Revisiting Intercultural Competence:
Small Culture Formation on the Go through Threads of Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that intercultural competence is not something that needs to be acquired anew but that needs to be recovered from our past experience of small culture formation developed during the process of socialization from birth. This small culture formation is on the go because it is a constant activity in response to everyday engagement with other people. It is activated by drawing threads of experience that can connect with the experiences of others. During cultural travel such threads can be pulled both from home to abroad and back again. This is however not a straightforward process because operating in the other directions are blocks that are created by Self and Other politics and essentialist discourses of culture that can enter into the process at any point, also fueled by our everyday understanding of the world and the global position and politics inherited from national structures. Any process of intercultural competence training needs to help intercultural travelers to recover existing threads and avoid blocks by means of ethnographic disciplines.

KEYWORDS

Competence, Ethnography, Intercultural, Self, Other, Travel

INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps not surprising that much of the recent discussion about intercultural competence has focused on what we need to know and do when approaching a new or unfamiliar cultural domain. This has brought with it a focus on the differences between the familiar and unfamiliar often framed as national or ‘big’ cultures. However, I wish to redirect the attention to what all of us have been doing when moving through different small cultural domains all through our lives and in what ways we must have been interculturally competent all along, and to how we can then apply this to future encounters. This shift is not however easy because the big culture idea is very hard for us to throw off and constantly gets in the way of what we already have to bring with us.

In this paper I will suggest that a way to focus back on what we bring with us from our existing cultural competence is to look at the small culture formation that we are all involved with from an early age. I shall frame this as ‘on the go’ to emphasize its everyday, ongoing nature and its potential for being carried with us whenever we go. However, I will also argue that this process continues to be inhibited by prejudicial ‘us’-‘them’ discourses of culture, often associated with big culture concepts. To help make sense of this tension I will introduce a heuristic distinction between block and thread modes of thinking and talking about culture. I will first define what is meant by these concepts and then explore them through examples of common events in everyday life. I will conclude with reflections on how this exploration may then lead to thinking about intercultural competence. I will argue throughout that focusing on threads instead of blocks can be the basis not so much of arriving at intercultural competence but of bringing the competence that we all already possess into play.
METHODOLOGY

While this is not an empirical paper in the traditional sense, the use of examples (critical incidents, historical recollections, and reconstructions) follows the broadly ethnographic disciplines of making the familiar strange and allowing meaning to emerge. This is set within the structure of a thick description, where the juxtaposition of instances serves a transformative exploration of meaning. Some of this material is taken from earlier versions of my own work, where bringing it together within the context of this particular thick description allows further meaning to emerge. My use of a first person style, while it may initially appear informal, enables a laying bare of the trajectory of how I construct the thick description. Validity is not therefore in claiming objectivity, but rather in showing the workings of how a subjective image is constructed. This trajectory enables, within the confines of the space allowed, a global interconnection to be made back and forth across the boundaries of time and place which I feel is crucial to understanding the intercultural as a non-essentialist force that brings us together in our diversity. All of this is set within the theoretical framework of small culture formation contextualized within my operational grammar of culture, which itself is the cautious product of previous empirical exploration within a constructivist, social action approach that will be explained as the discussion progresses.

SMALL CULTURE FORMATION ON THE GO

Small culture formation can be defined as “the everyday business of engaging with and creating culture” (Holliday, 2013, p. 56); and it relates to the underlying universal processes that we all take part in on an everyday basis forming and re-forming culture as we go. We encounter and learn to position ourselves with small cultures such as family, school, other families, all the groups and institutions that we join or interact with. We carry this intercultural competence with us to apply to new cultural locations.

I can see this in action when watching my grandchildren from a very early age visibly learning how to negotiate the Self and Other of who they and other people are in very complex cultural events such as mealtimes, meeting strangers and encountering the unfamiliar. This is exemplified by a recent event concerning my four-year old granddaughter:

We were in a department store together looking for the elevator. We discussed who to ask for directions and decided on a shop assistant who wasn’t serving somebody. He came to the elevator with us and did an exaggerated walk to entertain my granddaughter. The next day, when I was recounting what happened to her father, she said that she didn’t like the way the shop assistant walked. I agreed with her that he was rather odd and that I was pleased to get away from him.

I interpret what happened here as my granddaughter assessing the situation she was in. She had worked out the stakes and face issues – when to speak and when not to speak with regard to a stranger, members of her family, and advice she had been given. This was ‘on the go’ because there was not going to be a permanent small cultural relationship with the particular people involved in this event; though the experience would be stored for other events that may take place in the future with similar or different types of people.

I can relate this experience to my own very early memories of going to school, visiting grandparents, parents having guests, all of which stayed with me into more adult events of new jobs, forming relationships, other families, colleagues, shopping, dealing with authority, and travelling abroad. When I read Goffman’s (1959) analysis of how we manage ourselves in everyday life I immediately recognize all these things that I have been doing and experiencing. These are the minutiae of everyday relations, the small things that add up in such a way that the big culture concept can never be exclusive to one type of place. It is however ‘culture’ in a strong sense because it is to do
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