Difference in diversity: multiple perspectives on multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural conceptual complexities

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Published online: 10 Mar 2015.

To cite this article: Manuela Guilherme & Gunther Dietz (2015) Difference in diversity: multiple perspectives on multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural conceptual complexities, Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 10:1, 1-21, DOI: 10.1080/17447143.2015.1015539

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2015.1015539

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Difference in diversity: multiple perspectives on multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural conceptual complexities

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(Received 27 April 2014; accepted 28 January 2015)

This text undertakes an analysis of three concepts, namely ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘interculturality,’ and ‘the transcultural,’ which are scrutinized and discussed in their potential for explaining the wider scope of inequality, difference, and diversity as developed in perspectives of different north-south conceptual frameworks. The discussion draws from recently published or other made public sources from different academic and cultural traditions and, therefore, it maps different perspectives and uses of these terms. They have lately been made ubiquitous in the academic and social discourse and are often used indiscriminately. In fact, it is impossible to establish fixed and stable lines between them since they form a complex web of meanings that, to some extent, may crisscross each other. However, it is feasible, for the purpose of deeper scientific accurateness, to identify layers and regions of meaning for each of one of them and this is what this article attempts to do, against a backdrop of different types of colonialism, both from the perspective of the colonized and the colonizers, as well as against a backdrop of a north/south-south/north metaphor. The conceptual discussion on which this article relies is based upon two large projects in Latin America involving various types of higher education institutions.

Keywords: multiculturalism; interculturality; transcultural; difference; diversity; inequality

Introduction

We can recall several historical events and developments throughout the twentieth century that help illuminate the background of the context where we are nowadays leading our lives or, to put it in better terms, being led across them. In consequence, we are now struggling across the second decade of the twenty-first century, merged in crises and attempting to find out new paradigms that may guide us through ways out of ‘The Crisis,’ since this is, in fact, as plural as it can be. Moreover, while in the surface it is an economic, political, and social crisis, it goes deeper into the ontological and epistemological meanings of the whole humanity. This is to say that the vocabulary that the western-northern English-speaking academy has put forward in the last century in order to describe the changes evidenced in their national communities must be pushed beyond the horizons of their conceptual ‘languaging’ (Mignolo 2000; Phipps and Gonzalez 2004), namely the terms which are to be the focus of this article. The world is therefore trying to avoid the inevitable and figure out not one light at the end of the tunnel but the
treasures, life-sources, wonders and traps, shining lights, and possible exits for which the narrow tunnel can itself provide. It is our intention here to dig into the potential wealth of different understandings of these particular terms and therefore enrich our academic perceptions of them by opening them up to other world epistemologies.

Looking back at the twentieth century, we certainly cannot avoid evoking two world wars, the boom of international policy, decolonization and postcolonialism, intensification of globalization, the technological impetus and, as a result, wider and wider mass mobility. In addition, we can neither ignore the civil-rights movements, globalization of social movements, or the development of sociological studies nor the emergence of new nation-states and new societal paradigms that have, in the meantime, been validated. This is where we stand now, when we attempt to define multiculturality, interculturality, and transculturality, that is, by holding ourselves to ‘the old and the new’ that, however, differ according to whichever perspective we take – geographical, historical, cultural, political, ideological, sociological – in order to explicate social complexities such as ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘interculturality,’ or ‘the transcultural.’ These three concepts are discussed below in order to elucidate their explanatory potential with regard of the broader, societal constellations of inequality, difference and diversity that shape contemporary societies, both in northern and in southern contexts.

Furthermore, we briefly illustrate our conceptual exploration with the background knowledge that has been gathered from two large projects and networks, in which we have participated and taken scientific coordinating roles, in Latin America. In one case through the academic cooperation between Europe and Latin America and, in the other example, a project located in Mexico through which the very notion of ‘university,’ whose model was imported from Europe, is being put at stake. We also add a third experience of a small European project, carried out both in the north and south of Europe, about the intercultural dimension of citizenship education. Therefore, this article also emanates from the reflections, discussions, and activities which have been developed within a high number of higher education institutions, of various types, in Latin America. It results from conceptual analyses carried out by the Inter-university Framework Program for Equity and Social Cohesion Policies in Higher Education, the first project mentioned above between Europe and Latin American universities, 30 universities altogether, funded by the EC-ALFA program (http://www.riaipe-alfa.eu/). It also encompasses the experience of the second project mentioned above carried out at the University of Veracruz, Mexico. Both projects deal with the themes of cultural difference, curricula relevance, and the impact of higher education institutions, whatever their particular nature and structure, on the involving communities and wider society. Their agency under the scope of the previously mentioned projects fires back against the epistemological orthodoxy of the established canon and status quo and generates a reconceptualization of the leading terminology of difference, within which we selected the above referred three fundamental concepts: ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘interculturality,’ and ‘the transcultural.’ If radical cooperative intercultural projects such as the ones above are to be given attention and legitimacy, the academic community cannot ignore the impact that they shall have in the discussion of such fundamental terms, as the ones highlighted above, necessarily intertwined with other umbrella notions which must come into their discussion, such as ‘inequality,’ ‘difference,’ and ‘diversity,’ whose relationship is also to be developed further below.
**Toward ‘diatopically’ based visions of ‘living together’**

We are adopting here the ‘north/south-south/north’ metaphor in order to develop our conceptual hermeneutics of words such as multiculturalism, interculturality, and the transcultural. The north and the south, or vice versa, are nevertheless relative to each other, that is, we may take into consideration the north of the north (Alaska, Scandinavia, and Siberia, for instance), those which are both the south of the north and the north of the south (e.g. Portugal, Morocco, Taiwan, Mexico, and Alabama, USA) and we can certainly continue with portraying the south of the south (e.g. Mozambique, Australia, and Uruguay), in whose insides we can also find both the ‘North’ and the ‘South’. With the mobility which is taking place around the world, societies have become so diverse within themselves that we do not need any more to go across the political or geographical borders in order to meet the Other. There have been several authors developing the North/South metaphor, although in various perspectives, for example, *Si el Sur fuera el Norte* (if the south were the north), a critique of Eurocentric imposed views, meaning that the south is also entitled to have a say in world politics and economy and, moreover, that its contribution is indispensable for the world’s ecological balance and, therefore, its sustainability (Estermann 2008).

