Transcultural Identity

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Abstract

Initially, traditional approaches to culture (in close relationship to states and territories) are rejected. Instead, culture is a seen as system of items, i.e. of rules (meanings, norms, habits) and things (symbols, products, tools) people apply or use in daily life. Different items have different ranges. Thus multicultural society and the globalised world are like a storehouse, with items from almost everywhere. Individuals have to work out their identity in an environment which offers more and more different cultural items. To illustrate this approach, this research analyses biographies of young people, some with a migrant background, some without.

This paper sets-out points for discussion presented at a conference workshop. The workshop aimed to engage participants in considering how best to develop children's transcultural competencies. It concludes by arguing that in negotiating their identity children from migrant cultures necessarily develop intercultural competence and this should be positively recognised.

Culture

When we talk about intercultural dialogue, cross-cultural learning or transcultural personalities we may have units in mind, boxes or containers which are closed but can be opened to give entry to "other cultures". We may also have people in mind who represent a particular culture, imagining them to be part of that culture. Moreover, we may identify a culture with a nation state or region (a somehow constituted territory that may be smaller or bigger than a nation state). Hence, we may say that a German visitor to Turkey is somebody who approaches "Turkish" culture, or describe interactions between colleagues from Finland and Italy as intercultural, perhaps suggesting how these can be mutually enriching and ennobling.

No doubt, there is a clear need to define what we mean when we talk about "cultures" and "intercultural dialogue". Let us begin by considering that it is individuals who are communicating, interacting with each other and that through dialogue they are able to learn. When people interact they apply rules. We can imagine rules or rule systems like languages, ethic codes, the definition of beauty, the (different?) roles of male and female, young and old people, political objectives, how to cook a delicious meal, the sense of life, the symbols for love and eternity, the way to drive, to go and to sit, the importance of honour … '. We can also imagine that the rules which are applied in a particular situation might be the same or negligibly different so as not affect the communication "game", but that sometimes, however, there are people involved who play different games, whose rules differ remarkably.

It is obvious as well that people have created or constructed a variety of objects and that they have "cultivated" and changed the natural environment; that there are tools like a plough or a mobile phone, products like hamburgers or port wine, pieces of art like embroidered handkerchiefs or rock music. Those objects are used daily or at least collected and conserved (for example, in a museum). People know how to use these things properly precisely because there are rules linked to their usage.

Cultural items

As those rules and things have to do with culture we can term them as cultural items, and as such consider the following:

There is no reason to presuppose that all items build a closed, balanced and cohesive system.
People change items and items change with use. Moreover, different items may have different presence or prevalence and will not necessarily have the same appearance in space and time or the same usage and users. To say it in a political way: there cannot be one system of cultural items, with culture defined by one boundary; as necessarily congruent with a political system, a territory or the people who live there. The unity of land, people and culture is a myth and as such may be seen as a cultural item in itself.

For each cultural item, be it a rule or an object of daily life (like a tool or product or piece of art) data can be collected.
By asking "What is the range of this item and which people use it?" we can map the appearance of, and design extensions for, for example, a religious tradition, types of craft, music, food etc., but mostly it will be a particular map for each item. Further, if we take a distinguished item like a local festival then a small territory will be mapped. Whereas, if we take a general item, like attitudes towards time, space, equality etc, or a dimension of human behavior like masculinity, individualism or uncertainty avoidance, then a huge territory will be mapped (neglecting the fact that these cultural items cannot be evidenced in terms of yes/no, but only more/less).

Cultural items fulfill particular functions.
Given a particular function (e.g. greeting other people, initiation of the young generation or determining succession through heritage), different performances are equivalent. Hence shaking hands in one culture and hugging in another; the Christian confirmation and the humanistic/socialist "Jugendweihe" (as in the former GDR), can be considered equivalent and one cultural practice can be replaced by the equivalent item. So far, cultural exchange does not disturb the system, but substitutes one item for another.

"Intercultural" situations, i.e. situations in which more than one rule or item is relevant and applicable, are in general open to all ends.
When people facing a new cultural item, like a product (for instance a fruit they do not know) or tool/instrument, they accept it and integrate it in their system if it brings promises of prestige, fits to the habitudes, is deemed to be tasty or useful etc.

Globalization has lead to the spread of products.
Under the auspices of globalization, as many observers state with regret, more and more products (and, interestingly enough, also habitudes, i.e. rules) are getting spread all over the world leading towards a global culture with convergences in daily life. As far as some particulars items are concerned (TV, mobile phones or individualism/liberty etc.), this seems to be the case. We do not notice, however, how many items did not spread in the same way. However, if there is cultural imperialism, it does not succeed everywhere and in all respects. Often enough, ignorance, neglect, resistance, even counter activities can be stated. To give just a small example: Again and again lobbies try to promote a particular sport (e.g. soccer in the US, American football in Europe), but do fail continuously. Matter-of-factly a type of McDonaldisation has happened in the last decades, but at the same time the spread of Italian, Chinese, Turkish and Japanese cuisine was no less successful.

