Understanding Intercultural Interaction

An Analysis of Key Concepts

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United Kingdom – North America
Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83867-398-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83867-397-0 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83867-399-4 (Epub)

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Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

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About the Author

Dr Frank Fitzpatrick is a highly qualified and accomplished international business leader, intercultural consultant and academic. For over 25 years he has worked as an intercultural specialist extensively across several continents in complex strategic environments, successfully promoting intercultural awareness and collaboration amongst diverse groups of people from different cultural backgrounds. He has a PhD in Cross-Cultural Communication and Master's degrees in Business Administration and Linguistics.

Foreword

This book is aimed at students and professionals who wish to deepen their knowledge of how people interact in intercultural contexts by providing an overview of key concepts from a breadth of perspectives. Living, working and studying in intercultural and international contexts is ever more relevant to everyone, whether as language educators or students of social sciences, men and women working in international business and human resources or professionals dealing with issues in international relations and international development and specialist sectors such as industry, diplomacy, health and education, among others. As education and work become increasingly international, every student and professional at some point is likely to feel the need to explore and discuss concepts of culture and identity in order to be prepared for intercultural encounters in the globalised workplace, not least to understand themselves and the role that they play in their own society and on the international stage. For this, they will need the opportunity to be informed on and to explore notions of culture and identity and how they relate to their lives and future work. This book, then, brings together the most important and widely used concepts and theories relating to intercultural interaction in an informative and accessible manner in order to enable students and professionals of all backgrounds to improve their knowledge and prospects for the future. This will enrich the experience of intercultural interaction, improve the quality of business policies and dealings and build tolerance and understanding of different perspectives and conditions across the world of work and study.

Part I

Approach and Principles

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Intercultural or Cross-cultural?

The terms *intercultural* and *cross-cultural* are both used in the concepts in this book, but they are treated differently. *Cross-cultural* refers to comparative studies of behaviour across different cultural settings, whereas *intercultural* refers to interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds within a particular context. For example, a cross-cultural analysis of how meetings are conducted might identify different forms of address, levels of formality or status, the use of non-verbal cues and so on, in different cultural contexts. However, an intercultural analysis would focus on how individuals from different backgrounds actually behave and interact with each other when they meet and would analyse the outcomes of intercultural contact. In this sense, both levels of scrutiny have relevance depending on the focus of analysis.

The focus of this book is both *intercultural* and *cross-cultura*l in that, on the one hand, it refers to contexts where individuals and groups from a variety of cultural backgrounds and perspectives interact and navigate *interculturality*. This would include international business contexts, situations of migration or international study and so on, where there are perceived to be cultural differences in the way that people live, study or do business. However, there is also a *cross-cultural* focus in some of the concepts as they refer to the processes involved in moving from one context to another or preparing for this move, such as in cross-cultural adjustment or cross-cultural training. These concepts also create a link with issues in cross-cultural management, which has been prolific in generating an enormous volume of research, theory and practice for international business situations, much of which is explained and critiqued in this book.

The approach adopted in this book, then, draws upon concepts and theories across the spectrum and makes intercultural and cross-cultural concepts and issues relevant and accessible to all groups of students and professionals, regardless of background. It allows them to engage with the widest possible forum of contributors in their quest to position themselves in the wider arena of intercultural studies. Above all, it is important that individuals from diverse backgrounds and interests have a common understanding and common language to be able to speak to one another and debate their point of view.

Sites of Intercultural Interaction

Intercultural encounters take place across a wide variety of sites, for many different purposes, involving people from many different backgrounds, and can be motivated by a number of factors. Engaging with others from different cultural backgrounds may be voluntary, as in the case of international business people or professionals relocating for work, or involve negotiating business transactions or students attending university in another country. According to the reports of United Nations agencies, since 2009, the

growth rate of trade in developing economies has almost doubled, increasing substantially in relation to that of developed economies to the extent that the value of trade is now virtually equal in developing and developed countries as emerging economies seek to catch up with wealthier ones in their share of global trade. Likewise, international education has seen spectacular growth. According to a recent report by the British Council, in the past ten years the number of internationally mobile Higher Education students has risen from two million to over five million as countries seek to internationalise their economies and societies. In addition to this, the United Nations' International Migration Report indicates that there are currently more than a quarter of a million migrants across the world, more than a 40% increase since 2000 and the highest number ever.

