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Researching intercultural competence in language learners: Gaps between theory and methodology



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Abstract

Traditional approaches to intercultural competence (IC) in language learning have been criticised for reproducing cultural differentialism, a theoretical perspective which emphasises that people are different due to essential distinctions between their ethnic or national cultural background. While differentialist views have been recognised as problematic in the theory of IC, it remains to be examined whether and how cultural differentialism is reflected in the methodological tools used in empirical research in the field. To shed light on this issue, the article analyses five questionnaires studying IC or related concepts: the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2001), the Intercultural Development Inventory (Hammer *et al.*, 2003), the Intercultural Communicative Competence Instrument (Arasaratnam, 2009), the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (Portalla & Chen, 2010) and the Ungspråk Questionnaire (Haukås *et al.*, 2021b). The analysis reveals that cultural differentialism persists at the level of methodology. However, the extent to which questionnaires reproduce it varies according to how notions of culture, identity, differences and similarities are reflected in the questionnaire statements. The paper also discusses the possible implications of using methodological tools that reproduce cultural differentialism. It also provides some recommendations that can help researchers avoid this problematic approach in an empirical study.

Keywords: intercultural competence, cultural differentialism, essentialism, foreign language learning

Introduction

The concept of Intercultural Competence (IC) is extremely polysemic, with different definitions across disciplines (Dervin *et al.*, 2012; Perry & Southwell, 2011; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009). In

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the field of foreign language learning, the most influential definition of IC was coined by Byram, who defines it as the capacity of language learners “to see relationships between different cultures—both internal and external to a society—and mediate, that is interpret each in terms of other, either for themselves or for other people” (Byram, 2000, p. 9). In other words, IC refers to the ability to understand differences and similarities “between cultures” and to serve as a mediator in an intercultural encounter. It is important to emphasise that when originally explaining his approach, Byram (1997) argued that “presenting ‘a culture’ as [...] if there were only one set of beliefs, meanings and behaviours in any given country” is dangerous and that “when individuals interact, they bring to the situation their own identities and cultures” (p. 39). In other words, he recognised and mentioned the fact that societies are increasingly diverse and that other social distinctions and similarities, rather than only cultural ones, are also relevant for consideration in intercultural encounters (Hoff, 2020).

Byram’s definition has had considerable impact in the field of language learning and intercultural education, yet some have regarded it as problematic. Based on a misreading and an inaccurate equation of “culture” with “national culture” (Byram 2021), scholars (e.g., Dervin, 2010; Dervin *et al.*, 2012; Hoff, 2020; Holliday, 2011; Kramsch, 2009) have criticised it for pursuing principles of cultural differentialism—a theoretical approach which involves regarding people from different national cultures as being fundamentally and potentially irreconcilably different in values, beliefs, communication patterns etc. (Pieterse, 1996; Taguieff, 2001). The critics have argued that cultural differentialism is one of the major challenges within the broader field of intercultural communication (e.g., Dervin 2016, p. 103) and have addressed this problematic approach in research.

In spite of the attention to the problem of cultural differentialism at the theoretical level, scholars, however, have not yet examined whether and how this problem is reflected in the methodological tools used in empirical research on IC. The assumptions from which a methodological tool derives are likely to influence the data collected with this tool and, consequently, the results of an investigation. Therefore, a critical review of methodology is needed before the data collection. This paper aims to analyse how cultural differentialism is reflected in methodological tools applied in language learning research, and thus aims to generate insights useful for improving existing tools or developing new ones which better correspond with a non-essentialist and non-differentialist approach to IC.

To analyse whether and how cultural differentialism is reflected in research tools, the study focuses on a specific type of research methodology – quantitative questionnaires – and seeks to answer the following research question: *How do quantitative questionnaires applied in the field of foreign language learning research reflect the notions of culture, identity, differences, and similarities?* The study analyses five questionnaires commonly used to explore IC or related concepts in the field of foreign language learning. It discusses how these tools reflect the above notions and what implications this can have for empirical research as well as for respondents’ IC development. The final part of the article makes some recommendations to help researchers avoid reproducing cultural differentialism in a research study.

