

Interculture; Concept, Use and Ethics between Equality and Difference

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Abstract

In this article, the concept of 'interculture' is investigated from different angles. We start out with the theme of migration and move on to a discussion of literature as a tool to increase cross-cultural understanding. In the first part of this article, the theoretical perspectives of Salman Rushdie and Richard Rorty are central. Since similarity and difference constitute an underlying issue in both cases this leads to a discussion about equality and difference at the end of the paper, in which ethics represent a key perspective. In this last section, we explore an important point addressed in Charles Taylor's discussion of culture and ethics that can also be seen as a critique of the intercultural project and the way it balances similarity and difference, equality and difference.

Keywords: Interculture; concept, use, ethics, equality, difference

Introduction

In recent years, the term 'interculture' has been increasingly used to describe situations in which people with different cultural backgrounds interact, challenge each other and collaborate. The concept can be connected to a number of theoretical discussions about how a multicultural society is best able to function despite differences. However, because difference has been an important basic premise in multiculturalism, this concept overlooks what one could call a 'fusion of cultures'. Interculturalism differs from multiculturalism by focusing on this latter perspective.

In his book *Interkultur* (2010), the German expert on migration Mark Terkessidis points out that interculturalism is based on the notion of 'Kultur-im-Zwischen' (Terkessidis, 2010, p.10), which highlights what happens between cultures. Thereby, a difference-oriented concept of culture is diminished in favour of an interest in what people create together, and thus 'interculturalism' is also interpreted as a practical concept. It refers to the way we do something. For example, at an institutional level, we can strive to establish conditions for participation that ensure that discrimination is avoided: in this way, the individual can function 'barrier-free' within the institution's framework (Terkessidis, 2010, p. 9). The term 'barrier-free' is originally derived from the context of disabled people's access to buildings, but here it more broadly emphasizes the value of providing people with an equal opportunity to participate in societal, organizational and institutional contexts. Thus, in this model, the difference between people does not necessarily disappear, but it fades from focus: the ultimate goal is a future common culture.

The American education researcher James A. Banks, who is primarily known for the development of a multicultural pedagogy, has highlighted that interculturalism is 'a term used to recognize the desirability of people from different cultures to interact in dynamic and complex ways' (Banks, 2011, p. 14). Therefore, when it comes to intercultural practice, dynamic and complex interaction is, first, an essential part of any intercultural project and, furthermore, it is greatly wanted (desirability). The desire to meet the other through complex interaction must assumably be based on a willingness to obtain mutual understanding. Understanding is also always a process of integration in which new perspectives are integrated into one's own preconceptions of the world. In such a process, the clear lines between 'my' and 'your' culture disappear, because what parties bring into an encounter with voluntary and benevolent interactions becomes a new, common point of departure for further communication (Riis, 2006, p. 105). The concept of 'interculturalism' thus contains a duality - because the participants come from different backgrounds, they may start with different viewpoints, but the desire for interaction creates another focus and erases differences.

In this article, we examine how the perspective of interculturalism can be promoted. The examples are taken from different theoretical perspectives where themes such as migration, literature and ethics are bound together by a focus on the intercultural project. However, this does not mean that the intercultural project can not be criticized. At the end of the article, we take a closer look at an important aspect of such criticism.

Migration in an intercultural perspective

Institutions around the world must be able to accommodate a large variety of people with different cultural backgrounds. A phenomenon such as migration - in this article defined as changing one's country of usual residence - can concretely exemplify the central importance of the concept of difference in today's societies where the phenomenon has statistically increased. In any case, one must assume that people who are socialized in a different national and therefore generally also a different linguistic and cultural context often experience and represent differences in their ways of thinking and acting.

This highlights the potential difficulties of practicing intercultural values such as involvement and participation where the focus is on creating common human spaces (Kultur-im-Zwischen). Therefore, this approach requires a strong association between the individual and the group. One way of doing this is to look more closely at how individual migration stories can be linked to the universal human experience. The inspiration for this perception of the subject is taken from the Indian-born author Salman Rushdie (b. 1947). Based on the theme of discontinuity, Rushdie shows how the migrant's experience of lack of coherence can be linked to a more general human experience.

