

Beyond Factual Knowledge and Symbolic Competence: Interculturality as Transcultural Intersubjectivity*

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■ ABSTRACT ■

The trend of globalization has sharpened the debate on interculturality, which scholars examine from different and often conflicting points of view ('content' vs. 'practice', 'culture-specific' vs. 'universal', 'communication (meta)theory' vs. 'communication practice', 'individual' vs. 'collective', etc.). Whereas all these approaches are necessary to describe the multiple dimensions of interculturality, their dichotomous nature does not help to account for its internal complexity, which cannot be dissociated from the connections that exist among all these dimensions. The difficulty posed by the essentialist interpretations that tend to result from these dichotomies is compounded by the fact that in postmodern debates priority has been given to approaches that emphasize individual or collective agency over structural constraints which have to do with political economy or with cultural and linguistic codes and traditions.

This paper aims mainly at suggesting that the dissolution of the boundaries that exist between these approaches should be pursued in order to get a fuller

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and richer approach to their common object of study. After discussing, by way of illustration, content-based and practice-based perspectives, we suggest that one way of getting beyond these dichotomies consists in focusing on the 'interactional' dimension of interculturality, which means laying emphasis on intersubjectivity and, particularly, on the individual subjects considered as members of different cultural communities who strive to transcend their sociocultural boundaries in order to reach harmonious interactions in a world in which inequality and the de-territorialization of people and cultures are central features.

Key Words

interculturality, intersubjectivity, content-based approaches, interaction-based approaches, centrality.

1. Introduction

As one of the effects of globalization, the sharp increase in the de-territorialization of individuals and cultures has sharpened the debate on interculturality, a notion that scholars examine from different points of view ('content' vs. 'practice', 'culture-specific' vs. 'universal', 'communication (meta)theory' vs. 'communication practice', 'individual' vs. 'collective', etc.) which, very often, cannot be dissociated from often conflicting ethno-cultural traditions (Asante 2007, Chen 2009 and Miike 2010). We contend that whereas the dimensions examined in such approaches are necessary to describe the internal heterogeneity of interculturality, their dichotomous nature does not help to account for its complexity, in part because it blurs the multiple connections that exist among all those dimensions. The partiality of the resulting characterizations, consistent with essentialist interpretations of culture, is compounded by the relevance in postmodern debates of approaches that emphasize individual or group initiative or voice over structural constraints which have to do