretical debate

The theoretical debates around the problems of cultural differences contribute into what is understood as ethnicity and culture in the context of intercultural education. Current debates within the social science literature identifies two dominant and controversary approaches to culture: the *essentialist* and *non-essentialist* views of culture. Although it seems that the non-essentialist approach has become

more prominent among researchers, much of intercultural training is still based on essentialist the stance. I am here shortly presenting the both approaches.

The essentialist view sees cultures – national or smaller units – as containers of culture, each one separate from the other. Within this view, each culture is a set of characteristics that can be studied and used in order to communicate with the people 'belonging' to this culture. Cultures are seen as independently existing patterns: this can be seen for example in a way how people when they travel outside of their home countries say that they are "visiting other cultures". Hofstede (1997), namely, is one of the most cited upholders of this view. The essentialist view is challenged by the non-essentialist view, which pays attention to the constructed and contextualised nature of culture.

To illustrate how this approach is used in the classroom, I will provide an example based on my own experience as a trainer in intercultural work. In autumn 2008 I was invited to lecture about Islam for people who were in training to become intercultural trainers: health care workers, trade union people, and students among others. As I arrived early before my turn, I listened to a lecturer, whose turn was before me, giving a small exercise to the students. She had drawn on the blackboard a scale from 0 to 100 and the students had to situate different 'cultures' on the scale in relation to time, social hierarchies, gender roles and so forth. The aim of the scale was to show how Americans are more individualistic than Japanese, Russians have larger power hierarchies than Finns, and so on. I recognized this as an adaptation of Hofstede's (1997) scale. Come my turn, I realized, that what is expected from the lecturer in this kind of training situation is to offer some concrete models of how different cultures operate and how we could, based on those cultural 'facts', handle problematic situations which the educators may need to solve in their work. Yet, this viewpoint has numerous problems. First, there is a danger of overemphasizing the role of 'cultural' or 'religious' behavior in people's lives and forgetting that there might be other driving forces such as

economic, political or social motivations behind the acts which are justified by using cultural discourse. The second problem is that since we do not in everyday life, encounter 'cultures' as such but rather we are only able to observe limited cultural elements, adopted perhaps only by certain part of a specific population, there is a great risk of generalizing these elements as representing the totality.

The situation in the classroom may be just the current state of intercultural training in practice, but it also tells us about the uneasy confrontation of practitioners and researchers: the former are in need of very practical information about how to deal with cultural differences in their work and at the same time, the latter is reluctant to provide any concrete guidelines or tools. Culture, in this context, refers to shared meanings and values of a group of people, usually living in the same geographical area and speaking the same language. This definition, with some variations, is the most commonly used in literature dealing with intercultural education and learning (IEL in this text).

The theories of *intercultural communication* started to develop in the United States in 1970s for the purposes of international business training. Among the best known theorists of this interdisciplinary field there were names such as Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede and William B.Gudykunst. This functionalist, 'user friendly' approach saw cultures as separate entities and aimed to overcome difficulties involved in intercultural encounters. In this sense, intercultural communication is based on the idea that bigger the cultural differences are, the more difficult it is to overcome these problems. Therefore, there needs to be scientific methods to measure the cultural differences between cultures which can help to analyse the specific difficulties in intercultural encounters and offer a method that can be learned to solve those difficulties. For this purpose, different tools were used, such as diagrams of national characters, handbooks and models that aim to demonstrate how different cultures function. Nationality defines a person and her relationship to the others (of other nationalities)

a priori, but there are certain 'rules' that can be learned in order to facilitate the encounters and communicate despite the differences.

According to scholars of non-essentialist lines, it is not correct to talk about 'cultures' as entities, but rather of cultural elements and fragments which can manifest in different ways and take different meanings depending of the context. The non-essentialist view of culture that many anthropologists have adopted within the post-structuralist research agenda has made it difficult to reify the concept of culture for teaching and learning purposes. Hence, there is certainly a need to re-think IEL from the perspective that takes into account the danger of cultural stereotyping but at the same, is able to provide educators and learners with concrete tools for understanding how culture operates in complex, everyday life situations.