According to this author, intercultural philosophy in Latin America promotes a dialogue between the north and the south, that is, between European traditions of thought (as developed into Latin American) and indigenous Amerindian traditions, however, without aiming at a synthesis, instead at mutual respect, despite the difficulty in translating between different cosmological visions, concepts, living, and moral standards (Estermann 2008, 66–67).

Such dialogue goes beyond mere, nevertheless extremely demanding, linguistic translation into a ‘diatopical hermeneutics,’ an expression introduced by Panikkar (Estermann 2008), that implies a philosophical standing simultaneously upon differing *topoi*, in this case, different cultural cosmovisions. This expression was also developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who insightfully defined the concept and described its ontological and epistemological implications (Santos 1999, 2009). According to him, ‘diatopical hermeneutics’ is based on the idea that ‘the topoi of an individual culture no matter how strong they may be, are as incomplete as the culture itself’ (1999, 222).

Santos still adds that the objective here is ‘to raise the consciousness of reciprocal incompleteness to its possible maximum by engaging in the dialogue, as it were, with one foot in one culture and the other in another’ (1999, 222). This is, according to him, where ‘its *dia-topical* character’ lies. Accordingly, Santos criticizes political philosophy and its Western notion of human rights, as well as its ‘epistemicidal’ attitude toward other cultural traditions; as a counterproposal, he opts for a ‘diatopic hermeneutics’, a transcultural dialogue that transcends the ‘commonplaces’ of each culture:

Diatopical hermeneutics is based on the idea that the *topoi* of an individual culture, no matter how strong they may be, are as incomplete as the culture itself. Such incompleteness is not visible from inside the culture itself, since aspiration to the universal induces taking *pars pro toto*. Incompleteness in a given culture must be assessed from another culture’s *topoi*. More than as an inadequate answer to a given problem, cultural incompleteness manifests itself as an inadequate formulation of the problem itself. The objective of diatopic hermeneutics is, therefore, not to achieve completeness – which is admittedly an unachievable goal – but, on the contrary, to raise the consciousness of reciprocal incompleteness to its maximum possible by engaging in the dialogue, as it were, with one foot in one culture and the other in another. Herein its *diatopical* character. (Santos 1995, 340)
Modern European thought has tended to unilaterally impose hegemony, in its own terms, despite being itself based upon dichotomies, mainly in the form of colonial thought, which was made of ‘the traveling theories [that] were traveling from North to South’ and, moreover, including the fact that ‘the languages in which they dressed and traveled were the colonial languages, chiefly French and German’ (Mignolo 2000, 174).

The diatopical perspective enables us to contrast different societal constellations, shaped by structures of vertical inequality, of horizontal identity differences and of multiple sources of diversities, without imposing a single, often Eurocentric explanatory scheme (Dietz 2009). Instead, we propose to trace the specific historical origins of supposedly universal concepts. Therefore, it is also worth noticing that English in North America was at the upper level of the colonial symbolic representation whereas Spanish and Portuguese, even in their own colonies and despite their status of official languages, were placed at the intermediate level of colonialism, with evident zones of light and shadow depending on different geographical, political, and social factors.

For example, different roles were taken by the Portuguese language in Angola, where it was the unquestioned colonial language, whereas in Mozambique it played, and still plays, a sub-power role, due to the powerful representation of English-speaking colonialism in the region as well as to the regional hegemonic indigenous languages. The hierarchy of languages in multilingual postcolonial settings, between European colonized languages and indigenous languages, as well as among themselves, proves the complexity that multiculturalism and multilingualism has shown throughout the times (Adejunmobi 2004; Clemente and Higgins 2008; Guilherme 2007; Chimbutane 2011).

With the unfolding of colonialism and globalization, which have constituted different phases of a continuing process led by capitalism at an early and later stage, the North and the South have, to some extent, been de-territorialized, and therefore permeated every society in both hemispheres, although symbolic representations remain geographically situated (Garcia-Canclini 2005). With the mobility of populations, immigrants, refugees, and all sorts of travelers, societies, mainly in urban environments, have undergone intensive and rapid demographic change and, therefore, the North and the South, no matter how relative to each other they are, have come to be represented in neighboring communities, if not in the same community, both in the north and in the south.

**Diasporas and transnational communities**

Diatopical comparisons require a broad ‘tour d’horizon’ of the context in which concepts ‘travel’ and ‘migrate’ transnationally – between different societal contexts, between northern and southern constellations, and between diverse social actors (Mateos Cortés 2009). Newly appearing, so-called transnational communities can be conceived as diasporas that are no longer historic, but rather emerging as a result of the constitution of transnational migratory spaces and of their correspondingly de-territorialized ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai 1991). While some criticize the all too general and indiscriminate use of the concept of diaspora, coined for specific historical cases such as the Jewish, Armenian, and Palestinian diasporas (Rex 1996; Faist 1999), others perceive processes of ‘diasporization’ that can be generalized (Cohen 1997). It is precisely at the confluence of the emergence of transnational spaces and technological globalization and of the increase of ‘interconnectivity’ where – in contrast to earlier periods – migrant communities can, simultaneously, articulate identities at different levels.

Therefore, terms such as ‘multicultural,’ ‘intercultural,’ and ‘transcultural’ are now all becoming quite common around the world, both in the academy and in official policy.
documents, however, each one of them is more or less familiar to each society, either with positive or negative connotations, whose perception depends on the academic traditions and the historical developments of each one of the terms in each context. This means that such terms are not universal signifiers either, although they are often paradoxically understood as such despite their own particular reference to difference. Although the definitions of multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural tend to claim precisely for decentering and against universalizing cultural assumptions, theorizations of multiculturalism, interculturality and the transcultural often tend to conceptualize them from an insider ‘either-or’ perspective based upon generalizations and essentialisms as well as upon unilateral understanding of other views.

