

# Critical Interculturality



# Critical Interculturality:

*Lectures and Notes*

By

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Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Critical Interculturality: Lectures and Notes  
Series: Post-intercultural Communication and Education Series

By Fred Dervin

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

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

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9495-8  
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9495-1

*To the memory of Regis, Robert and Wellamo.  
To Céline, Eija, Pirkko, Stéphanie, and Véronique. Be strong!  
To Pauli for the years of happiness, past, present and future.  
And to A. D. L., welcome to my family!*



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## INTRODUCTION

*“A Chinese proverb: ‘when one dog begins barking at a shadow, ten thousand make it into a reality’—an epigraph to any commentary on ideologies.”*

E. M. Cioran (1973)

This book assembles seven previously unpublished talks given in 2014-2016. The theme of the book is the mysterious and mystic notion of the “intercultural.” This mythical/magic word is somewhat reminiscent of the precious artefact, *the Sampo*, from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century work of epic poetry from Finland entitled the *Kalevala*. The Sampo is “*the mill of fortune which wise men, since the beginning of things, have sought to invent. It is the magic mill which grinds out all sorts of treasures and gives wealth and power to its possessor. One has only to whisper his wishes to it and they will all come true*” (Baldwin, 2006: 5). The Sampo can produce flour, gold and salt out of thin air. Like this element of Finnish mythology, the “intercultural” is often of indeterminate type which we hope can bring good fortune, especially in the fields of education and communication.

I consider the chapters that compose this book as contributions to *critical interculturality*, understood here as a never-ending process of ideological struggle against solid identities, unfair power differentials, discrimination and hurtful (and often disguised) discourses of (banal) nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism and various forms of -ism. Critical interculturality is also about the *now* and *then* of interaction, beyond generalizations of contexts and interlocutors. The “doctrine” of *desa-kala-patra* of the Hindu community in Bali (Indonesia) describes very well this understanding of interculturality (Herbst, 1997). *Desa* refers to situation, *kala*, time and *patra*, the subject. No *desa* that we experience is similar, neither are *kala* and *patra*. They change, evolve and adapt *ad infinitum*.

This book is not always a “feel good” book. The different chapters explore issues and problems with the very notion of interculturality. The late Z. Bauman’s answer to the questions (cited in Bunting, 2003) “*Why do I write books? Why do I think? Why should I be passionate?*”, “*Because things could be different, they could be made different*”, sums up well my long-term intentions with this book: the way we think and work with interculturality could/must be made different. Recent years have witnessed

an increase in the notion being battered on macro- and micro-levels, manipulated and used for what I consider to be evil purposes (eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, democracy-talk, etc.). It is thus urgent to drain this marsh... And to rid interculturality of its invisible daggers which can do more harm than good.

*Critical Interculturality* is quite different from my other books—or other books on interculturality for that matter. While remaining academic, the book delves into the personal too. My different and multiple voices can be heard throughout the book: in the lectures that I have given around the world but also, and especially, in the notes on interculturality that I have collected during my professional trips around the world in 2016. I repeat: *my multiple voices*. When I transcribed the lectures and copied my notes on my computer, I was often intrigued by what I was saying/writing. *Was it really me speaking? Were these my own biases, ideologies, and contradictions? Would I say something the same way today? Would I rant about the same things?* I often experienced “internal exoticism” (Guillaume, 2008) in the process: I was caught in my own role and observed myself as an “other.” It is rare, in academia, to witness such positions on paper.

My lectures were, of course, not improvised. I had PowerPoint presentations that guided me. Yet lectures given “live” are less formal, somewhat more relaxed and prone to improvisations, reformulations, and asides. The reader might get confused by these aspects. I consider this to be part of critical interculturality.

In offering this book to my readers, I agree with Hannah Arendt (cited in Weisseberg, 2000: 22) when she argues that “*I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say.*” My ways of thinking about and problematizing interculturality as a critical “thing” rely very much on my life experiences, my successes and failures, and my encounters with many and varied others.