Addressing the Problem of Cultural Differentialism at the Theoretical Level in Intercultural Education Research

In a broader sense, the term *cultural differentialism* refers to the theoretical perspective which suggests, first, that the world is divided into national cultures that are essentially different; second, that each culture is congruent with a certain population group; and third, that people from different cultures are different (Pieterse, 1996; Taguieff, 2001). Both in the social sciences and intercultural

communication research, scholars (e.g., Banks, 2016; Benhabib, 2002; Dervin 2016; Dervin *et al.*, 2012; Holliday, 2010, 2011; Phillips, 2007; Young, 2011) have recognised that the differentialist perspective is theoretically and epistemologically problematic.

First, it has been criticised for considering cultures as separate entities defined and restricted by national and geographical borders and, thus, associated with ethnicity or nationality (Benhabib, 2002; Dervin, 2010; Holliday, 2010; Pieterse, 1996; Phillips, 2007; Turner, 1993). In contemporary studies, however, scholars (Benhabib, 2002; Dypedahl, 2018a; Holliday, 1999; Kramersch, 2013; Mikander *et al.*, 2018) distinguish at least two major approaches to defining culture. It can either be traditionally associated with ethnicity, nationality and country, or can refer to broader concepts. For example, some scholars (Banks, 2016; Benhabib, 2002; Barrett, 2016; Dypedahl, 2018a; Kramersch, 2009, 2013) suggest defining culture as a framework of references that a particular group of people shares and that group members commonly refer to in understanding the world and their own and others' actions. In this broader sense, culture can be associated not only with an ethnic or national group but with any group of people, including religious groups, neighbourhoods, work organisations, sexual orientation groups, generational groups, and families (Barrett, 2016; Dypedahl, 2018a). All these types of groups have their own particular, "small" (Holliday, 1999), cultures. The latter implies as well that "all people belong simultaneously to and identify with many different groups and their associated cultures" (Barrett, 2016, p. 19). Ethnic or national groups, thus, represent only one of many types of cultural groups with which people can identify.

Second, cultural differentialism has been criticised for an oversimplified view of peoples' identities and a stereotypical representation of the Self and the Other (Benhabib, 2002; Dervin, 2010; Holliday, 2010; Phillips, 2007; Turner, 1993). In this context, the Self refers to one's image of oneself (e.g., as a member of a cultural group), whereas the Other refers to an image of a dissimilar person (e.g., a representative of a different cultural group), which is required to define oneself through opposition. By emphasising cultural differences between people, differentialists tend to consider the Self and the Other as representatives of different ethnic or national groups. Ethnic or national culture, therefore, becomes a "badge" of identity and of differences between people (Turner, 1993, p. 412). Critics argue that to a certain extent, ethnic or national culture has always provided this mark of identity and social distinction, but what is problematic is that within the differentialist approach, it becomes "a synonym for identity, its main marker and differentiator" (Benhabib, 2002, p. 1). This simplified view underestimates or completely ignores that other factors, such as gender, social class, and age, also constitute identity and can distinguish as well as represent similarities between people.

The above criticism of cultural differentialism stems from non-essentialist views (Baker, 2012; Banks, 2016; Banks & Banks, 2019; Benhabib, 2002; Holliday, 2011, 2010; Kramersch, 2009, 2013), which have been widely promoted in the social sciences, humanities and intercultural communication research over recent decades. Non-essentialism implies that identity is multidimensional, that is, an individual has not one, but rather multiple identities due to self-identification with various social groups based on gender, age, social class, ethnicity, religion, race, education, language, and professional affiliation. Each category constitutes a certain facet of a person's identity. National or ethnic culture, thus, plays the role of only one of many possible dimensions that create differences or similarities between people. According to the non-essentialist approach, these identity dimensions cannot be separated from each other; they are interwoven, constructing the complex and unique identity of a person.