Moreover, they also slip into definitions that are presented as comprehensive and universally bounded. Each view presented may therefore seem to be unaware of the particular implications of different worldviews meeting at some point and having to cross the bridges between different topoi, without them being explicitly signaled. That is, the interpretations of what multiculturalism, interculturality, transculturality stand for, as abstractions, are eventually deeply rooted in cultural traditions and ontological standpoints. In addition, the suffixes also vary from ‘-ism’ (e.g. multiculturalism, interculturalism, pluriculturalism, transculturalism) to ‘ity’ (e.g. multiculturality, interculturality, pluriculturality, transculturality), assumedly with different but apparently fixed meanings. Also need mentioning, other expressions such as ‘the’ multicultural, ‘the’ intercultural, ‘the’ pluricultural, or ‘the’ transcultural. By and large, all these prefixes and suffixes in nouns, as well as the expression – ‘the’ plus adjective, have specific standardized meanings, however, the ideological, historical, political, and social connotations vary and certainly have implications upon different academic options and discussions.

**Multiculturalism and interculturalism**

In recent years, above all in the Anglo-Saxon debate on intercultural or multicultural education, a pressing need for ‘multiculturalizing’ the educational systems has been claimed through mechanisms of ‘affirmative action’ and ‘positive discrimination’ which would allow for an ‘empowerment’ of certain ethnic minorities, both autochthonous and allochthonous, in the course of their process of self-identification, ethnogenesis, and emancipation (Giroux 1994; McLaren 1997). Accordingly, the resulting academic concepts as well as policy proposals emerging from Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism emphasize differences between groups and collective identities which supposedly shape and define certain minorities inside society.

In the continental European arena of the debate, on the contrary, the need for interculturality in education is not claimed on the ground of the minorities’ identity necessities; the struggle for intercultural education is here justified by the apparent inability of majority society of meeting the new challenges created by the increasing heterogeneity of the pupils, by the growing sociocultural complexity of majority–minority relations and, in general, by diversity as a key feature of the future European societies (Gogolin 1997; Verlot 2001; Aguado Odina 2003). As a consequence, it is not identity and difference, but interaction and hybridity which tend to be emphasized in continental European debates as well as policy proposals.

In this sense, whereas in the USA, in the UK and lately also in Latin America a minority empowerment education is being developed, continental Europe is shifting
toward an education which mainstreams the promotion of intercultural competences inside both the marginalized minorities and the marginalizing majorities (cf. Table 1).

It is evident that the Anglophone academy has, for almost half a century now, taken the lead in theorization and policy design of multiculturalism and, therefore, the term ‘multiculturalism’ became ubiquitous both in the academy and in the media, in political debate as well as in informal talks. It is not long ago that European scholars, teachers, politicians, etc. could not even recognize the word ‘intercultural’ (INTERACT Project, final Report, 2007, www.ces.uc.pt/interact). Due to the increasing use of this term in transnational official documents by the UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, for example, its use has recently become more familiar.

However, this does not mean that its use is consensual or even equally acceptable for every tradition, neither in scientific interpretation nor in ideological approval. The word still sounds strange, a neologism, in Anglophone circles while it has, from the beginning, sounded familiar in Spanish and in Portuguese, on the whole, in Iberian-American circles. Generally speaking, in Europe, at least in southern countries the term was promptly and easily adopted despite its different connotations, for example, more focused in national diversity in Spain while with a more cosmopolitan flavor in Portugal, understandably for historical reasons. By and large, in the USA, it is lately becoming more used but falling short of the requested recognition of singular community identity, whereas in Latin America the concept is widely used despite the fact that it still raises some concerns about its possible neglect toward the recognition of the power relations and abuse throughout their colonial past.

So the question continues in the air, what does ‘intercultural’ stand for and how does it differ from ‘multicultural’? In English, ‘interculturalism’ is the preferred version, instead of ‘interculturality,’ perhaps because the former is felt to be overlapping with ‘multiculturalism,’ nevertheless often understood as an updated and more fashionable term that tends to avoid the conflicting and relativistic connotations of the latter. For example, Anglophone multiculturists such as Meer and Modood believe that ‘multiculturalism presently surpasses interculturalism as a political orientation’ and that ‘until interculturalism as a political discourse is able to offer an original perspective … it cannot, intellectually at least, eclipse multiculturalism’ (2011, 192).

This is not, however, a consensual understanding, since both terms are politically loaded and ‘interculturalism’ cannot be taken as value-free or ideologically free even though both terms are generally assigned different and even diverging political

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<th>Table 1. Diversity in multicultural and intercultural discourses.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Factual level = status quo</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Multiculturality</strong> Cultural, religious and/or linguistic diversity</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Normative level = pedagogical, sociopolitical or ethical proposals</strong></th>
<th><strong>Multiculturalism</strong> Recognition of difference:</th>
<th><strong>Interculturalism</strong> Coexistence in diversity:</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Principle of equality</td>
<td>(1) Principle of equality</td>
<td>(2) Principle of difference</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) Principle of difference</td>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Principle of positive interaction</td>
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Source: Dietz (2009), based on Giménez (2003).
orientations. Their common suffix, multicultural- and intercultural-ism, may also signify that both express a social situation and movement, nevertheless, both terms are assumed to convey a common meaning or, at least, to provide the same solution for a ‘problem’ that is shown, in this case, as having a single perspective and to respond to one world vision.

In Spanish and Portuguese, even in Ibero-American contexts on the whole, the word interculturalidad(e) is more and more common and substantively refers to the ontological dimensions of both the individual and society. In Latin America, the great challenge remains in making visible the original cultural diversity that has survived the colonial and immigration segregation and assimilation processes as well as the national homogenization that was carried out after independence.