Theoretical debates these two approaches are clearly distinguishable, however in everyday life practices they occasionally mingle. Baumann (1996) for example, argues that minority groups can both be manipulated and they can manipulate the essentialist discourses on culture. Culture may be an operational term for scholars to discuss differences or similitude between certain groups, but it is as much used by the studied subjects themselves. However, the non-essentialist view seems to be more accurate in post-migration, hybrid societies. The increased migration and other type of more or less permanent mobility between nation states have multiplied the possible references for many people in today's world, thereby problematising the adoption of the nation state as a unit of reference for cultural identity. The essentialist view, still widely applied in intercultural education and training, is, as I argue in this paper, highly problematic. From the viewpoint of those scholars who have positioned themselves more within the non-essentialist perspective intercultural communication can be operationalised and learned like a game that requires knowledge of the rules and the right playing strategy (Illman, 2004, p.18). From this perspective, cultural diversity is only recognized as an obstacle

that has to be overcome, not as a value as such, as it has been argues by French scholar Abdallah-Pretceille (2003, p. 68).

The approach that sees cultures as cohesive entities is still widespread among practitioners, but it has been criticized by more hermeneutically oriented researchers, who argue for a more dynamic understanding of the concept of culture. People are not only passive products of their social and cultural environments, but they actively shape their worldview and give meanings to their experiences from their own perspective, creating a unique understanding of their own and others' cultures and of identity and difference (Illman, 2004, p.19).

In anthropology, there have been important attempts to re-think culture in light of global flows and modes of deterritorialization. Migration dynamics and impacts have been objects of anthropological studies already since 1930s, but the disciplines interest has shifted to ethnicity in post-migration societies in 1970s, and to migrant transnationalism in 1990s (Vertovec, 2007, p.964). Consequently, during the past decades there have been some important changes in ways of looking at culture and ethnicity, which are worth mentioning here. First, already in 1940s and 1950s the anthropologists working in south central Africa started to theoretically consider the profound socio- economic transformations in these societies and, among other things, the inter-linkages between spheres of political economy and modes of social relations implicated in migration processes. In 1970s and 1980s anthropological research was much concerned by questions of ethnic identities. Ethnographic studies were conducted in urban contexts in Europe and North America. It was during this period when the Barthian view (Barth, 1969) on ethnicity started to become a dominant stream of thinking, especially in the context of migration studies. Anthropologist Fredrik Barth did not consider ethnic identities to be universal, but negotiated and renegotiated in changing contexts. During this period, anthropology of migration started to interest in maintenance, construction and reproduction of ethnic identity among migrants. Finally, from 1990s onwards, transnationalism became one

of the fundamental ways of understanding contemporary migration processes. This transnational turn has provided illuminating ethnographic data and an appreciation of the dynamics of migrants' lives and interests across national contexts. Other emerging notions, such as hybridity, creolization and cosmopolitanism, have lead to anti-essentializing shift in anthropology since 1990s (Vertovec, 2007, pp. 961–966).

The problem is that the current theoretical approaches to culture and cultural differences are hard to reify for training purposes. People involved in intercultural education or work need a practical approach to culture related questions they face in concrete situations. For example, a study conducted by Pitkänen (2006, p. 110) indicates, Finnish authorities (health care workers, social workers, teachers, policemen etc.) said that they would need handbooks that present customs of different nationalities in order to facilitate intercultural encounters in their workplaces. However, in the theoretical discussions most scholars would reject that kind of 'handbook approach', because they would be based on representations and even stereotyping views of cultures. As noted by Vertovec, many anthropologists are reluctant to describe almost any characteristics of a group or category, for fear of being labeled as 'essentialist' (2007, p.965). It seems that there is a need to adjust intercultural learning theories and practices that would better match with the challenges of post-migration, super-diverse societies.

From Culturalist to Cultural:
Solid and Liquid Approaches to Culture

Intercultural education is based on two different principles. The first is the common principle of equality of all people and the right to be treated equally and second, on the second is idea of diversity and difference. There is always a dynamic relationship between the politics

of equality and difference, since the principle of equality calls for equal behavior towards everybody whereas the principle of difference calls on taking into account people's different needs and unique qualities. Intercultural education operates between these two principles and aims at justice -however difficult that might be (Kaikkonen, 2004, p. 137). Diversity in this case refers primarily to differences that are considered cultural. Gender and social class also construct differences and have been the objects of numerous studies, but only cultural difference is seen as important enough to deserve specific training programmes. What do we need to know about the cultural 'other' in order to successfully deal with him/her and what kind of intercultural competency is relevant in today's post-migration societies?