In his article *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), Salman Rushdie describes the experience of returning to his childhood city, Bombay, India, after about 20 years away from it. When he was 13 years old, Rushdie was sent to a boarding school in England. A few years later, his parents moved to Pakistan, and an obvious reason for Rushdie to visit Bombay disappeared (this was moreover compounded by the war between India and Pakistan). Nevertheless, the connection to the places we leave - and perhaps in particular one's childhood home - is based on more than a mere geographical affiliation. A recurring theme in Rushdie's writing is immigration and identity. His desire to return to Bombay and the house he grew up in is also an attempt to put his own history and thus identity into perspective. Through this process, Rushdie manages to describe a number of fundamental issues of the migrant, which can resonate in principle with any human being. We all have the ability to associate with the situation of the migrant, even if we have not moved across national borders: we all have experienced situations in which the context is new and our knowledge and our life experience do not seem to be an asset. Rushdie writes, 'It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, which is part of our common humanity' (Rushdie, 1992, p. 12). In other words, based on a personal story, he

formulates an experience of universal character - "of universal significance and appeal" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 12).

Here, we must first dwell some more on the experience of discontinuity as a central theme. The experience of fracturing and a lack of coherence goes hand in hand with the need for - and the expectation of - coherence. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer uses the phrase 'Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit' (anticipation of completeness) to describe this expectation. This anticipation not only accompanies the migrant but also everyone else's attempt to comprehend their universe, and thus it exists in all human beings. In our encounters with the world around us, the new is always interpreted through our preconceptions. We can revise these preconceptions, adjust or confirm them, but the process of understanding always strives to create meaning and coherence (Gadamer, 2004, p. 280). Thus, discontinuity always represents a challenge.

Within social psychology, the term 'cognitive dissonance' is used to describe the experience of inconsistency. Leon Festinger was one of the first to investigate this phenomenon experimentally, and he has, since the 1950s, inspired countless other studies. According to Joel Cooper, everything suggests that cognitive dissonance is actually a common human trait: we all experience discomfort when we experience dissonance, the discrepancy between knowledge and expectations on the one hand and events and actions on the other (Cooper, 2007, p. 156). For example, the disappointment when something has not turned out as expected prompts a need for explanation. Social psychology here substantiates what is also Gadamer's point with the concept of 'Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit'.

The link between an individual's experience and the common human anticipation of completeness represents an argument in favour of the intercultural project. How this connection is addressed in the daily meetings between people from different backgrounds depends, of course, on the context, but one example is taken from a German day-care institution. It is derived from the book *Midt i en mangfoldighed af børn - Pædagogiske svar på en multikulturel samfundsudvikling* (a Danish book about diversity in multicultural daycare institutions) by Vibe Larsen. In this text, Larsen explains that 'All parents were asked if they wanted to describe, why and how their child got its name'. She notes, 'The stories created a picture of different stories, but also of common stories across ethnicity, culture and social background' (Larsen, 2008, p. 103). The individual stories are here connected through the common human phenomenon, that of parents naming their children. In principle, every narrative has

the potential to connect people despite differences in cultural background. In the following section, we explore the potential of literature as another way to connect the individual with the collective.