**Toward critical interculturalism?**

Interculturalismo(o), which is also used in Spanish and Portuguese but more popular in the English-speaking academy, rather than ‘interculturality’, however still as an undervalued alternative to ‘multiculturalism’, is nevertheless blamed for giving predominance to the individual at the cost of the group, the community, that is, the collectivity. Therefore, it concentrates on relationships between individuals, whether ‘relational’, tending to be dialogical, or ‘functional’, acknowledging diversity but, in the end, aiming to integration as understood as something not very far from assimilation (Walsh 2010). On the one hand, ‘interculturalism’ can hence be interpreted as being connected with the intensification of mobility, a give-in of states to the need to pacify pluricultural societies and of global business to the needs of investment. On the other hand, ‘interculturality’ points to the existential character of societal bonds that need to be re-conceptualized due not only to contemporary ethnic and cultural diversity in our society but also to the strengthening of critical awareness and empowerment of individuals and groups that were formerly marginalized (Guilherme 2012b).

Moreover, Walsh claims for una interculturalidad crítica, whose aims are not simply recognition, tolerance, or integration of cultural diversity within a western/Eurocentric-dominated structural matrix, that is, ‘su proyecto no es simplemente reconocer, tolerar o incorporar lo diferente dentro de la matriz y estructuras establecidas’ (2010, 79). A critical interculturality aims to center, re-conceptualize and lay new existential, epistemological, and sociological foundations for equitable institutions and environments, that is, ‘es re-conceptualizar y re-fundar estructuras sociales, epistémicas y de existencias que ponen en escena y en relación equitativa lógicas, prácticas y modos culturales diversos de pensar, actuar y vivir’ (2010). The difference between the simple concept of ‘interculturality’ and the idea of a ‘critical interculturality’ is that the latter is explicitly determined to address constellations of conflicts and relations of power between the various elements participating in intercultural interactions, to unveil implicit tensions between multiple ethnic cultures, to question taken-for-granted ruling principles of intercultural communication and interaction in hegemonic societies, and to be active in transforming long-lasting societal structures. The definition of ‘criticality’ draws upon different traditions, either centered in northern Europe (Frankfurt School) or translated into other world visions and conceptual frameworks (Paulo Freire). The discussions of such theoretical backgrounds are not an objective of this article, however, the concept of ‘critical interculturality’ with which it deals is more particularly inspired by the latter.

Higher education institutions are here understood as having special responsibility in promoting epistemic and social responsibility not only through academic internationalization but also through their cooperation with surrounding communities within the scope
of research and intervention projects, either local, national, or international. This is the assumption and goal taken by both projects referred above and which triggered the reflections and discussions expressed in this article. The RIAIPE3 ALFA Project, funded by the European Commission, and the project InterSaberes, focusing on the intercultural universities in Mexico, are both dedicated to question the role of universities, both classical, in that they deliver a European-based classical and modern canon, and traditional, in that they intend to recover native ethnical cultures. The article also refers to another project, INTERACT (www.ces.uc.pt/interact), which dealt with citizenship education and teacher education and, therefore, it also revolved around the role of educational institutions – higher, secondary, and basic – both in community life and global societies, by exploring different levels of citizenship. The projects mentioned above are not the focus of this article but they are described below since their findings and products were determining for the conception and construction of this article in that they provided the opportunity for reflection, research, and discussion about the key concepts focused here. And, moreover, the authors of this article have taken leading roles in the design and scientific coordination of the projects mentioned above.

The transcultural

The notion of ‘the transcultural’ has also been brought into the discussion with an apparently more neutral idea and therefore attempting to avoid the baggage carried by ‘the multicultural’ and ‘the intercultural’ not only by shying away from the ‘ism’ suffix but also by rising up into a level above as suggested by the prefix ‘trans.’ This is where the interaction between different cultures can transcend not only their borders but also their interstices, a ‘third space’ according to Bhabha, overcome their own elasticity, Gadamer’s horizon, and give rise to a common but new cultural arena that remains beyond its sources.

This is also a process similar to the notion of transdisciplinarity, as described by Romão (2005). Therefore, this term raises another problem which is precisely that it does not address the local variables, the conflicts and the potential that the situation itself can altogether bring about into the transcultural event. According to Estermann, for example, the notion of transculturality takes into account the historical processes of cultural change and waving, including hybridization, to which he refers as processes of transculturalization (2010, 30).

Transcultural processes tend to trigger capacities which go beyond conventional, internally transmitted cultural savoir-faires. Therefore, on the actor level new competences emerge as a particular trait of transcultural phenomena. The corresponding notion of ‘transcultural competence,’ coined by Pratt in 1952, aims to capture the ‘cultural translation from one worldview into the other,’ assuming that there is only two at stake and that their borders are perceptible, that is, still overlooking that the process ‘entails an awareness of the multiple timescales on which the discourse unfolds and an ability to capitalize on the layered simultaneity of various historical discourses operating in the present’ (Kramsch and Uryu 2012, 223). Transcultural competence is also defined, from another perspective, that of international business studies, as ‘the capability to connect different points of view through the elicitation of dilemmas and their reconciliation’ (Trompenaars and Woolliams 2009, 443).

In sum, reconciling differences is the aim of the development of this set of skills described above as ‘transcultural competence,’ not building upon conflicting relations, although terms such as multiculturalism, interculturality, and the transcultural, among
other, are currently so widely used that they have become too elastic and, therefore, to be cautious about the accuracy of its use implies to be aware not only of its elasticity but also of the multiple personal identities, the epistemological traditions and, if this is the case, of the academic background of their users.

The Modern Language Association’s report (2007) identifies ‘a specific outcome’ for language education which they name ‘translingual and transcultural competence,’ defined as ‘the ability to operate between languages,’ and adds that ‘transcultural understanding [is] the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form’ (3–4). This report offers an interpretation of the transcultural dimension of interculturality that is also rather common and that places it in-between languages and cultures, somewhere where they can converse with each other. Kramsch, a member of the Report committee, draws upon the ‘symbolic nature of transcultural competence’ and explains that it entails a ‘risky circulation of values across historical and ideological time scales, the negotiation of nonnegotiable identities and beliefs,’ in sum, that it implies ‘reflecting on the way that our and the Other’s realities mutually construct each other through symbolic systems’ (2012, 18).