Intercultural communication, education and learning have been the focus of numerous studies in the fields of psychology, educational sciences, linguistics, economics and anthropology. A large number of studies, text books and guides have been published on the topic, not to mention a variety of institutions and individuals who provide training, teaching and coaching on intercultural competency. Therefore, this article does not aim to provide a complete, deep analysis of everything written on the topic, I am rather attempting to outline an overall picture of tendencies and preferences found in the research literature with regard to theoretical positioning and conceptual choices.

The term *intercultural* is used in this paper, even if in some texts the terms *cross-cultural*, *multicultural* and *transcultural* also appear. All of these terms refer to different discourses and are used in different ways in different contexts, sometimes overlapping. The competency needed in intercultural encounters has at times been defined as intercultural, sometimes as cross-cultural or multicultural competence/expertise/awareness. In Finland, Jokikokko has drawn attention to the variety of terms and came to the conclusion that the terminology in the field varies and depends on perspective and emphasis (Jokikokko, 2005, p. 90). Since this article focuses more on the problems of 'cultural' in general, I will not go very deeply into definitions of these

different approaches. Whether we are talking about multi-, cross- or intercultural education (learning/training/competence), one must define what is meant by 'cultural' and, in my view, take the concept of 'culture' into the center of the analysis. In short, this paper argues against culturalist and ethnologist approaches in intercultural education and proposes some alternative perspectives.

Most studies on intercultural competence and intercultural adjustment include a short introduction to the key concepts of the study, It should go without saying, that when discussing anything 'cultural', the concept of 'culture' should be taken into the center of the analyses. Dervin (2006, p.108) has found that the definition of culture as "shared habits, beliefs and values of a national group" is frequently used in the literature on intercultural education. Seen from this perspective, a learning situation is considered 'intercultural' if it involves people with different nationalities. The predominance of this kind of thinking is evident in the situations, in which the presence of different nationalities is seen as pre-condition of 'intercultural' or 'multicultural' for learning. Yet, the conceptualization of culture in this way is not necessarily the most accurate in today's super-diverse contexts.

One alternative and perhaps better adjusted to post-migration societies is, as Dervin (2006) proposes, to look at the definitions of culture based on Bauman's (2000) image of *liquidity* as a spirit of our times. Following Dervin's idea, the different approaches to culture could be divided into a *solid* and a *liquid* understanding of culture.

A *Solid* understanding of culture sees cultures as closed systems which determine a large part of an individual's actions. The solid approach pays little or no attention to internal diversity within a group considered 'cultural'. Within the solid understanding of culture, nation -states are often seen as 'containers' of culture. Thus, any situation becomes 'intercultural' by virtue of more than one nationality's presence. The *Liquid* approach that refers to Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity' (2000) also takes into account Bhabha's (1990) concept

of cultural hybridity. *Liquidity* can be used a metaphor to describe the nature of culture in today's super-diverse world.

In Finland recent studies in the field of intercultural education discuss the 'liquid' nature of culture in today's world: e.g. Marianne Teräs on her study *Intercultural Learning and Hybridity in the Culture Laboratory* (2007) understands culture as "dynamic and hybrid as well as a socially and historically constructed phenomenon" which involves "intermingling of cultural practices, discourses, values, conceptions, and artifacts". She considers hybridity as constituting "part or even the core of a culture" (Teräs, 2007, p. 25). This approach has clearly moved a step further from the solid understanding of culture by recognizing the diversity within groups and perhaps referring to current forms of multiple identities and belonging such as transnationalism and hybridity, but still considers hybrids as combinations of solid cultures.

However, the more practically oriented the approach, the more ambivalent meanings the word 'culture' gets. In a publication of Finnish National Board of Education (Ikonen, 2005) on teaching of immigrant children, a chapter called 'Very different cultural background' ("hyvin erilainen kulttuuritausta") discusses the issues of illiteracy and the problems of motivation for studies (Perttula, 2005, p. 77). Therefore, as I read it, the chapter suggests that illiteracy is something that is related to culture, rather than socio-economic structures in the country of origin. Seen in this way the word 'culture' encloses all differences, including those that are caused by unequal distribution of wealth and resources. It seems that despite the attempts in theoretical literature on IEL to open up the concept of culture for less bounded and essentialising definitions, on the practical level there are more difficulties to distinguish cultural dimensions from linguistic, economical and social problems.