The non-essentialist approach changes the overall understanding of diversity. According to this perspective, it is deemed mistaken to consider any identity marker (e.g., gender, ethnic culture or age) separate from its interconnection with others. This approach implies that differences, as well as similarities, between people cannot be purely ethno-cultural or based only, for example, on gender.

They are always complex and emerge out of the intersection of many and varied identity dimensions. Hence, in an interaction between two foreigners, it is not only their ethnic or national cultures that make them distinct but also their gender, social class and professional affiliations, among others. In addition, the latter categories, if they coincide, can constitute similarities between people, for instance, if these foreigners are women, teenagers or academics. A research study that takes only one dimension as the main marker of differences between people underestimates the complex character of identity structure and yields to a simplistic view of the Self and the Other. Moreover, such a study risks ignoring diversity within social groups, whether these groups are ethno-cultural or national or based on gender or social class (Benhabib, 2002; Okin, 1999; Phillips, 2007; Young, 2011).

In recent years, non-essentialist views have become dominant in the theory of intercultural communication and language learning research. Increasingly, scholars tend to agree with the non-essentialist argument that taking only ethnic or national culture as a marker of identity is problematic. Among them, Wahyudi (2016) argues that identity is complex and, thus, IC “should be seen from a variety of lenses, not only from culture alone” (p. 149). Other researchers (e.g., Deardorff, 2019; Dypedahl, 2018b) have begun to make a non-essentialist approach explicit in the definition of IC. In one of her latest works, Deardorff (2019) relates IC to “the skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed to improve interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity and so on) or across borders” (p. i). In this definition, IC encompasses various diversities rather than focusing on ethno-cultural or national differences. Dypedahl (2019) has also defined IC as “the ability to relate constructively to people who have mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one’s own” (p. 102). By introducing this broad definition of IC, Dypedahl underlines that differences between people are not just related to nationality but can also be products of other factors such as the communication with family and at workplace or the influence of popular culture and online communication.

Some scholars have responded to the criticism of cultural differentialism by incorporating a critical stance in their approaches to IC (e.g., Baker, 2012; Dervin, 2010; Dypedahl, 2018b; Hoff, 2014; Wahyudi, 2016). For example, Dervin (2010) introduced an alternative model of IC (which the author terms “proteophilic competence”) based on “the appreciation of diverse diversities of the Self and the other” (p. 166). The concept of “diverse diversities” in his approach refers to Pieterse’s (2004) statement that all people are distinct in terms of habits, opinions and discourses, irrespective of geographical boundaries or their ethno-cultural or national belonging. Acknowledging that individuals have multiple and composite identities, which are revealed differently in different contexts, Hoff (2019) stresses that IC must be understood as relating to the ability “to navigate conflict, contradictions, complexity and ambiguity” (p. 444) in contemporary postmodern societies, rather than to the empathetic tolerance of otherness.

As discussed above, critiques of cultural differentialism have prompted an increasing number of scholars to move towards a non-essentialist perspective in conceptualising culture and IC. However, this change in conceptualisation does not imply that the non-essentialist perspective has been automatically adopted by scholars working with empirical research. While providing definitions of IC which do not directly reflect differentialist ideas, scholars may, nevertheless, pursue the principles of cultural differentialism when working on empirical studies or developing instruments for the data collection (e.g., Arasaratnam, 2009; Portalla & Chen, 2010; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2001). For example, Portalla and Chen (2010) – authors of the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale that will be analysed further in this article – conceptualise IC “as an individual’s ability to achieve their communication goal while effectively and appropriately utilizing communication behaviors to negotiate between the different identities present within a culturally diverse environment” (2010, p.

21). If culture is considered as referring to beliefs and practices of any social group and identity as encompassing various sociocultural dimensions, this definition can easily be interpreted within the non-essentialist paradigm. However, what is problematic in this and many other approaches to IC (e.g., van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2001), is that researchers neither provide any explicit definitions of culture, nor explain what they mean by “intercultural” or “culturally diverse environment” when clarifying the theoretical background of their methodological tools. Moreover, rather than emphasising and strengthening non-essentialist views, authors tend to include some markers indicating that they associate culture with ethnicity or nationality. This problem will be discussed in detail later in the results section of this article.