In our view, the notion of intercultural or transcultural competence as a relational and contextual disposition when dealing with diversity has two important implications (Dietz 2009): First, it requires a distinction between intercultural ‘competence’ and intercultural ‘performance’ (Bender-Szymanski 2002), i.e. in Saussurean terms between the dimensions of langue and parole, internalized dispositions and actually externalized praxis of interculturality and diversity.

Accordingly, intercultural competences cannot and may not be reduced to mere ‘recipes’ of accurate behavior in given intercultural contexts (Guilherme 2013). And, second, the competences identified as intercultural cannot be and may not be substantialized and delimited against intracultural competences; instead, these relationally and contextually articulated dispositions should be conceived as a particular kind of professional habitus to be acquired, trained, and developed by teachers, social workers, and other ‘intercultural mediators.’ This specific professional habitus paradoxically presupposes not particular, a-priori defined competences, but, on the contrary, ‘the competence to lack competences’ (Mecheril 2002, 25) – diversity-awareness and self-reflexivity instead of a professional monopoly on (mostly monoculturally defined) knowledge and expertise.

**Dangers and risks of essentialization**

However, these concepts are not used self-reflexively and consciously in educational practice, but are instead reproduced in essentialized, often racialized ways. A majority of educational actors who are not experienced in intercultural contexts may ‘ethnicize’ cultural differences by reifying the cultural characteristics of their students. There are case studies from European as well as from Latin American contexts which demonstrate that throughout superficial and all too quick teacher training and professional development sessions inter-group difference is often essentialized (Gogolin 1997, Aguado Odina et al. 2005, Jiménez Naranjo 2009).

At the same time, individual and group phenomena are conflated, emic and etic perspectives are indiscriminately mixed, such dissimilar notions as culture, ethnicity, phenotypic difference, and demographic situation (i.e. being a numerical ‘minority’) are confused, and finally, the great historical stereotypes of the Western other, i.e. the topoi of
the ‘gypsy,’ ‘the Muslim,’ etc. are bandied about (Bertely and González Apodaca 2003; Carrasco Pons 2004; Dietz 2009).

The main risk of essentialization consists in the simplifying conflation of different concepts: language thus becomes culture, linguistic varieties are reduced to ethnic markers of difference, gender characteristics are identified with religious denominations of in-groups which then tend to isolate themselves from the rest of society. These trends of essentializing certain identities appear both inside minorities and in the surrounding majority society; as they often coincide through mutual stereotyping, essentialization ends mostly up producing ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’ about sameness vs. otherness, about ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Eriksen 1993, Dietz 2009).

As an example, this problem has been studied in detail for the case of Belgium by Verlot (2001), who ethnographically illustrates how the divergent underlying national identities of the Flemish and Walloon communities reproduce opposed discourses of dealing with diversity at school: while the southern Belgian, French-speaking Walloon community, which has lost its importance and prevalence inside contemporary Belgium, perceives itself as a homogeneous mainstream society which has to assimilate immigrant pupils through French-only and color blind strategies (copied from its dominant point of reference, republican France), the Dutch speaking, economically and politically dominant Flemish community insists on presenting itself as a minority society with a threatened language, which actively tries to integrate other, immigrated minorities through multilingual and multicultural school strategies (Verlot 2001).

**Toward comparative ‘diatopical’ and transcultural approaches**

Accordingly, comparative, reflexive and in this sense transcultural and ‘diatopical’ perspectives are necessary to perceive nuances and to avoid simplifying essentializations. Risager had previously put forward a definition of the ‘transcultural approach,’ which she distinguished from the multicultural and intercultural approaches, as one that ‘takes as its point of departure the interwoven character of cultures as a common condition for the whole world’ (1998, 248). But she later confessed that she preferred the term ‘transnational’ to transcultural, as she explains, because the latter seems ‘to cover something that cuts across ‘cultures’, and this implies a holistic concept of culture that [she does] not share’ (2007, 220, n.2.).

On the one hand, the term transcultural does not address the conflicting aspects between different cultural communities but, on the other hand, it tackles the cultural complexity of individual interaction in today’s world and, therefore, of the ‘in-betweens’ of global communication. However, the notion of interculturality is also understood as gaining momentum when it addresses society as a whole, and this does not mean a holistic concept of culture, by hinting that the intercultural character of life in society is not a matter only for those who are different, either the immigrants or the natives/indigenous, that is, ‘se a categoria da interculturalidade tem algum sentido é no abarcar da sociedade como um todo: não é exclusivamente “assunto de e para migrantes,” “de ou para, indígenas,” “de ou para minorias” sejam elas aloctones ou autóctones’ (Giménez 2010, 19), but of cultural diversity in society as a whole. In sum, it is everyone’s issue, and to say it more clearly, everyone is someone else’s Other.

Kymlicka also supports a holistic idea of a society that is culturally diverse and provides us with a new citizenship paradigm consisting of a multicultural statehood framework encompassing an intercultural citizenry, meaning that, states need to recognize the multicultural composition of society and be based upon a multicultural representation
so that citizens may play their roles interculturally supported by institutions that reflect equitably the multicultural fabric of society. Although the author states that ‘the precise details vary from country to country’, he proposes to replace ‘the idea of a nation-state with that of a “multination” state’ (2003, 150–151).

However, Kymlicka acknowledges different ways of conceiving what a multicultural state should be and therefore he concludes that ‘a “multicultural state” is one that reforms itself to enable … various forms of multicultural membership in the state’ (2003, 153). As for the understanding of intercultural citizenry, Kymlicka clarifies that it involves ‘a range of more positive personal attitudes toward diversity’ (157) and eventually a serious commitment to the workings of a multicultural state, and he insightfully adds that ‘the goal of building and sustaining a multicultural state requires citizens to privilege local interculturalism over global interculturalism’ (161). In short, multiculturalism and interculturality/interculturalism should be made inseparable from each other and are, above all, not extrinsic, but intrinsic, to any society.