Whereas functional equivalence seems to be prerequisite of cultural exchange, the items themselves are changing or are being changed.
Only recently almost all European states have entered into a single area of higher education through the *Bologna Process*. However, it may be argued that the Bachelor and Master system in Germany or Portugal bear greater similarity to the systems they ought to replace than the model they purport to follow. To continue with our example of the global kitchen from above, it can be argued that while there is a process of adaptation to a diversity of cuisine, be it pizza, chop-souy, sushi, hamburgers or kebabs, these meals differ according to the local food tradition, they do not have the same taste everywhere! Whereas McDonalds in Germany is a location for children, in some other countries it is the meeting point of new businessmen.

Mobility is one vehicle which transports cultural items
A worldwide increase in mobility is evident, including the tourism of the wealthy to distant locations. Associated with this products and services are marketed and delivered worldwide, by means of advertisement the global players are trying to develop a global way of life, even the same "taste" worldwide. In a historical perspective, however, mobility and the exchange of goods is nothing new. Just remember the "discovery" of the Americas or the cultural influence of the Italian republics in the late medieval times. In Germany, for instance, in the late 19th and early 20th century the "orient" was quite fashionable (as the subjects of operas or the tobacco advertisement show).

At any time, even in the era of nation building and nationalism, people moved transnationally.
Artists, scientists, merchants, (religious and political) missionaries, labor migrants transported cultural items and encountered communities with a particularly different set of rules. They have integrated different cultural items in their lives and thus become transcultural personalities. To give two historical examples: One of the most famous German(?) musicians, Georg Friedrich Händel (born in Halle) was strongly influenced by the Italian opera and used to live in England (buried in Westminster London). An important astronomer and expert of geodesy, Georg Wilhelm Struve (born 1793 in Altona near Hamburg), served the Russian tsar; the geodetic arc, called "Struve-Bogen" is nowadays part of the UNESCO world heritage.

At any time people, at least elites, have been fascinated by cultural items they did not use or practice before.

"Exotic" things have always appealed and people have created new communities beyond political borders. "Exile" is the place where people intend to live their existential rules, though outside their original residence – and adopt other items "by the way". For example, the post revolutionary Turkey of Atatürk (Kemal Pascha) hosted in the late 1930s hundreds of German intellectuals who escaped the Nazi-Regime, hence contributing to the "traditionally good relationships" between the two countries

The history of (wo)mankind is nothing else than a continuous exchange of cultural items.

Whatever a "culture" is, it is the result of communication and interaction of people who practice (some) different rules and use (somehow) different products/tools. In short: Culture is exchange.

Individuals

With regard to individuals we can apply these views as follows:

a) We define culture as a multilayered system of rules (meanings, norms, habits) and things (symbols, products, tools) that people apply or use in daily life. There are plenty of those cultural items which have different ranges, can be changed and do change. Individuals learn and share those rules and exchange those things with other people at any time as it is the premise and the result of communication and cooperation.

b) Under these auspices living and acting in a multicultural society and globalised world is just a particular case of communication and cooperation: individuals have to work out their identity in an environment which offers more and more different cultural items than ever.

c) Whereas in a "normal life" rules and objects are changing continuously and everybody has to cope with new cultural items, there are conditions and situations which challenge people in a particular way, in a dramatic way, due to the extent, extension or depth of change brought about by, for example, political revolution, natural sources of life, new and fundamental technologies which have an unavoidable impact on daily life, its rules and tools.

d) From the individual's point of view there are life events which are like revolutions: Migration being a good example. Within few days the conditions of life change fundamentally, new rules and tools demand to be applied. These dramatic changes, remarkably enough, are sometimes the result or conclusion of "real" revolutions: imagine people who have to escape from dictatorship, as they are persecuted by the new powers. Refugees have lost the security of daily life including all its rules and tool and are challenged, mostly threatened by all the endeavors they have to undertake in order to survive, to escape, to reach a Refugio – which is, as far as asylum seekers in EU are concerned, secure only

for a certain time and far from representing the values Europe pretends to stand for.

Identity

In terms of identity, migration demands much work, the work for building identity, a new identity and self-concept negotiated with the rules and tools of daily life.

Children are said to be able to learn easily how to move within and deeper into the "culture" they are confronted with. However, migration is normally not their choice, it is the choice of their parents and they are taken away from their childhood environment by a sudden decision they were not involved in. Hence migration can be a dramatic, even traumatic experience.

Under these auspices children have to build up a new, more or less cohesive system of rules which give their live orientation and perspectives. They have to combine the demands of their parents and the demands by their new environment, including school.

Hence they develop the competences of transcultural personalities who learn how to act successfully within an environment in which some rules are different.

This work children do, these competences they acquire are not acknowledged sufficiently. Only now immigrants report how they experienced this situation and how they managed to "survive", to remain a cohesive personality. All children have to do this work, immigrants even more.

Example:

Autobiographical remarks by Feridun Zaimoglu

References:

Wolfgang Berg (ed.): Transnational und transkulturell. Lebenswege verändern. Aachen 2007