This book is based on lectures delivered around the world (Canada, China, Finland, Russia, the USA). The transcription of the lectures is as literal as possible, with added punctuation and division into paragraphs. The language is sometimes hesitant, sometimes somewhat clumsy. A few edits have been made—e.g. (...) indicates that parts of the lectures were removed for the sake of coherence. Each chapter can be read independently however they do complement each other. To make the lectures easier to read, each lecture is preceded by a brief introductory paragraph. I have also added footnotes to clarify some points that were made during the

lectures. As most lectures deal with the same topic (interculturality), the reader will find a certain amount of repetitions. Please consider them as clarifications and as a way of reinforcing my arguments.

The notes are written as they appeared in my diaries. Some might consider them as vanity, or mere self-indulgent, navel-gazing introspection. To me they represent an important part of my identity as a thinker and scholar. It is through these notes (and the strange arguments and explanations that I share from time to time) that I am able to reflect on my research. My readers can use them for their own teaching of interculturality or for their own self-reflexivity.

I am hoping that this book can fill a lacuna by helping students, practitioners, scholars and decision makers to understand the complexities of critical interculturality. Another hope is that the ideas in these pages will stimulate discussion about the challenges ahead of us.

*Sanur (Indonesia), 6<sup>th</sup> January 2017*



# CHAPTER ONE

## PROBLEMATISING CRITICAL INTERCULTURALITY

*In May 2016, I was invited to speak at Cornell's Third Internationalization Symposium, "The Globally Engaged Campus: Defining and Redefining Where We Are." The aim of the symposium was to explore opportunities for meaningful international experiences. My talk discusses the concept of intercultural competence in study abroad, a topic that I have been working on for the past fifteen years. I present my own understanding of interculturality and propose a working definition of intercultural competence. This was my second talk about the topic in the US in spring 2016.*

Good morning, everyone. It's a real pleasure to be here today. Thank you so much to the organizers for having me. It's a dream come true. You have such a beautiful campus. It's always a pleasure to be in the US, one of my favourite countries in the world these days... I say "*these days*" because, of course, I believe that we do change interests in places as we get older... just like art and music.

Today I'm going to talk about *Intercultural competence, study abroad, and the global-minded campus—a proposal*.

I work in a department of teacher education in Finland, and my position is that of a professor of multicultural education. When I was appointed four years ago, I was somewhat "traumatized" by my new title because I started my work more or less at the time when multiculturalism was said to be "dead" in Britain and Germany.<sup>1</sup> And before my appointment at Helsinki, I never used the word "multicultural." I would always talk about the "intercultural." I went to see my Head, and I said, "*How come I'm not intercultural education? Why this label of 'multicultural'?*" And she replied, "*Intercultural what?*" She'd never heard of the word *intercultural*. She added, "*anyway, they all sound the*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Angela Merkel's and David Cameron's famous assertions from 2010 about the "failure and death of multiculturalism" in Europe.

*same.*” I was a bit frustrated at the time.

Today, to be honest, it doesn’t matter. What I’ve realized from my five years at Helsinki is that regardless of the label that you use—*intercultural*, *multicultural*, *transcultural*, *global*, *cross-cultural*, and so on and so forth—as long as you know what you mean and you give real meaning to these words, it doesn’t matter what you use.

People always ask me, “*what’s the difference between intercultural and multicultural?*” And I often reply that it depends on your viewpoint. It depends on where you’re situated in the world. It depends on your political beliefs. It depends on the ideologies that cross your mind. As such there are people who talk about *transcultural* who mean the same as when I say *intercultural*. But there are other people who say *intercultural* and mean something completely different from what I mean when I say *intercultural*.

### Framing my talk

Let me frame now this talk with two quotes that summarise, I think, my position.

First a quote from Confucius<sup>2</sup>. There’s a lot of talk about Confucius these days, because of our friends from China. And of course, we are—when I say *we are*, I mean maybe Finland and Europe, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it was the same here in the USA—torn apart between admiration for the Chinese but also fear of the Chinese. Because they’re taking over. I see it as a good thing. I mean, power has shifted throughout history. We do have so many stereotypes about the Chinese. And when I say *we*, I mean myself included. I’m not a superhuman. I’m just a normal human being. And we often use Confucius to talk about the Chinese.