In what follows, I will examine how the theoretical shift from cultural differentialism to non-essentialist and non-differentialist perspective has been reflected at the level of research methodology. For this purpose, I chose four frequently used in the field questionnaires as well as a newly developed tool, the Ungspråk Questionnaire, and analysed how they approach notions of culture, identity, differences and similarities.

Methodology

Scholars (Fantini, 2009; Matsumoto & Hwang 2013; Sinicrope *et al.*, 2007) have suggested a variety of methodological instruments that can be used to study IC in the context of foreign language learning and intercultural communication research. For instance, Fantini (2009) names more than 40 tools. They differ in terms of the theoretical models of IC on which they are based, research purposes, fields of implementation and type of methodological approach (quantitative vs. qualitative). Moreover, methodological instruments differ in terms of the focal concepts they aim to investigate. Many instruments do not evaluate IC per se but rather focus on other relevant concepts associated with it, for example, intercultural sensitivity (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Chen & Starosta, 1997; Hammer *et al.*, 2003), intercultural effectiveness (Portalla & Chen, 2010), multicultural effectiveness (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2001), pluriculturalism and interculturality (Byram *et al.*, 2009), personality traits (Kelley & Meyers, 1995) and behavioural patterns (Koester & Olebe, 1988).

To select appropriate methodological instruments for our analysis, certain criteria were introduced. First, in order to provide comparability between tools, a particular type of instrument was selected, specifically, quantitative questionnaires based on a Likert scale. Questionnaires were given preference due to their ease of application and their common usage in research on IC. Second, among these questionnaires, only those that assess one or several attitudinal aspects associated with IC, such as open-mindedness, curiosity, cultural empathy, acceptance/appreciation of differences, tolerance and respect were selected. These particular aspects were emphasised because they underpin most of the theoretical models of (see, for example, Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2010). Third, only questionnaires developed for or commonly used in language learning research were included. Finally, due to recent developments in theories of intercultural communication, only questionnaires developed or updated in the last 20 years were included in the analysis. In total, five questionnaires that met these criteria were identified: the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2001), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer *et al.*, 2003), the Intercultural Communicative Competence Instrument (ICCI) (Arasaratnam, 2009), the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) (Portalla & Chen, 2010), and the Ungspråk Questionnaire (Haukås *et al.*, 2021b).

To examine whether and how the selected instruments address cultural differentialism, the questionnaires were analysed in three steps. First, the manner in which the tools address the notion of

culture was considered, as well as whether they imply an association between culture and ethnicity or nationality. Second, the extent to which the questionnaires use ethnic or national culture as the main marker of identity and differences between people was examined. Third, the degree to which the tools take into account similarities as well as differences between the Self and the Other was examined.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the results of the analysis. First, it indicates the theoretical assumptions from which the considered questionnaires stem. Second, it demonstrates how the notions of culture, identity, differences and similarities are reflected in the statements of the questionnaires.

First, it was found that the tools considered derive from different theoretical approaches to culture and identity. Most of the questionnaires - specifically, the IDI, the IES, the MPQ and the ICCI - are theoretically based on the differentialist approach. This means that they stem from assumptions that associate culture with ethnicity or nationality and consider culture the main marker of identity and differences between the Self and the Other. For example, the authors of the MPQ underline that they designed the tool to assess individuals' multicultural effectiveness, defined as the capacity to operate successfully in a new cultural environment (van Oudenhoven & van der Zee, 2002). A new cultural environment here refers to a new national or ethno-cultural context, with which a foreigner, whether it is the Self or the Other, has to deal. For example, van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2000) consider the Chinese context as a new cultural environment for a Dane, thus, associating culture with nationality and regarding one's national belonging as the main marker of identity in an intercultural encounter.