Back to the triad: the transcultural, interculturality, and multiculturalism

Therefore, the conceptualization of interculturality, if critical, acquires ontological and epistemological connotations and requires an equitable dialogue in society between different cultures that remain nevertheless as identifiable and recognizable units made of individual citizens with free membership combinations. Finally, we cannot have real interculturality without true multiculturalism, both remaining ideological and, consequently, political and pedagogical tools for societal interdependent relationships.

Moreover, not only does critical interculturality demand systemic change of social and political institutions but also have the terms, on which this change occurs, to be multilaterally negotiated, not unilaterally conceived or conceded. This claim is indeed antipodal to current positions and practices prompted by an abstract wish, and at all cost (for one side, and at a minimum cost for the other), of ‘coexistence’ and ‘tolerance,’ that is, ‘estas posiciones y prácticas de un deseo abstracto y a toda a costa de “coexistencia” y “tolerancia”’ (Viaña Uzieda 2011, 18). In sum, this makes all the difference, that is, ‘es la médula de las diferencias’ or, in other words, this is the core of the issue (Viaña Uzieda 2011).

Nevertheless, according to Bhabha, ‘the multicultural has itself become a “floating signifier” whose enigma lies less in itself than in the discursive uses of it’ (1998, 31). All these concepts whose definitions we have been attempting to discuss, and put into dialogue with each other, namely, ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘interculturalism’/‘interculturality,’ and ‘the transcultural,’ are simultaneously ideologically loaded and culturally slippery. They are, however, unavoidable concepts in contemporary social and cultural studies, which need academic digging. To start with, multiculturalism has, to some extent, fallen into a vague notion with regard not only to the definition of the term but also to the identification of its elements.

There is a wide understanding that, within the political limits of the nation-state, multiculturalism encompasses sub-state groups that according to the particularities of each region may include more or less immigrant communities or native communities that survived the homogenizing process comprehended in the construction of nationality as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983). The preservation of specific cultural communities within the national context is generally strengthened by discrimination and even more so by segregation.
Kymlicka, for example, proposes a set of varieties of liberal multiculturalism, namely: ‘(a) indigenous peoples; (b) sub-state/minority nationalisms; (c) immigrant groups’ (2007, 66–71), however, such a frame presents several uncertainties such as whether the category of ‘indigenous people’ does or does not coincide with that of ‘sub-state/minority nationalisms’ or, still, the many variables within immigrant groups, a broad group that raises interrogations such as their territorial and socioeconomic origins as well as immigration waves and generations.

More recently, another issue has come in the way as far as multiculturalism is concerned, which is religion. Within the European tradition of the modern nation-state, referring mainly to linguistic and cultural hegemony and state secularization, all that overflowed the national core, which constituted the public arena, was therefore ascribed to the individual’s private circle. However, as soon as groups and individuals, others than those responding to the national archetype, felt they were entitled to the right of living and displaying their identity in the public arena and neglected assimilation goals, such standing prompted much racism and discrimination intensified by fundamentalist violence in every side (Weisse 2007; Dietz 2009; Jackson 2011).

Such ‘ethno-religious mix,’ which was characteristic of pre-modern European societies, obliterated throughout the building process of the national community, has made ‘the novelty of contemporary multiculturalism [which] is that first it introduces into western nation-states a kind of ethno-religious mix that is relatively unusual for those states, especially for western European states’ (Modood 2007, 8). Religion, and the violence that it has brought to the scene since the terms of conflict are not supposed to be resolved through human logics or reasoning, has therefore radicalized the positions and oversimplified the inter-ethnic negotiation complexities and, finally, disguised the linguistic and cultural conundrums of our diverse ontological existences in a common and shared world.

UNESCO provided simple and basic, although helpful in a schooling context, working definitions of the terms ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘interculturalism/interculturality’ where the former ‘describes the culturally diverse nature of human society’ while the latter, using indiscriminately the first or the second terminology, is described as ‘a dynamic concept [that] refers to evolving relations between cultural groups’ (2006, 17). The positions where different cultural groups stand in society, and how each one views itself, that is, how each group sees its position and role in society, are in fact disregarded here. However, the document adds that ‘interculturality’ presupposes ‘multiculturalism,’ which is a relevant clarification for the purpose mentioned above, nevertheless it ignores the question whether ‘multiculturalism’ presupposes ‘interculturality,’ which is in our opinion equally relevant.

In general, it seems to offer no discussion that ‘as a discourse, multiculturalism can broadly – and without, for the moment, further specification – be understood as the recognition of co-existence of a plurality of cultures within the nation’ (Stratton and Ang 1998, 135). It is common understanding that the description of a society as multicultural implies that the different elements – cultural groups – are awarded equitable social and political recognition or, at least, acknowledgment. This is the minimum requirement for the formal ‘multiculturality’ of a national society, which however does not make sure that this given society is intercultural. We can detect societies where the pendulum falls on the one or on the other side, either in relation to how their members describe accomplished cultural diversity or with regard to how they live with it (Guilherme et al. 2010). On the one hand, this idea seems to imply that these different cultural communities can, or even wish, survive independent from each other in twenty-first century societies, in the midst
of such intensive networking and mobility. On the other hand, this seems to go against the notion of nationality, as the ethnic horizon and support of the nation-state. Kymlicka’s citizenship model of ‘multicultural states and intercultural citizens,’ as described above, may be considered as offering us a kind of a ‘third-way’ solution that deserves serious appreciation.