What’s interesting but alarming about Confucius is that you can use his ideas and make him say whatever, in a way. And make him justify your sometimes potentially—and I’m going to say a bad word—‘racist’ comments about the Chinese. About the fact that Chinese people are not *autonomous*, that Chinese people are not *critical thinkers*, that Chinese people are not this or that. I reread *The Analects* recently. Very few people have read *The Analects*. And I made a list of quotes from Confucius that contradicted the way we often use Confucius in research or in teaching in the “West.” And I found this one which I have never seen used by “Westerners” to explain the behaviours or thoughts of Chinese students

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<sup>2</sup> Confucius (551 BC—479 BC) was a Chinese philosopher, teacher and politician. He is well known for *The Analects*, a compilation of his teachings.

and scholars: “*A scholar who cherishes the love of comfort is not fit to be deemed a scholar.*” That’s how I see my position as a scholar, as a thinker, as an intellectual, involved in research on interculturality, and also as a human being, in a sense. I refuse to cherish comfort...

The other quote is from Michel Foucault<sup>3</sup> (1988: 154) who reminds us that “*a critique is a matter of pointing out what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept, rest.*” This is another way of seeing my work on interculturality. I examine assumptions, our assumptions as researchers, the assumptions of decision-makers, the assumptions of administrators, the assumptions of students, the assumptions of the media, the assumptions of people. There are quite many assumptions about the benefits of study abroad in terms of interculturality, and that’s what I would like to talk about here today.

When I say the word the ‘intercultural’ I put myself in a category called renewed intercultural—or interculturality, actually—*renewed interculturality*. This is a global movement that is increasing and that is represented by such scholars as Adrian Holliday, Ingrid Piller, Prue Holmes, Zhu Hua, Xiangyun Du, or the late Regis Machart who are based in countries like Australia, China, Denmark, Finland, Great Britain, and Malaysia. It’s still very much Eurocentric in a sense, but I’ve managed to cooperate with people based outside Europe who share similar ideologies about interculturality.

## Problems with intercultural competence

What is interculturality? Camus is said to have uttered these words: “*To name things badly is to add to the misfortunes of the world.*” (He probably never said that by the way. But nevermind, everybody quotes him, but you can’t find the source—which is a bad example of academic—how shall I say—ethics and honesty...). All the people that I’ve mentioned from renewed interculturality, this is how they feel in a way about this word “intercultural”. That it badly names phenomena, and that, in many cases, it can contribute to bad things happening in the world.

The concept of intercultural competence does exactly the same. First of all it is very polysemic: it means so many different things to so many different people. But at the same time, it can be very empty. People sometimes use the word “intercultural competence” without knowing what they are talking about. They have a fuzzy idea of what it means.

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<sup>3</sup> French philosopher (1926-1981).

And we could say the same about the word “Global-minded.” We just had a global-minded survey in Finland to assess our students who studied abroad. And when I met the people who did the survey, I asked them: “*What does global-minded mean? Or global-mindedness?*” They had no idea. They just said, “*Well, that’s what they use in Canada these days. So we thought, you know, we’re going to use it. Because in Canada, they’re very good.*”

Intercultural competence as a concept is also becoming old and tired. When people ask me, “*What is it that you work on?*”, depending on the country or the place where I am, they might say, “*Oh, do you still talk about intercultural competence? Is it still something valuable today?*”

It is also somewhat very Eurocentric and Americano-centric. Three names pop up all the time when we talk about intercultural competence and study abroad—I call them the ‘trio’—Byram, Bennett, and Dearsdorff. Two Americans, one Brit. And they are people who work for institutions that have a lot of symbolic power: The Intercultural Development Research Institute (Bennett), The Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) and NAFSA Association of International Educators (Dearsdorff), and the Council of Europe (Byram). For example, the Council of Europe is very much involved in creating the idea of intercultural citizenship. It’s a very political decision to do that, especially at times when we are getting an increasing number of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe. And they’ve even decided to add the word “democratic competence” to the intercultural. They talk about intercultural and democratic competencies. They have this very biased idea that democracy is in danger and that we need to make sure that people who come to Europe know about democracy. The Council of Europe believes in a way that the “West”, Europe, invented democracy.