The same is relevant to the IES, which measures intercultural effectiveness as a behavioural aspect of IC. The authors neither provide any explicit definition of culture nor explain what they mean by "intercultural." However, their position becomes clearer when they discuss intercultural communication as "posing additional complexity" in interactions between people and state that "each person has a significant and separate cultural identity" (Portalla & Chen, 2010, p.23). This distinction of cultural dimension from other facets of identity indicates its association with nationality or ethnicity, rather than with other multiple dimensions, such as gender, age, professional affiliation. Hence, in its theoretical framework, the IES also focuses on ethnic or national belonging as the main identity marker in intercultural communication, thus pursuing the ideas of cultural differentialism.

Result 1. The notions of culture, identity, differences and similarities in the theoretical frameworks of the questionnaires: A variety of approaches

The IDI, which is based on Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (1993), also stems from the differentialist views. The DMIS explicitly links culture to ethnicity by considering various stages of intercultural sensitivity as *ethnocentric* or *ethnorelative*. Moreover, in the clarification of Bennett's model, Hammer *et al.* (2003) explicitly associate the Other with a foreigner or an immigrant without mentioning other forms of diversity based on gender, age, sexual orientation, professional affiliation, etc. The researchers state that people with one of the ethnocentric stages of intercultural sensitivity (*Denial*) experience cultural differences "as associated with a kind of undifferentiated other such as 'foreigner' or 'immigrant'" (p. 424). Therefore, it can be concluded that theoretically the IDI stems from the differentialist approach, as well as the MPQ and the IES.

Table 1 *An overview of the questionnaires*

Questionnaire	Theoretical framework (approach to IC)	Statements			
		The notion of culture is used in the statements	Culture is associated with ethnicity or nationality	Culture is used as the main marker of identity and differences	Focus on differences vs. similarities
1 Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) (2001)	Based on cultural differentialism	Yes	No	No	Only some statements are focused on differences.
2 Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)	Based on cultural differentialism	Yes	No	Yes	Most of the statements are focused on differences. Similarities, if mentioned, imply the elimination of differences.
3 Intercultural Communicative Competence Instrument (ICCI)	Based on cultural differentialism	Yes	Only in the first statement	Yes	Statements are focused on differences except statement #6, which mentions similarities between "people from different cultures."
4 Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES)	Based on cultural differentialism	Yes	No	Yes	Statements are focused on differences except statements #8, #17, and #19, which mention similarities between "culturally different" people.
5 Ungspråk Questionnaire	Based on non-essentialist views	No	Not applicable	Not applicable	Statements are focused on differences

The ICCI is different from the considered above questionnaires in the sense that the reference to the differentialist approach in its theoretical framework is not explicit. Moreover, in designing the ICCI, Arasaratnam (2007) attempted to take into account the criticism of cultural differentialism. The

author recognises that due to the growing migration and mobility in the world, “it is becoming increasingly difficult for one to pinpoint one’s own cultural identity/affiliation,” and therefore, researchers and practitioners involved in researching IC should stop thinking “in terms of national/ethnic boundaries or even in terms of cultural taxonomies” (p. 71). However, instead of applying a non-essentialist approach and considering diverse dimensions of identity, the author rather seeks to ensure that the questionnaire does not associate one’s identity with a particular ethnicity or nationality. In other words, she seeks to avoid the representation of the Self and the Other as members of specific ethnic or national groups, i.e. as a German and a Spaniard. However, ethnic or national culture as a generic category remains the main identity marker in an intercultural encounter. Therefore, the overall theoretical framework of the ICCI pursues the principles of cultural differentialism.

The Ungspråk Questionnaire, on the contrary, derives from the assumption that identity is complex and diverse, and that ethnic or national culture represents only one of many dimensions that construct it (Haukås *et al.*, 2021a). The authors emphasise that differences between the participants in an intercultural encounter cannot be reduced only to ethnic or national distinctions but are also based on gender, age, social class, etc. These views on culture, identity and differences reflect the non-essentialist perspective.