Other encounters may be due to enforced circumstances, as with refugees or asylum seekers seeking sanctuary. Intercultural contact may also be short term, as in the case of tourism or international exchanges, or long term, as with permanent migration. It may also be inter-institutional where individuals represent a company, a government or a civic body, focussing on business, leisure, collaboration, diplomacy and so on, or it may be on an individual or casual basis. The vast range and variety of intercultural encounters has made the need for a greater understanding of intercultural behaviour increasingly critical for everyone involved in global interaction.

Intercultural interaction may also be remote, occurring digitally or through international communication and may be expressed in writing, through images or broadcast across media. This means that there may be no direct contact with other people from different cultural backgrounds, but cultural representations and cross-cultural variations may be factors in interaction. This can be seen in such things as textbooks, films, music, fashion, ideas, ways of studying or doing business remotely and such, which may require adjustment and understanding of new, different worldviews in an increasingly globalised and postcolonial world in order for interaction to be successful.

To reflect this considerable range of diversity and growth trends, the key concepts presented in this book are designed to give insight into the multiple sites and contexts in which intercultural interaction takes place, drawing on research in context, in order to ensure that students and practitioners benefit from the rich and diverse experience and knowledge that this brings. Whether working in industry, business, leisure, health, aid, defence, law and order or diplomacy, or studying or travelling as migrants, tourists or practitioners, this book encourages readers to draw upon their own experiences in order to contextualise the concepts presented and to enrich discussion from multiple viewpoints.

Key Themes

Underlying each concept there are meta-theoretical foundations or assumptions about human nature, behaviour and knowledge that influence the way in which they are presented and explained. The breadth of study and research that contributes to analysing how individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds behave and interact naturally creates an extensive panorama of analysis from a wide variety of perspectives across a range of disciplines, including language and communication studies, social

sciences and business and management studies. However, there are some recurrent themes and issues that run through many of the concepts that readers may wish to be aware of and refer back to when analysing the concepts in Part II of this book.

What is Culture?

In the most general terms, given that humans are fundamentally social beings, culture refers to what is created and shared between and among people, and all interaction and behaviour can be seen to be framed and permeated by intercultural processes. As a result, it is at the group level, however small or large, that *culture* needs to be analysed and understood. However, culture is often spoken about as if it were a pre-defined concept that has an external influence on us. We often talk, for example, of our national culture or the culture of an organisation, or the traditional culture of a community, and it is often associated with large constructs, such as civilisation or nationhood and expressed through national cultural assets and symbols, such as music, literature or flags or national teams. Such a notion, which is heavily influenced by a positivist perspective that sees reality as objective and external to social interaction, tends to prey on the emotive appeal of national or ethnic identity, which invokes pride in one's own 'culture', and often, a sense of superiority in relation to others. Alternatively, culture is often seen anthropologically, as a way of life in a particular, bounded location, relating to traditions and customs, embodied in dress, cuisine, rituals, celebrations and so on, which provides continuity across generations and influences how individuals interpret their world, how they behave and the choices that they make. Drawing on all of this, much contemporary management theory is based on identifying dimensions that seek to categorise and explain essential and, sometimes, seemingly irreconcilable characteristics, enshrined in *national cultures*, and to provide guidance for managers on how to overcome these differences and succeed in the intercultural arena.

The notion that people in a nation make up a homogeneous ethnic, linguistic, or religious group can almost always be challenged, however. It is improbable, for example, that all members of any sizeable community know each other or necessarily share similar views on their commonalities, despite their sense of common identity being articulated through dominant religious, linguistic, historical, or other symbolic frameworks. Individuals will have different backgrounds, social and material means, experiences, aspirations, interests and levels of education, for example, as well as varying perspectives, allegiances and codes relating to their generation and social role, for instance. Furthermore, nations can be seen to be decidedly polycultural composites of smaller and diverse cultural groupings, while administrative and political arrangements based in history have sometimes created cultural communities that may have become stateless and disparate, or have become hybrid versions that have evolved over generations and through diaspora, as nation states have come and gone. Likewise, the idea that individuals and institutions interact and operate exclusively within a national border or geographically bounded space is largely flawed, as all systems and economies are increasingly linked through transnational interconnections facilitated by technology and global media through increasing globalisation. Thus, the sense of cultural homogeneity perceived in large communities can be said to be largely conceptualised, or *imagined*, through symbolic representation and the persuasive call to unity. It is certainly true that many individuals and groups choose to identify with such conceptualisations and the associated process of cultural categorisation, believing them to represent their