Research-based theory building

In this sense, in an ongoing reflexive-ethnographic above-mentioned project entitled InterSaberes, we are currently analyzing the ‘grammar of diversity’ underlying the creation of so-called intercultural universities in Mexico. These higher education institutions have been created after the 1994 Zapatista uprising in different indigenous regions throughout Mexico in order to meet claims for indigenous access to university education, as well as to provide culturally pertinent educational alternatives for young indigenous people not willing to emigrate from their communities. Through a case study in four indigenous regions of the southeastern state of Veracruz, our project has critically accompanied the innovative, community-based teaching developed inside these universities. Through our constant ethnographic shifting between interviewing of all participant activist groups, participant observation of the college and of the community interaction arenas, and joint academic-activist workshops where we discuss our findings with the participating teachers, students, and community authorities, our ethnography directly nourishes teacher training. The main focus of these discussion and mutual training workshops is the search for both a pedagogically and a politically adequate manner of dealing with different sources of diversity – not only ethnic and cultural, but also gender-based, sexual orientation-related, and religious ones. Students train and practice these diversity approaches throughout small, but locally relevant joined community action research projects (Mateos Cortés 2009, 2011; Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2011).

To ensure a dialogue between such a reflexive ethnography and intercultural pedagogy, it is necessary to redirect the classic legacy of hermeneutics in anthropology and ethnography, until now confined to the semantic and conceptual dimension (i.e. the discourses and models of multicultural/intercultural education), toward cultural praxis, that is, toward daily interaction (Fornet-Betancourt 2002). This requires a ‘pragmatic hermeneutics’ (Braun 1994) that analyzes the conditions and possibilities for validating meaning practically, within its social contexts. From an intercultural perspective, this hermeneutic-pragmatic approach allows us to distinguish between the mere translation of a culturally specific meaning (i.e. the level of semantics, of competence), on the one hand, and the analysis of the performance of this meaning that different groups in contact use while interacting, on the other hand (i.e. the level of pragmatics, of performance; cf. Braun 1994). In our Veracruz example, the semantic level of competence includes the varying notions and perceptions of kinds and hierarchies of diversity, as expressed by our informants-collaborators-activists through ethnographic interviews and group discussions, while the pragmatic level of performance resides in the detailed, participant observation of practiced, lived diversity in daily school and community interaction.

Accordingly, for an empirical study of multiculturalism in practice and its link to educational policies, the reflexivity of the social and educational actors must be taken seriously and faced by a committed, engaged, and thus doubly reflexive anthropology. Since this commitment to the particular school actors studied does not imply full identification with their objectives, the task of a ‘double hermeneutics’ (Giddens 1984) is to broaden the study of the educational actors to include the uses that these actors make of
academic knowledge, e.g. how they appropriate academic diversity discourses in their
daily school and classroom routines. The resulting ethnographic praxis that is proposed
here is not limited to either aesthetic introspection, as suggested by postmodern
tendencies, or mobilizing externalization, as practiced by former activist approaches.
Through the reciprocal negotiation of academic and pedagogical-cum-political interests, it
is possible to generate a ‘novel mixture of theory and practice’ (Escobar 1993, 386),
which consists of phases of empirical research, of academic theorization, and of
transference to political and/or educational praxis. Again, in our example on intercultural
universities in Mexico, the ethnographic fieldwork with the educational community in situ elucidates local and contextual logics of negotiating over different kinds and sources
of diversity: on how to articulate inside and outside the classroom gender and
generational diversity with ethnic dichotomies and religious differences, on how to
diversify accordingly the BA curriculum without ethnifying and essentializing such
differences, on how to articulate legitimate ethno-cultural and ethno-political claims-making with the pedagogical need for ‘meta-cultural’ (Jiménez Naranjo 2009),
interaction-centered competences. This kind of dialogic and reflexive fieldwork prompts
programmatic conclusions and alternative curricular propositions, e.g. on classroom
interaction and group composition criteria, on student project priorities, on the
constitution and composition of alumni and professional networks, all of which are then negotiated – locally as well as on the state level – with the directing boards of these
institutions. And again, the ethnographic accompaniment of these negotiations provides
new insights on the underlying and emerging local ‘grammars of diversity’ (Mateos Cortés 2009, 2011; Dietz and Mateos Cortés 2011).

In addition, the conceptual discussion put forward in this article also springs from the
above-mentioned three-year-long Europe-Latin America project (2010–2013), the Inter-
university Framework Program for Equity and Social Cohesion Policies in Higher
Education (http://www.riaipe-alfa.eu/) focused on the development of equity and social
cohesion by the 30 participant universities, 22 of which in Latin America, in their social
and political environments. This project started with one-year-long needs analysis which
was carried out in each university and helped design and implement specific action plans
throughout the second year, and finally both provided a collection of potential good
practices which were shared and disseminated during the third year. Furthermore, this
three-year-long activity was supported by theoretical and conceptual research and
production undertaken by four thematic committees, organized among all team members
according to their research interests, active throughout the whole duration of the project
and whose work was compiled in published material and final reports (e.g. Teodoro et al.
2013; Guilherme 2014; Guilherme and Dietz 2014). Multiculturalism, interculturality,
and the transcultural were among those concepts which were recognized as needing
theoretical discussion and elaboration in connection with their application in the project
action plans implemented in each institution.

The discussion developed throughout this article also draws upon research carried out
by another project, INTERACT (www.ces.uc.pt/interact), which dealt with citizenship
education and teacher education and, therefore, it also revolved around the role of
educational institutions – higher, secondary, and basic – both in community life and
global societies, by exploring different levels of citizenship. This project also developed
conceptual analyses, mainly about basic concepts related with democratic intercultural
citizenship as used in documents issued by European transnational institutions and
national governments of the participating countries. Moreover, the perspective taken in its
final report also addresses a North-South perspective within the targeted European
Conclusion: a triadic model for analyzing heterogeneity in society

We may therefore conclude that the terms examined above – ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘interculturality,’ and ‘the transcultural’ – are not only loaded with different layers of meaning, elastic in their formation (with alternative suffixes, prefixes, and articles) and in their use, but also complex in their historical, academic, and cultural intricacies. However, this does not imply that their use should be avoided or is necessarily confusing, instead they are rich terms that should be used conscientiously and rigorously, that is, by tackling the critical issues that they enable us to raise (Guilherme 2012a). On the one hand, ‘multiculturalism’ is unquestionably the most controversial of the three concepts discussed above, with radical positions in each side of the barricade, either for (multiculturalism is alive) or against (multiculturalism is dead). On the other hand, ‘interculturality’ and ‘the transcultural’ may become slippery, in that they tend more easily to be used uncritically, as a softer version of multiculturalism, however, this erroneous tendency must be strongly avoided, challenged, and even contradicted. In our view, a clear, explicit, and contextualized distinction between what is ‘intercultural,’ what is ‘intracultural,’ and what is ‘transcultural’ may serve as a powerful analytical tool for all those social sciences interested in studying heterogeneity phenomena in contemporary societies.