Result 2. The notions of culture, identity, differences and similarities in the statements of the questionnaires: A discrepancy with the theoretical framework

The analysis also revealed that questionnaires’ statements do not necessarily mirror the declared theoretical assumptions. Hence, there can be a discrepancy between how scholars discuss the notions of culture, identity, and differences and similarities in the theoretical frameworks of their tools and how these notions are reflected in the statements of the questionnaires.

First, a discrepancy can emerge due to the lack of clarity regarding the notion of culture. For example, in Arasaratnam’s (2009) tool, all ten statements address the notion of culture. However, only one of them associates it with (supra-) ethnicity: “I often find it difficult to differentiate between similar cultures (ex. Asians, Europeans, Africans, etc.)” (p. 9). The other nine statements do not provide any explanatory example: “I feel that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach me,” “Most of my friends are from my own culture,” “I feel more comfortable with people from my own culture than with people from other cultures” (p. 9–10). Although these statements contain the term “culture,” they do not indicate whether the respondents should continue to associate culture with ethnicity or supra-ethnicity. However, given that the item referring to (supra-) ethnicity is the first one in this questionnaire, it is likely that the respondents will implicitly use this category as a reference throughout the other nine statements of the questionnaire.

The same is relevant to the other questionnaires based on the differentialist approach to IC, such as the IDI, the MPQ and the IES. For example, the IDI refers to culture in such statements as: “People should avoid individuals from other cultures who behave differently,” “People from our culture are less tolerant compared to people from other cultures,” “Family values are stronger in other cultures than in our culture,” “When I come in contact with people from a different culture, I find I change my behaviour to adapt to theirs” (Hammer *et al.*, 2003, p. 434). Statements in the MPQ that address the notion of culture include “Gets involved in another culture” and “Feels uncomfortable in a different culture” (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven 2001, p. 286–287). Although these questionnaires theoretically derive from the differentialist approach to IC, their statements do not contain any explicit association of culture with ethnicity or nationality. They do not provide any explanation or clue regarding how respondents should approach this notion. In these questionnaires, the absence of clarity regarding the notion of culture may be explained by the fact that they were developed before

the recent paradigm shift in intercultural education theory. The initial versions of the IES and the MPQ date back to 2000 (see Chen & Starosta, 2000; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000). The theoretical framework of the IDI, which is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, refers to even earlier works by Bennett (1993). Due to the prevalence of the differentialist approach, the notion of culture was used in questionnaires in its most common sense at that time, that is, related to ethnicity or nationality. Therefore, an explicit definition of culture was not considered necessary.

However, due to the current variety of approaches to defining culture, the absence of any explicit indication of how respondents should define it can raise a problem of interpretation. Sercu (2004) argues that respondents represent a heterogeneous group of people that “may not have a *common* body of knowledge” (p. 83). Due to individual characteristics such as age, sex, nationality, level and type of general education, prior knowledge and life experience, respondents can apply different definitions to the same concepts. Therefore, if the questionnaire does not provide any reference to a specific approach to culture, some respondents may refer to the traditional differentialist framework and consider culture as an attribute of a national community or its native members (Holliday, 2009; Kramsch, 2013), whereas others might apply a broader definition and consider culture as an attribute of any social group.

Second, a discrepancy between the theoretical framework of a questionnaire and its statements can emerge due to the lack of clarity regarding the notion of differences. Most of the tools based on the differentialist approach aim to present the Self and the Other as culturally, that is, ethnically or nationally, different. For example, the IES, the ICCI and the IDI reflect differentialist views of people by using such expressions as “culturally different counterparts,” “people from different cultures,” “people from other cultures,” or “people from my own culture.” The same is relevant to some statements of the MPQ, such as “Feels uncomfortable in a different culture” and “Get involved in other cultures.” In this case, “different” and “other” can be interpreted as referring to “distinct” or “unsimilar.” According to the questionnaires’ theoretical frameworks, the differences are meant as ethno-cultural or national. Yet, due to the absence of any indication of ethnicity or nationality, the meaning of differences, in fact, will depend on how respondents define culture.