Intercultural Competence in Super-Diverse Society

As contacts with other nationalities become part of everyday life for many, either through international migration, travel or other types of mobility, there seems to be a common understanding that differences which are seen as cultural should be taken into account in different areas of everyday life. Through global media, we all become aware of diversity and we are forced to realise that our way of seeing the world is not the only possible one. This is what Appadurai (1996) calls 'the cultural dimension of globalization'. Depending on the situation, cultural diversity and the encounters with cultural differences, either real or imagined, can either be seen as a challenge or even a problem, or alternatively they can be considered as richness and a possibility.

In Finland, a few scholars have argued for a need of *intercultural competence*. It is seen as a key concept of intercultural education and learning and therefore deserves to be discussed in this context. "It can be claimed that everyone needs intercultural competence nowadays" argues Jokikokko and continues:"Even local communities are multicultural, and people are not restricted to one single environment, neither mentally or physically. People have different sub-cultural backgrounds; they may have contacts in other countries; they travel; and the media brings the world into their homes and lives even if they never went outside the borders of their native country".(Jokikokko, 2005, p. 90). Scholars argue for intercultural competency for educators, teachers (Soilamo, 2008, Pitkänen, 2006; 2005; Talib 1999; 2002; 2006), employees of public administration and authorities (Matinheikki-Kokko, Hammar-Suutari, 2006; Pitkänen, 2006), language learners (Dervin, 2006) and nurses as well as employees in multi-national companies and development co-operation workers (Räsänen, 2005). Intercultural awareness is seen as an important *cultural capital* that can help to navigate in the world of transforming labor markets (Talib, Löfström & Meri, 2004; Talib, 2006). Definitions and perspectives may vary from one researcher to other, but it seems that most scholars in the field of intercultural

education agree that fact that some kind of intercultural competency is needed in today's working life as well as an ability to function in today's societies in general.

What is actually meant by intercultural competences? In the most limited sense, intercultural competency can be reduced to mean knowledge of different customs and traditions and correct ways to behave in different national contexts, understood as 'target cultures'. Today, this kind of knowledge that focuses on general features of a foreign culture is seldom considered as intercultural competency (Pelkonen, 2005, p. 71). For Jokikokko (2005) intercultural competency is a combination of skills, attitudes, action and knowledge and awareness, but she also questions whether it should be considered as a philosophy and not only as a multidimensional ability to act in various situations.

Pelkonen (2005) argues for competency and sensitivity to support understanding, dialogue and the adaptation to one cultural context to another. According to Dervin (2006) the most often quoted definition of intercultural competency comes from Byram (1997, pp. 57-64) who defines intercultural competency in terms of *attitudes* (relativising self, valuing other), *knowledge* (of self and the other: of interaction: individual and societal) and *skills* (interpret and relate & discover and/or interact) to be worked upon by learners.

Despite the fact that most researchers seem to agree that intercultural competences are needed in today's world, some questions arise about how this competence could be acquired and whether it can be acquired at all. Kaikkonen (2004, p. 147) points out that intercultural competency has become a commercialized product and that the criticism towards teaching intercultural competency is justified when it refers merely to technical skills as demanded by many educators. He certainly makes an important point here. But one should also remember that in fact, the concept of teaching intercultural competency was *first* adopted by enterprises who train expatriates for international missions and has only in the late 1990s moved into the social field.

Dervin takes a critical position with regards to the idea of becoming interculturally competent through training. He argues that first of all, the learners are already interculturally competent from the beginning of their studies, since they are already used to "rapport/face management" in their own environment on daily bases. Second, he argues that all acts of communication are intercultural, even in intracultural contexts. The third argument concerns the nature of competence itself: it is not something that is "acquired" for good, since it is not a measurable, stable skill. Finally, he criticizes the theory of intercultural communication competence in LLT for the fact that it may generate ethical, psychological and intellectual problems since some of the learning takes place outside of the educational environment. Therefore, he suggests that individuals "develop" intercultural competence, instead of "becoming" interculturally competent. (Dervin, 2006, pp. 112-113.) The idea of becoming interculturally competent can also be queried from a hermeneutically oriented perspective, e.g. Nynäs (2001) argues against the predictability and rationality of intercultural encounters.