Literature as an intercultural tool

The above-described experience of and reaction to discontinuity is thus a common human challenge, which the intercultural project can refer to in creating common standpoints or common understanding. However, the likelihood that the migrant has an extraordinary experience of the phenomenon of discontinuity is significant. Rushdie argues that ‘the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this in an intensified form’ (Rushdie, 1992, p. 12). In so doing, he not only emphasizes the perspective of the migrant but also the migrant writer. This is firstly because he relies on his own story as a migrant and author in *Imaginary Homelands*. At the same time, this text implicitly suggests that authors have an expanded ability to convey their experiences (because they have an audience). Authors can ‘meet’ their readers in many ways, but some sort of resonance with the latter’s own life is an important condition for their interest in the text. Rushdie often uses detailed, individualized accounts, but they are always linked to the common human experience. For example, in describing his novel *Midnight Children* (1981), he formulates his purpose as follows: ‘What I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory’ (Rushdie, 1992, p. 10). Specific memories in this book are connected to the concept of memory as a phenomenon. The narrator in *Midnight Children*, Saleem, struggles to remember things properly and therefore to make sense of his own fragmented story. Thus, the reader is drawn into the construction of a narrative that speaks to the common human expectation of coherence (Gadamer - *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*) and subsequently to the experience of discontinuity (Festinger - *cognitive dissonance*). In this way, readers have the opportunity to link the narrative to their own preconceptions. Rushdie appeals to his readers through implicit references to their own lives, and ideally, they are able to relate to some element that transcends the individual.

This poses the question of whether literature - in contrast to, for example, academic writing - has a special potential to bolster the intercultural project. The American neopragmatist Richard Rorty (1931-2007) was a strong advocate for the view that literature is especially suited to making what at first sight seems strange and foreign understandable and familiar. Rorty highlights that the process of understanding our fellow human beings does not solely concern rational or intellectual activity - this

understanding can also arise based on emotions. He provides the example of Charles Dickens (1812-1870), who contributed to an increased social engagement through his portrayals of poor and vulnerable people, their history and their situation. In his writing, readers are moved by his grim stories and realize that people whom they do not know nor think they have anything in common with nonetheless suffer and feel in the same way. In this way, literature can activate what one might call a human sympathy.

This 'access' to insight into other people's lives can also be seen as a critical comment on the purely theoretical approach to interpersonal understanding: 'To say that it [literature] is more fruitful is just to say that, when you weigh the good and the bad that the social novelists have done against the good and the bad that the social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories' (Rorty, 1999, p. 120). In other words, literature's ability to touch us emotionally activates empathy for our fellow human beings, even if these fellow human beings are perceived as fundamentally different. Literature provides an insight into our common humanity. As Rorty puts it, 'shared pains and pleasures' (Rorty, 2000, p. 16) are enlightening when it comes to genuine interpersonal relationships. This element is also relevant to the intercultural project when it remains on the outlook for ways to connect people with different cultural backgrounds.

Although Rorty's work addresses the common features of the human experience, his view on cultural difference is different to the one presented in the intercultural project. Unlike in the latter concept, Rorty also finds it important to focus on cultural differences. In a discussion with the Indian-born philosopher Anindita Nyogi Balslev, he notes that in cultural encounters where both parties are seeking to understand each other, they tend to focus on similarities and familiar concepts (Rorty, 1999, p. 110). Rorty suggests that if people stay solely within the framework of similarity, their worldview does not change. In this vein, he views literature as a way to increase cross-cultural understanding, but insists it must first emphasize differences. In institutional and educational contexts where literature is used, it is important to be aware of and reject the natural inclination for similarity. Rorty recommends that we seek out the literature that is most alien to us (Rorty, 1999, p. 112). The goal is primarily to change stereotypical notions of 'the others' by avoiding the tendency to understand otherness through predefined patterns.

From the perspective of the intercultural project, Rorty's arguments can be used to discuss the role of similarity and difference in human thinking in general. The discussion not only concerns different perspectives but also entails a basic ethical evaluation of the role of equality and difference. However, there is no consensus on how to prioritize these two dimensions when different cultures fuse into one in the context of the intercultural project. In the following section, we explore the debate about 'difference blindness' from an ethical perspective.