The other questionnaires, the Ungspråk and the MPQ (in most of its statements), focus on interpersonal relations and measure particular personality traits associated with IC, rather than IC per se. Consequently, they emphasise general rather than cultural differences between the Self and the Other. In the statements, this is reflected by the exclusion of the term “culture.” For instance, the Ungspråk contains the following statements measuring open-mindedness: “I like that people have different opinions,” “I try to get to know people that are different from me,” “I like that there are differences between myself and other people.” In practice, this exclusion of “culture” can incite respondents’ reflection on other markers of identity and differences besides ethnicity or nationality. However, this may equally lead to the problem of interpretation regarding the term “differences.”

Depending on their own views, respondents might define diversity and differences in various ways. Jokikko’s (2005) study on teachers’ interpretations of intercultural competence shows that educators can define differences in, at least, three different ways. First, they can apply the differentialist framework and define differences in terms of visible markers, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, language and race. Second, they might refer to differences as invisible markers, including family history, sexual orientation, political opinion, learning style and worldview. Third, most of the informants in the study reported that they perceived differences as personal and individual rather than linked to a person’s belonging to any social group or ethnicity/nationality. Jokikko’s findings can be relevant to any other group of informants, including young language learners. Students, who often form their perception of culture and differences under the influence of adults, including their teachers, can reproduce the same meanings as their educators. Therefore, when a questionnaire

measuring learners' IC does not contain the notion of culture and shifts the focus from cultural differences to general ones, this does not necessarily imply that respondents will automatically follow this shift. Some respondents might consider ethnicity or nationality as the main marker of identity and differences between people, whereas others might consider differences to refer to invisible markers or personality traits.

Moreover, in relation to the third focus of the analysis, it was found that, regardless of the theoretical assumptions, all the analysed tools emphasise differences rather than similarities between people. For example, in the IES and the ICCI, similarities are mentioned in only a few statements as existing between "culturally different counterparts" or "people from different cultures," for instance, "I have a lot in common with my culturally different counterparts during our interaction" (the IES) and "I often notice similarities in personality between people who belong to completely different cultures" (the ICCI). In the case of the Ungspråk, although the questionnaire aims to incite reflection on various aspects of identity of the Self and the Other, similarities between people are not mentioned in the statements at all. This approach might be problematic and reproduce cultural differentialism if respondents define differences only as ethno-cultural or national. In the case of the IDI, similarities between people are highlighted only in a particular part of the questionnaire, which reflects one of the six stages of intercultural sensitivity development. This part emphasises similarities as universal human features, for instance, "People are the same despite outward differences in appearance." However, this emphasis on similarities is made by minimising or eliminating cultural or any other differences between people. This is equally problematic, because it ignores the complexity and uniqueness of a person's identity, and thus, simplifies the relationship between the Self and the Other.

Summary of the results

Taken together, the findings suggest that even though the problem of cultural differentialism has been addressed in theoretical research, it persists at the level of quantitative research methodology. Most of the questionnaires (i.e., the IES, the IDI and the MPQ) used in the field stem from theoretical assumptions that associate culture with ethnicity or nationality and consider it the main marker of identity and differences in an intercultural encounter. These views reflect the principles of cultural differentialism and serve as a basis for the theoretical frameworks of these questionnaires. At the same time, due to the recent shift in the theory of intercultural communication research, the authors of the latest tools seek to take into account non-essentialist views when designing their questionnaires (e.g., the ICCI and the Ungspråk). They aim to and, to varying extents, succeed in avoiding the reproduction of differentialist views of identity and culture in their tools. However, the findings indicate that neither traditional nor non-essentialist approaches to IC are adequately reflected in the questionnaires themselves. The references to such notions as culture and differences can be unclear in the statements and make it problematic to identify which theoretical approach a tool reflects. Consequently, whether or not a questionnaire reproduces cultural differentialism often depends on respondents' interpretation of the above concepts. These findings can have both methodological implications and consequences for the respondents' intercultural perspectives.