These concepts, which were the focus of this article, were examined above in relation to north-south-north perspectives since the reflections and discussions were founded in the collaboration between European and Latin American researchers and higher education institutions. Accordingly, the triad of multiculturalism, interculturality, and the transnational perspective require a contextual rooting in a broader societal and structural analysis which scrutinizes these contemporary phenomena in their multilayered dimensions. When carrying out such a more structural perspective, we need to distinguish three different, but complementary, analytical axes, each of which constitutes a whole social scientific research paradigm in its own right, but which combined make possible a much richer, multidimensional analysis of identities and diversities – the social scientific research paradigmatic concepts of inequality, difference and diversity, within which the concepts of multiculturalism, interculturality, and the transcultural were discussed above (Dietz 2009):

- Historically, the paradigm of inequality focuses on a ‘vertical analysis’ of particularly socioeconomic structurations (as in the case of Marxist theories of classes and of class conflicts), but also includes gendered inequalities (such as in the feminist critique of patriarchy). This paradigm has long been nurturing compensatory and often overtly assimilationist institutional responses, which identified a given minority’s lacks and/or handicaps as sources of inequality. It thus represents a Universalist approach, which is deeply rooted both theoretically and programmatically in a monolingual and monocultural habitus. Such a habitus is the classical result of the western nation-state and its hegemonic way of conceiving social sciences.
The paradigm of difference, in contrast, has been formulated, achieved and spread by the new social movements and their particular identity politics. It promotes an opposite, ‘horizontal analysis’ of ethnic, cultural, religious, gender-based, age, generation, sexual orientation, as well as diverse capabilities related differences. This is achieved through group-specific, segregated empowerment strategies for each of the concerned minorities. The corresponding approach privileges particularist and multiculturalist responses, which frequently ignore, make invisible or downplay socioeconomic inequalities and structural conditions.

Finally, as detailed above, the diversity paradigm is formulated through the critique of both assimilationist monoculturalism and essentializing multiculturalism. In contrast to the other two paradigms, this approach starts from the plural, multi-situated, contextual, and therefore necessarily hybrid character of any cultural, ethnic, religious, class, or gender-based identities. These diverse identities are articulated both individually and collectively. Accordingly, the resulting strategy of analysis has to be intercultural in the sense of relational, cross-cutting, and intersectional, in order to emphasize the interaction which occurs between highly heterogeneous identity dimensions.

The following (cf. Figure 1) summarizes graphically the conceptual implications and complementarities which arise from these three axes. In their triadic combination, they constitute together the methodological point of departure for an intercultural analysis of

![Figure 1. Inequality, difference, and diversity in intercultural studies.](image-url)

Source: Dietz (2009).
constellations of life-world diversities and of their normative diversity treatment or management.

As this figure illustrates, the emphasis on identity discourses and politics, which is characteristic of the multiculturalism paradigm and which is present in much of the Anglo-Saxon debates, generates empirical data on ‘otherness’ as shaped by *emic*, actor-produced discourses which rely on difference as a semantic strategy to horizontally delimitate in-group from out-group cultural features (= axis of difference). On the contrary, if emphasis is particularly put on intersectional, hybrid phenomena of inter-group interactions, as observable in the actors’ daily practice, the resulting interculturalism paradigm, as dominant in continental European debates, is characterized by cross-cutting and contextual definitions of different kinds and sources of diversity, which are relevant in praxis, but which are not analyzed in their historical or structural rootedness (= axes of diversity). Finally, therefore, these two axes need to be complemented by a structural and diachronic, historical view of contemporary heterogeneity in society (= axes of inequality), which is methodologically guided by an *etic*, observer perspective, provides us with data on the persisting, often colonially shaped *longue durée* of inequalities, which in the ethnographic present end up creating a syntactical dimension, a syntax which creates particular ‘path dependencies’ (Pierson 2000) that enable certain perceptions of heterogeneity while avoiding others.

Through this triadic kind of analysis, which is not limited to the observable ‘surface’ of intercultural patterns nor to the content of collective ethnic identity discourses, multiculturality, interculturality, and transculturality become visible and analyzable as complex conceptual and discursive phenomena. Including its underlying institutional structurations, the phenomenon of diversity in difference is thus to be localized in the very structure of contemporary society, as a contextual and case specific translation of a shared, underlying and maybe even universalizable ‘grammar of diversities.’

As shown above, all the three projects’ research work and findings, two taking place in Latin America and one in Europe, provide some questioning about the main conceptual platforms which support multicultural, intercultural, and transcultural communication and interaction in European and Latin American societies. They also offer(ed) opportunities for culturally polycentric perceptions and studies of such phenomena. They are(were) research experiences too large to be scrutinized here, however, consultation of their websites may trigger critical reflections about the need to open up the understanding of words which are used on a daily basis and too often at random in all sort of institutional documents and media arguments. The thesis of this article consists in pointing out how fundamental it is, in our social, political, and academic *milieux*, to proceed to a mindful opening of the mind into the wealth and the potential of meanings and agency that the three above-mentioned, specific and widely used terms, namely multiculturalism, interculturality, and the transcultural, can offer with regard to cultural diversity, inequality, and difference.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Funding**

This work is partly based on the RIAIPE3 ALFA Project (2011–2014), funded by the Alfa Program (European Commission) and by the Mexican Council for Research and Technology (CONACyT).
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