supposed innate cultural heritage. However, the immense diversity, hybridity, mixing, connecting and redefining that is continually evolving through persistent diaspora, fusion, bricolage and global change thwarts the simplistic association of places with fixed identities at any one particular time in history. Furthermore, culture, viewed as a product of nationhood or a similarly large construct, also encourages the discourse of cultural superiority over others, fuelled by incompatible worldviews and beliefs and imbued with a sense of intolerance and inevitable intercultural conflict.

This is in contrast to a *social constructionist* perspective on intercultural encounters, where culture is seen as a complex and dynamic process, which is rooted in an *interpretivist* viewpoint of how we use language and communication to interact with and interpret our social world. Thus, while there are observable aspects of daily life created from prolonged and enduring cultural grouping in the way that people go about their everyday lives and interact with each other, culture is seen as an active and negotiated process, rather than a static, essential quality related to pre-defined categories. In this sense, culture will mean different things to different people. This perspective draws substantially on the notion of *discourse*, where language use permeates the day–to-day construction of meaning in context through an interpretive framework and common intercultural processes. In this sense, there are established expectations and generic conventions that regulate what should happen and what is appropriate in certain situations or cultural spaces, whether at work, in public and private life or in education and so on. Such cultural conventions influence social roles, status and acceptable behaviour, and in intercultural interaction, if we lack knowledge of appropriate behavioural scripts and contextualised cues, or genre-specific language what feels like cultural misunderstandings may occur.

Cultural life, however, is inevitably set within a framework of authority and power relations that govern and regulate a particular social and economic order, both from the wider institutional organisation of society and from the informal responses to the way individuals and groups resolve everyday issues at the discourse level. This adds a further dimension to the social constructionist approach, bringing into focus the dynamics of power and conflicting agendas, which permeate the purely constructive and interpretive process and negotiation of meaning. In this sense, a *dialectical* approach, one of opposing and contradictory forces and interests pitched against each other, based in *critical theory*, becomes apposite when examining intercultural situations, as it acknowledges the relational tensions that larger sociocultural constructs can yield.

The approach to culture in this book, then, draws upon an interpretive perspective and embraces its complexity and its vitality while recognising, at the same time, that the administrative and sociocultural and political frameworks of formalised territories, along with their associated nationalist discourse, frame social interaction and create relational and dialectical tension in everyday life. While the motivation to adopt a nation-state framework for understanding culture is undoubtedly compelling, as it promotes simplicity of analysis, explanation and action, it is crucial to adopt a deeper level of inquiry and recognise that social experience and the cultural meaning attributed to it by individuals at group level is an integral part of social interaction and that it is influenced by the wider social, economic and political relationships in which it is framed. In this sense, students and practitioners are encouraged to critically interpret

concepts in relation to the cultural groups that they encounter through their experience and to reflect on them in relation to the context of behaviour, rather than assuming pre-ordained characteristics based on nationality or supposed ethnicity.

Cultural Identity

As with culture, while we are influenced by our upbringing and cultural and social environment, cultural identity is not something that we are merely given or need to discover within ourselves. While, initially, we are born into and live in a social order and way of life which existed before us and we learn a language and interact within institutional and social relationships that ascribe identities and roles to us through cultural representations and categories, our identity is not determined by this. We may experience a sense of belonging or identification, but our identity is largely a combination of how we see ourselves and who we believe we are, on the one hand, and how others see us and influence the way we are, on the other. In this sense, identity is personal, social and cultural, and we construct it through interaction across multiple discursive sites and settings influenced by the people that we know, the spaces and institutions that we frequent and the narratives that we draw upon and identify with over time. We are all, at the same time members of multiple groups relating to the social roles that we play, whether, for example, as a family member, as an employee or as part of a particular generation, profession or society and so on. We are not defined by any one group, but our sense of identity is an amalgamation of all these roles and, as individuals, some will have more influence on us than others. However, though we are able to make choices about how we view ourselves as an individual and in relation to other people, where we are born and how we live constrains the amount and type of social, economic and cultural resources we have at our disposal to create our own biography or narrative. Thus, our life chances and our worldview will be influenced by the political, economic and sociocultural constraints of the cultural groups and society that we engage with.