There’s a great book by Jack Goody, an anthropologist. The book is called *The Theft of History* (2006), in which he goes through all these wonderful ideas that we pretend are ‘ours’ and shows by going back in time that, actually, they’re not ours, they are the others’ as well, in a sense. *The Theft of History*—I love this idea. Recognizing this theft (and/or *mélange*, mixing of ideas) should be central to intercultural competence.

Another problem about intercultural competence is that the boundary between education and business is very thin. The work of Bennett—Milton Bennett, whom you might know very well—is very problematic in this sense. If you want to use his scales/surveys for your studies, for instance, to assess the level of your students in terms of ethnocentrism, et cetera, you have to pay. Now, of course, nothing is free these days. I don’t live on the moon; I do realize that money matters. But I have some issues



when, for example, a PhD candidate in Finland uses Bennett's model to assess the integration of migrant children in our classrooms when the model was actually more or less designed for the business world. And I have the same issues when this is used for study abroad in a sense.

Let me continue. Intercultural competence is also often presented as a technology, a miracle that's going to help us to face or deal with—and between inverted commas—"cultural difference." I'll come back to this word later.

And, of course, there's a trend. The problem that we have as "renewed interculturalists" is that the idea of intercultural competence is overly dependent on the term "culture," on comparisons of national cultures, and very crude contrasts. For instance, the comparison between what we call *individualistic* and *collectivistic* cultures. It's a bias considering that individualism is in a sense an important notion that emerged from European modernity. And that, by claiming that we, the "West", that we "Westerners"—whatever that means again<sup>4</sup>—are individualistic versus the Chinese, for instance, who are collectivistic. I'm not the only one to have said that, of course, *all societies are collectivistic*. There's no way we can exist without the other. And of course, we're so naïve that we don't notice that Facebook is the best symbol of collectivism, in a sense. A different kind of collectivism compared to 50 years ago, but it is collectivism. *I exist for the other, through the other, and with the other*. And there's no way that it's all by myself that I will exist and create who I am.

## Beliefs about interculturality and study abroad

In Finland, the idea of intercultural competence is used in a very loose way. And it's very often a victim of what I would call *uncritical groupthink*, where there's the systematic idea that when you study abroad, you're going to be more open-minded, you're going to be more tolerant, you're not going to have any stereotypes about anything anymore. And so basically, you're not going to be a human being anymore...

About tolerance—by the way, I forgot to say, but I'm here to irritate you. Sorry about that. That's on purpose, you know. Because we want to talk, we want "blood." We don't want just to agree on things...—I think that there's an issue about tolerance. That's a word that we put forward all the time at the European Union level. We need to be tolerant, we need to

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<sup>4</sup> I use the words the "West" and "Westerners" between inverted commas as I am not completely sure what these words refer to. Geographically: *Where does the "West" start? Where does it finish? Who decides?*

develop tolerance. But I find tolerance to be patronizing. Tolerance is not enough. We need to go beyond the idea of tolerance to create encounters. Tolerance is about saying, “OK, you’re welcome here. I will tolerate your culture, your language, your whatever. But you need to remember that you’re a guest here.” And, in a sense, “my ways are still better than yours.” Of course, these are all meta-discourses. But that’s often what hides behind this word of “tolerance.” It’s a beautiful idea, but it’s a very idealistic and politically manipulated idea, especially at the EU level. I wouldn’t be surprised if that was the case in other parts of the world today.

A few months ago, my international office asked me to give a talk to students who were going to live abroad. And they imposed a title on me. The title was “*The benefits of study abroad.*” I’m a thinker, I’m a scholar; I’m not a robot, I’m not a machine. I hate it when people give me a title. They asked for an abstract, so I sent in an abstract. And the title that I suggested was “*Interculturality and study abroad—not an obvious combination,*” with a question mark. Here’s the answer I got back from the person who invited me: “*I would like to ask about the title. Why did you change it? The way it reads now is that you are skeptical (sic) about it being worthwhile to go do study abroad. Since internationality [I think she meant internationalization] is high on the agenda at the moment, I would hope to see the program promote a positive view towards international mobility.*” I’m happy to be positive but I don’t want to lie. I’m not a promoter. I’m not a businessman. I’m paid to do research and propose alternative views to make a very small contribution, potentially, to the world based on my own ideologies and those of my peers. So there are ready-made discourses and assumptions about e.g. the links between study abroad and interculturality. And this often leads to romantic visions.