Equality and difference as ethical categories

In his well-known book *The Politics of Recognition* (1992), Charles Taylor highlights Kantian thinking as one of the more explicit examples of difference blind equality thinking. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) builds his ethics on the fundamental idea that what is right and wrong is based on general criteria, which ensures that everyone are considered equal (Kant, 1965, p. 5). This foundation is formulated through 'the categorical imperative': 'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law' (Kant, 2002, p. 56). One example of this notion in practice involves lying: although we can have many reasons to lie, when we do, we contradict the fact that we must trust each other if our society is to function. Therefore, it seems logical to enact a general law stating that one must always tell the truth despite the fact that in some situations it may be tempting, obvious or even right to lie. When we lie, we usually do so because of personal goals - it can be anything from one's own, selfish inclinations to attempting to protect others. However, the categorical imperative always considers individual desires suspicious. Based on this principle, it becomes difficult to be aware of difference as an important element. Kantian thinking suggests that our first interest in other people must be of a more general nature and therefore focus on what we have in common as human beings.

The categorical imperative follows a logical train of thought: for example, it is contradictory to take care of oneself first whilst at the same time claiming that everyone must be treated equally. Thus, the categorical imperative imposes a type of self-control ensuring that all humans are respected as equals. In this way of thinking, ideals such as equality and respect become two sides of the same coin. Seen from a historical perspective, the ideal of equality promoted during the French Revolution, the notion of fraternity and the concept of freedom coincide with Kant's thinking. Nevertheless, Kant describes his moral philosophy as a historically independent principle, which every thinking human should be able to perceive (Kant, 1965, p. 5).

However, philosophical thinking as well as thinking in general is never entirely independent of historical circumstances. If the intercultural project is also founded on an ethical concept of equality that is culturally based, it may be useful to take this point into consideration when it comes to arguments against difference-blind positions. As previously mentioned, the educational theorist Banks states that interaction and the desire for mutual understanding are central to the intercultural project. At the same time, he notes that the concept of 'interculture' is primarily used in Western Europe (Banks, 2009, p. 14). Banks is a prominent representative of multicultural pedagogy, which primarily evolved in an American context. Historical circumstances can be a concrete reason for placing different emphasis on similarity and difference (Rorty) and on equality and difference. One of the critics of a too equality-minded perspective is Taylor. In the final section of this paper, we explore his arguments.

Balancing between equality and difference

When Taylor discusses 'the politics of equal dignity' (Taylor, 1992, p. 44), he highlights Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Kant as early exponents of this thinking. In his criticism, he does not question equality as a basis for human coexistence, but he is skeptical about the way it is managed: there is a risk that the predominant focus on making everyone equal could lead to a blindness to the differences between people. Sometimes, it is necessary to discriminate in order to respect people's equality.

The concept of identity is the starting point for Taylor's discussion. It is linked to the concept of recognition. The need to be seen as one's true self and respected for it is related to the fact that identity is something that is shaped by interactions with the environment. Being able to maintain a particular identity requires an acceptance from other people. Other people's ideas about who we should be can therefore feel as an attack. It follows that a lack of proper recognition of the peculiarity of individuals and groups can lead to harm (Taylor, 1992, p. 25). Respecting equality can thus necessitate treating people differently. Taylor summarizes the conflict between these two ways of thinking: 'These two modes of politics, then, both based on the notion of equal respect, come into conflict. For one, the principle of equal respect requires that we treat people in a difference-blind fashion. The fundamental intuition that humans command this focus is on what is the same in all. For the other, we have to recognize and even foster particularity' (Taylor, 1992, p. 43).

Concluding remarks

The focus of the intercultural project is to establish equal possibilities for participation in groups, institutions and society. By focusing on similarities, the common features of human beings, the intercultural project can ensure that this is the case. Examples of how this can be achieved despite the many differences between people can be seen in the writings of Rushdie and in Rorty's perspective on literature. However, a more explicit theoretical criticism of the intercultural project can also be brought into the debate, when the balance between similarity and difference points in the direction of an ethical debate of equality and difference. The intercultural project also has its limitations. Even though it appears to be an effective means of connecting people across cultural divisions, it also entails the risk of blind spots.

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