Implications for Research and Respondents' IC Development

The present findings are significant in at least two major respects. First, they can have important consequences for empirical research and its results. The findings indicate that to a certain extent, all the considered questionnaires lack clarity regarding how respondents should define culture, differences, the Self and Other, when facing these concepts in the statements of the questionnaires. If these notions are not clarified before the data collection, respondents can apply different, even mutually exclusive, approaches and definitions. For example, some informants can relate culture and

differences to ethnicity and nationality and associate the Other with a foreigner. Some respondents can apply broader definitions and take into account other aspects of diversity and identity, such as gender or age. If researchers neglect this, the study could yield unreliable results.

Second, the findings may have important implications for the development of respondents' IC. Foremost, if a questionnaire in its statements reproduces cultural differentialism by explicitly associating culture with ethnicity – or supra-ethnicity in the case of the ICCI – there is a probability that the use of this tool may facilitate the strengthening of essentialist views and fostering negative stereotypes among respondents. For example, the emphasis on ethnicity/nationality as the main marker of identity may prompt respondents to overlook or underestimate other aspects of identity that can be more significant in face-to-face intercultural communication, such as gender, age, social class, language repertoire, personal views and interests. Moreover, the emphasis on differences rather than similarities may impel them to look at the Self and the Other through the lens of contrasts, which may lead to fostering the view that foreigners, immigrants and members of ethnic minorities are a priori dissimilar, and there are no commonalities between *us* and *them*.

The same implications are associated with the questionnaires that do not explicitly reproduce cultural differentialism in their statements but, due to the unclear use of concepts, do so implicitly. If the notions of culture and differences or the meaning of expressions such as “people from different cultures” are not clarified before the data collection, there is a high probability that respondents, who have not been previously introduced to the non-essentialist perspective, will apply essentialist views. Hence, it can be assumed that the use of questionnaires aimed at studying learners' IC will lead to paradoxical results. Instead of evaluating IC for its further promotion, the use of these questionnaires will impede its development by reinforcing negative stereotypes and prejudice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has examined to what extent and how cultural differentialism, which has been criticised in theories of intercultural communication, is reflected in five questionnaires designed to study IC and related concepts. Taken together, the findings of the study suggest that the differentialist approach persists at the level of methodology, which reveals a gap between theory and methodology in the field. However, the extent to which the examined methodological tools reproduce differentialist views varies depending on how the notions of culture, identity and differences are reflected in the questionnaire statements. The use of tools that reproduce cultural differentialism can have negative implications for both empirical research and for the development of IC. Hence, researchers in the field should critically review the tools designed for investigating IC when choosing an instrument for their study.

To avoid reproducing cultural differentialism, researchers may consider revising methodological instruments by following some recommendations. First, it is worth considering which theoretical approach to IC a tool reflects in its instructions and statements or questions. This can be done by analysing how the notions of culture, identity and differences are presented. Their association with ethnicity and nationality, as well as an emphasis on the distinction between people, indicates that the tool reproduces differentialist views and, thus, can reinforce negative stereotypes towards representatives of ethnic and national groups. On the other hand, the consideration of identity as complex and diverse, and ethnicity or nationality as only one of many possible markers of identity and differences between people, indicates that the tool reflects non-essentialist views. Such an instrument should also emphasise both similarities and differences between the Self and the Other, rather than put forward only ethno-cultural or national distinctions. However, it should be kept in mind that the above indications may not be clearly presented in a tool or be absent. Hence, the

theoretical framework that a questionnaire reproduces will in fact depend on respondents' interpretation of culture, identity and differences. Therefore, the second and the most important recommendation is to clarify the approach to these notions before the data collection. This clarification can be made by introducing necessary adjustments in the tool itself or by having a discussion with the respondents before they work with the tool.

The questionnaires examined represent only a small number of the existing tools designed to study language learners' IC. However, the findings can also be relevant for other instruments applied in the field, including qualitative ones. Hence, more research is needed to investigate whether and to what extent other tools reproduce cultural differentialism and what adjustments need to be made.

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