Recently we published an article about the imaginaries shared by international students about interculturality and study abroad in Finland (Härkönen & Dervin, 2016; see Dervin, 2008). And these are divided into three categories—*behaving*, *learning*, and *post-sojourn benefits*. Let me just take a few of them. In terms of behaving, when you ask students, *so what is interculturality in relation to study abroad?* they tend to reply: *you mustn’t meet people from your own country, but only meet foreigners*—whatever that means. With, of course, the typical hierarchy that I’ve described in my work—on top of the hierarchy are the so-called “local” people. (Again: whatever that means because, of course, not all local people are positioned the same way. You may have a “local” passport, but still not be considered as a ‘local.’) For example, recently, a Finnish university recruited tutors for international students. And it said “Finns only.” And I contacted their international office and I said, “*Finns only*—

*do you mean people who hold a Finnish passport, or what did you mean?"* They replied and confirmed, "native Finns." I wrote back: "there are no native Finns. I mean, Finland was created not even a century ago. And this place is not your place. I mean, you came from somewhere else, like everybody else." So, I mean, this is discrimination, in a sense. They never replied, because they didn't like what I was saying.

Another belief about the intercultural and study abroad is that you mustn't speak your own language. You have to use the target language—whatever that means, again: in many countries, there's not a target language, but target languages. How do you choose the target language? Well, that's usually related to the powerful language that is presented as being *the* language to be learnt and used.

In terms of learning, there's a strong belief that you have to learn about 'other cultures.' And when you ask people what they mean by this they're not too sure. They have to learn about themselves. They have to find their identity. That's something that comes back all the time from students who study abroad. You know, "*we're here to find out who we are,*" et cetera. Probably some of it is true. Although I'm not quite sure what it means to try to find one's identity. I mean, I'm still not sure what that means.

And in terms of learning, that's something we don't hear very much about in Finland. But the work that we did for example in England shows that so many students, international students, believe that they should learn to speak like a "native speaker." The problem is, *what on earth is a native speaker today? Do we mean somebody who speaks with a Scottish accent, somebody who comes from Leicester, somebody who comes from Wales? Somebody who comes from...—an immigrant who happened to have become British at some point?* I mean, these are very political choices. But we still brainwash students, in a way, to make them believe that they have to learn a language the way it is spoken by "native speakers"—usually represented by the elite population. We've done quite a lot of work on English as a lingua franca, for instance, in study abroad. And it's fascinating to see the negative attitudes that so many students have towards the English spoken by the other, meaning non-native speakers. In 2016, I think that's quite extraordinary.

And about the post-sojourn benefits and the intercultural. The usual rhetoric of "*yeah, I've become a cosmopolitan.*" I am not sure what that means. "*I've become a citizen of the world. I love this idea—citizen of the world. I'm a better person. I've become more tolerant. I don't have any stereotypes about the others,* et cetera. *And I now respect diversity.*" I find the idea of respecting diversity troubling. Because, first of all, I believe that respect is patronizing. We need more than mere respect. And, second

of all: diversity. Who are we talking about when we say *diversity*? That's a term that's becoming very popular in Finland. I think it's thanks to *diversity-talk* in the US, because that's a term you use a lot. But when I ask people, what do you mean, "diversity" (see Chapter Five)? In Finland, diversity means "the immigrant." But not all immigrants. It means a black, Asian person, basically somebody who is non-white—not the white majority—or Russian, because of the history between Russia and Finland. But if you come from America, if you come from Germany, or whatever, you're not considered an immigrant in a sense.

### Where do all these ideas come from?

We researchers are guilty for a lot of these very strange ideas. We've created, over the years since the 1950s, what I call *pseudo-theories*. And I'm going to be mean, but many of them are *pollutants*. For instance, the "culture shockification" of study abroad. "*Culture shock. I've experienced culture shock.*" Really? Tell me about it. The *w* and *u* curves<sup>5</sup> which, these days, so many students know about. When they talk about their experience, they're like, "*oh yeah, you know, it's like the w.*" And I had this student once who said, "*it's like the u curve, you know?*" And I'm like, "*u curve?*" But, "*you know, this idea that you start— it's the honeymoon, and then culture shock, and then adjustment, and then et cetera.*" This is a model from the 1960s, by the way, that we're still using in 2016.