Emerging Perspectives and Strategies

There is no doubt that culture is an important element of any social organisation today. The way how cultures are perceived and discussed may have consequences in shaping peoples' lives and human relations. There is no need to remind how much harm negative stereotyping can cause to individuals who need to face them in their everyday lives. Traditionally, ethnography is based on the idea that cultures exist as systems that can be observed, interpreted and described. What is needed in intercultural education is a move away from an ethnographic, descriptive approach towards an anthropological, hermeneutic approach.

Let's think about a concrete situation in which a non-Muslim educator may feel perplexed by his/her Muslim student's behavior, if the latter refuses to eat pork offered at school referring to religious reasons, and demands to be served something else instead. Then, on another occasion, the teacher meets the same student drinking alcohol. Facing this kind of a contradictory situation is confusing for the educator, because it proves that people do not necessarily fit into given cultural frames, but the affiliations and meanings can be negotiated differently in different occasions. In other words, "every individual has the potential to express him/herself and act not only depending on their codes of membership, but also on freely chosen codes of reference" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006, p. 478). Intercultural training based on a factual knowledge 'of different cultures' and technical skills do not prepare learners to meet the complex patterns in which culture is constructed in everyday life situations. In the worst case, this kind of intercultural education first produces the 'other' (or "cultural difference") and then tries to offer tools for dealing with this 'other'.

Postcolonial studies are concerned with the interconnectedness of knowledge and power. This is why it would be interesting to look at intercultural education as a process that constructs knowledge of cultures and of what we perceive as 'cultural diversity'. Perhaps the best known study on the field is Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that demonstrates how essentialising knowledge of the Orient was constructed in academic and popular discourses and how this knowledge was used to legitimize the colonial rule over 'Oriental' people. The concept of 'otherness' is also used in postcolonial studies in order to describe a person or the people who are considered as 'culturally different'. Seen from this angle, considering or describing someone or some people as 'culturally different' is not a neutral act, but it brings power hierarchies and processes of social distinction into play. This is important to keep in mind, particularly when discussing IEL in the context of immigration.

A solid, essentialising approach to culture is problematic from several viewpoints. First of all, it presupposes that cultures exist as natural units. Equating culture with nationality is also highly problematic in the era of emerging transnational lifestyles. Even if we agree on the fact that the cultures do not exist as natural units but as social constructions, it does not reduce the importance of culture. In this sense, the important question is not to find out what the characteristic of for example a Muslim are, but how and why "Muslimness" is emphasised in certain situations and why, in other situations, it is played down. More concretely, instead of just stating that 'Muslim women wear head scarfs' it would be more interesting to ponder why some Muslim women wear a scarf and others do not, and what is expressed with the wearing or non-wearing of the scarf. In this case, the wearing of a scarf takes different symbolic meanings if it happens in a context where it is forbidden (e.g. in French state schools) or if it happens in a context where it is considered as an obligation (e.g. while praying in the Mosque).

Within education research some scholars have taken seriously the need of new theoretical and methodological approaches when it comes to the transformation of post-modern societies. New, emerging social structures demand, as argued by Robertson and Dale (2008) knowledge that can help to understand the new ontology of the world order. Abdallah-Pretceille (2006; 2003) argues that the concept of culture is marked too much by a descriptive, objectifying and categorizing approach and is therefore no longer able to grasp the flexible and constantly changing nature of cultural forms. Hence, there is a risk that instead of providing the students with critical tools to analyse and contextualise differences that are called 'cultural', the students will, in fact, only learn about cultural stereotypes or even prejudices. Therefore she argues for a concept of *culturality,* which invites us to contextualise cultures in terms of social, political and communication -based realities. 'Culturality' refers to the fact that cultures are increasingly changing, fluent, striped and alveolate. Therefore, it is

the fragments and not the totality that one should learn to identify and analyse. (Abdallah-Preteceille, 2006, pp. 475-479.)

It seems necessary that trainers take into account silences and hidden attitudes which affect the ways of behaving; their own as well as their students. S/he needs to be able to objectify his/her own norms and references, because the more the audience is heterogenic the less these norms and references will be shared by the others (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003, p.56). At a more practical level Dervin (2006, p.120) proposes *intercultural deconditioning* as a method of helping 'students to move away from stereotypical representations and "reach" a more diversified picture of the reality.