Cultural Essentialism

Seeing culture and identity as objective and having a fixed nature with pre-defined characteristics that are inherent and static is known as *cultural essentialism*, rooted in a *positivist* approach that seeks to gather empirical evidence of the supposed 'real' nature of cultural and social categories. Such a perspective also tends to be applied to other social categories and roles, such as race or gender or nationality, in which individuals from a certain background are assumed to be alike or determined by their essential nature, creating the idea of homogeneity across large populations or types of people and predictability in how they may behave or interact. Much of this is not based in evidence, however, but a result of acquired stereotypes or commonly held, imagined views drawn from prejudice or anecdotal accounts of purportedly typical behaviour. In this book, culture and identity are treated in a *non-essentialist* way, from an *interpretive* or subjective perspective that assumes that they are created and negotiated by individuals in a social context across multiple sites and locations through interaction. This does not exclude external influences on individuals, such as previously formed shared meaning, tradition, national symbols and values, popular media and literature and so on, which people may choose to identify with, albeit, in some cases, without critical reflection, but it does not accept enculturation or socialisation as determining factors. The increasing proliferation and diversification of relationships, spaces and sites of intercultural interaction, and the increasing range of

technological resources and media for international connectivity, communication and mobility prevents a simplistic identification of individuals with stable and static identities based on a fixed location or social role. As a result, readers are encouraged to see culture as fluid and to explore both the contextual constraints on and individual responses to intercultural interaction.

The Universality of Culture

While culture is integral to human interaction, there are different views as to how much cultural variance occurs across different contexts and populations. An *absolutist* perspective, on the one hand, sees all human behaviour as species-related, regardless of cultural context. This means that all psychological constructs, such as intelligence or self-esteem, are displayed in the same way in all populations with no qualitative difference governed by cultural bias. In contrast to this is a *relativist* standpoint, which assumes that most human behaviour is shaped and motivated by values and interpretations particular to specific cultural groups and contexts. This means that certain behaviours, for example, may be valued or admonished in different ways across different cultural contexts, giving rise to variations in aspects of sociocultural organisation.

In moderation to these contrasting views, is a *universalist* approach, which contends that all biological and cognitive processes are common to all human beings as members of the same species and that we are able to interpret the behaviour of other humans regardless of cultural variance, although this may be displayed in different ways as a result of cultural influences. Thus, for example, while such rites as birth, marriage, or coming of age tend to be celebrated across all cultural groupings, the way that they are practised tends to vary and we may have to learn about how this unfolds in different contexts. In this sense, the approach adopted in this book takes the view that many aspects of human behaviour can be considered common and universal across the intercultural spectrum, and the concepts presented in Part II encourage readers to consider those commonalities across different cultural contexts. This involves taking into account how interculturality is created and sustained through interaction within particular contexts and encounters among individuals and groups, rather than assuming that behaviour is governed by pre-defined and essential cultural differences.

The Question of Cultural Relativism

The question of *cultural relativism* frequently comes to the fore across the key concepts in this book because of the sensitivities that surround the debate on morality and values, particularly when discussing critical social issues that lead to inequality and vulnerability. While many aspects of culture can be considered universal, in that they relate to common patterns in how humans live together and interact, the critical question is to identify what behaviour is universal and what is culture-specific. For example, all groups and societies tend to have some sort of structure, hierarchy and roles, but the way that they are organised will differ substantially across the cultural spectrum. Some groups may have complex and multiple roles in the way that they organise themselves, for instance, while others may depend on simple and minimal differentiation or layers. Likewise, within communication, the existence of functions, such as greetings and non-verbal cues, or the use of prosodic features, such as voice tone and stress, are universally common, but vary in their manifestation and use