The Hofstedian legacy (Holliday, 2010) should also be held responsible. Geert Hofstede<sup>6</sup> has been classifying cultures in different categories, without realizing that through the categories, he's actually imposing positive and negative aspects to different parts of the world.

There's also linguacentrism. We've created so many ideas about language through teaching languages, for example. "*This language is more logical than other languages. This language is more difficult than other languages,*" et cetera. These, of course, don't mean—they mean something subjectively—but objectively, that doesn't make sense. I mean, when we get foreign students in Finland, they don't really have to study Finnish, because we tell them that it's the most difficult language in the world. First, how can you make this comment? Because, of course, it will depend

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<sup>5</sup> These two hypothesis models, proposed by Lysgaard (1955) and Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), describe adaptation development in a foreign country, moving from e.g. a "honeymoon" period to "culture shock."

<sup>6</sup> Dutch social psychologist (born in 1928), famous for his cultural dimensions model.

on your motivations, the languages you know. And second, I mean, what a wonderful sign of linguacentrism—the belief that our language is better, more complex than others.

Word-of-mouth and artistic productions have also imposed certain ideas about the benefits of study abroad in terms of interculturality. There are quite a few films about study abroad that sort of embellish and provide us with beautiful, non-political, non-problematic descriptions.

One ad I came across in Hong Kong said “*study abroad, an educational opportunity of a lifetime.*” “*A whole world of opportunities awaits you.*” “*Why study abroad? One, to travel the world. Two, to broaden your worldview and perspective. Develop your cultural sensitivity, learn to be independent and resilient, discover yourself and the world.*” The Erasmus exchange programmes are, in this regard, one of the best propaganda machines in Europe. There’s hardly any criticisms about them in EU documents or in the voices of people who promote study abroad.

## Culture

Let me start to wrap up. Here’s my proposal for intercultural competence in study abroad. I’m not going to go through the idea of culture. I would just want to mention that there’s been a lot of literature in anthropology, critical literature on culture. For example: *Contesting Culture* by Baumann (1996), *Generous Betrayal* by Wikan (2002), *Seeing Culture Everywhere* by Breidenbach and Nyíri (2011). These scholars basically are saying that there’s an overemphasis on the idea of culture, especially national culture, and that it is very problematic. Because it’s not about the inter-, really, but it’s only about what people represent through their culture. I do believe—and I’m not the only one—that this use, and the misuse, and abuse of the word “culture,” especially in terms of national, and, for example, Eastern, Western culture is very problematic. Because we are ignorant, in many cases, of the debates, the critical debates, that have taken place around the concept in anthropology. I love this phrase by Eriksen (2001) who says, “*the concept of culture is a deceptively cosy blanket.*” You know, you’re cold, et cetera. You don’t know what’s going on. Well, culture is, in a sense, easy to put forward. It protects you somehow. But in many cases, of course, it may not have anything to do with culture. It might be power relations. And for example, Baumann—Gerd, the late anthropologist, not Zygmunt, the late sociologist—in his book, *Contesting Culture*, worked in the suburbs of London where he looked at how people were using this word of “culture” to make sense of their lives, to make sense of their encounters with others. And what he showed very convincingly is that

when somebody was talking, for instance, about an Asian informant, they would explain their behaviours and their thoughts by referring to their ethnicity, culture, or their “community.” So the fact that a lot of the things that they do, they’re also very much responsible, personally, for what they’re doing, or interpersonally for what they are doing. And culture becomes a cocoon, or an overly determining force, which can be very problematic. Piller (2011: 172) goes even further than I do. She says: “*Culture is sometimes nothing more than a convenient and lazy explanation.*” That’s an interesting idea. Think about this. And we’ve published a book recently called *Culture as an Excuse* (Dervin & Machart, 2015), where we’ve looked at different situations where people talk about their culture, or use their culture as some sort of alibi for what they are doing.