Conclusions

We have now looked at some ways of understanding culture within intercultural education and learning. It seems justified to argue, that 'solid' ways of perceiving culture and ethnicity does not easily fit into today's world, characterized by hybridity, super-diversity and transnational migration. If we agree on the fact that 'culture' is socially constructed and constantly negotiated in dynamic processes, we might want to ask, what we can really teach and learn about cultures in today's world? What kind of new perspectives and strategies should be adopted into the studies of IEL? Three suggestions arise from the readings analysed for this paper. First, there seems to be a need for studies that analyse the contents of intercultural training programmes. However intercultural training at the current state may include almost anything, depending on to whom it is addressed. There are numbers of institutions offering intercultural training, as well as publications dealing with the topic to respond different people's needs of learning to deal with what is perceived as 'culturally different'. Yet very little is know what is actually going on in the field, since intercultural train-

ing may encompass wide variety of practices. On the other hand, intercultural theories often lack critical analyses of how these theories themselves are products of global processes that promote inequality and hierarchical power relations, and how they, in turn, contribute to these processes of knowledge production and hierarchisation. For a further investigation, methods, theories and practices of intercultural education would make an interesting object of studies.

A second suggestion is to critically analyse the underlying theoretical and conceptual ideas on which IEL is based on. Can there be found, for example, some practices that reinforce cultural stereotypes instead of working against them? A real challenge is to integrate current theoretical discourses into operational classroom practices. Further analyses of the field would help to identify the pitfalls of IEL, but also to share and develop good practices.

A third suggestion concludes the other two. It is to critically analyse the ideological base of the intercultural education theories. Finland has become an immigration country relatively late compared with many Western European countries and it might even be an exaggeration to refer to an 'immigration wave' to Finland, however it is true that the membership in the European Union, globalised labor markets, increased student mobility and many other factors bring Finns into contact with other nationalities more than ever before. Finland has of course always ethnically diverse country (with minorities such as Sami, Roma, Tatars etc.), but the importance to learn about the diversity emerged with international immigration. From this background, it is easy to understand that the intercultural education in Finland is most often discussed in the context of immigration and the 'new' ethnic minorities. Immigration is a highly politicized issue and this should not be forgotten when discussing about IEL. Within higher education, intercultural training was introduced in the 1990s when Finland became a member state of the European Union, although it has been officially an aim since 1970s (Dervin, 2006, p. 109). Hence,

the IEL is needed in order to respond to political and demographic transformations, not to value diversity as such.

Despite the rationale that most European states need immigrants as labor force, highly skilled workers and tax payers, most anti-immigration discourses use cultural differences as an argument to explain why certain nationalities should kept out from Europe. This applies particularly to those who are considered most 'culturally distant' from Europeans, often referring to Arabs and Muslims. Yet the idea of cultural distance or closeness is highly contested in current scientific debates. Although most scholars working on IEL see cultural diversity rather as something enriching and positive and argue for tolerance, respect and peaceful cohabitation of people from different backgrounds, the risk is that it simultaneously underlies the 'cultural' aspect of differences that can, in reality, be due to many other reasons: economic, political etc. In short, when highlighting culture at the cost of other differences one risks to reinforce the racist idea that cultures are fundamentally different, people are prisoners of their own cultures and that the culture is the main reason for insunderstaning and problems in social enconters.

The other risk is that the discussions turn into an ideological battlefield, when the scientific validity of the theories becomes questionable. Intercultural education, as education in general, may suffer from the value-laden, normative presumption that it is automatically 'a good thing' (Robertson & Dale, 2008, p.7). Hence, the basic concepts of intercultural education, 'culture' and 'ethnicity' but also 'difference' and 'diversity', should be analysed in the light of postmodern challenges. Taking the concept of culture seriously as I argued in this paper is extremely important since the intercultural educators do not only transfer the knowledge of how to deal with 'culturally different' people but they may also contribute to the construction of difference. Following the idea of Adballah-Pretceille (2006, p.477) I see a danger in the cultural training that is based on knowledge of supposed cultural models. There, in fact, focus is rather on *cultural representations* than actual *cultures.* The challenge of intercultural

education today is in developing that kind of methods and tools for educators that are adaptive to today's hyper diverse societies where growing number of people no longer identify themselves with only one national culture.

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