Interculturality or intercultural competence is very often about comparing cultures. And comparing cultures, we could say, is *normal*. I’m not sure what normal is, but it’s part of us in a sense. Of course, the problems are the followings—when we compare cultures, we’re very much influenced by our own ideologies, for instance, by ethnocentrism—this idea that our ways are better than their ways. There are cases when we believe that “their” ways are better than “our” ways. But it’s usually a minor phenomenon.

Comparing cultures also sometimes creates false boundaries between people. Because we only look at difference. And yes, there are differences between people. And even between people from within one’s own family. But we also have a lot of commonalities. And what I’m interested in, as a scholar working on intercultural competence, is to train people to work within the continuum of similarity and difference. To oscillate between these two, and not just to rush towards difference. I mean, difference is obvious. It’s easy to notice difference. I can look at each and every one of you in this room and make assumptions about where you come from, et cetera. But in order to spot similarity—first of all, I need to sit and talk to you, and spend time with you. The problem is, these days, we don’t have much time.

Let me give an example. I just had a wonderful discussion there at the poster session with a student. It took—I mean, we spoke for about a quarter of an hour—and it took, let’s say, nearly until the end, for us to negotiate meaning and understanding. Because we were saying the same things, but in different ways. Most of the time, because we don’t have time, we just take the words that we hear for granted, and then move on. Fifteen minutes is not enough, of course. But in this case, it’s better than nothing.

And when we compare cultures, we make explicit, implicit, moralistic judgments. As scholars and as people working on internationalization, we need to be extremely careful. Because sometimes what we say about the other culture, or other cultures, can give the impression that we are better, and that they are worse, that we are more civilized, they are less civilized. I could spend hours talking about politeness to illustrate. It's amazing how we create categories of countries or cultures that are politer than others. I said I love the US earlier. I do. But every time I come here, it takes maybe a day to get used to the omnipresent question, "*how are you doing, Sir?*" I remember the first time I came to the US, somebody said, "*hi, how are you doing, sir?*" in a shop. I just went, "*hum?*" And the guy looked at me—"*oh, I'm just asking you how you're doing.*" And I replied, "*uh, what am I supposed to say? I don't know. I'm OK, I guess.*" "*Oh, good. OK.*" And then one day, I thought I would be honest about how I'm feeling to see what happens to my interlocutor. So basically, I went into a shop, this guy, very smiley and nice, "*oh, hello! How are you doing, sir?*" I replied: "*Well, I'm not well. I just heard that my mom has cancer, and I feel really depressed about it*"—and the guy just went, "*OK, well, that will be \$20. I'm sorry*". I mean, you know, obviously, I had "broken" a social contract. For many Finns this shows that Americans are polite. While Finns, "*we're not polite*", because when you go to a shop in Finland, you go, "*hei. Hello*". You get the stuff, you get the money, "*Kiitos. Thank you*". And then "*hei, hei. Goodbye*". But look at the process. It's the same process. You know—*how are you doing, Sir?* It's basically looking at you and saying, well, I saw you. I know you're here. I accept that you're here, and I'm telling you you're here, and I respect your presence, in a sense. In Finland, it could just be eye contact. But the result is the same. And we cannot claim that Americans are politer than Finns. And you can hear from Finnish students—very often, when they talk about "Finnish culture," they say, "*oh, we're not polite at all.*" So it scares foreigners off, because, they're like, "*oh my God! What am I going to do? They're not polite in this country.*" And then, of course, foreign students go back home and they spread the idea that Finns are not polite. That's problematic, of course.

At the moment there's a trend to produce leaflets to help international students to "integrate." With my colleague and friend Heidi Layne, we have analysed such a booklet called "Oh, behave!" which is used at some universities in Finland (Dervin & Layne, 2013). This is an excerpt from this booklet: "*Whereas in many cultures, people are supposed to follow instructions of teachers and supervisors, Finns are encouraged to solve problems independently and take initiative when needed. Thus while young people in many cultures live in a very protected and supervised life,*

*students in Finland are very independent and take responsibility for their studies. This is another area where foreign students also get easily confused.*” Horrifying, isn’t it? Look at how we move from “*in many cultures, people*” to “*young people in many cultures*” to suddenly “*foreign students*.” Of course, there’s a lot of ethnocentrism in there, which places implicitly Finns above others. Just like all students in the world, Finnish students are good and bad, hard-working and lazy, etc. Recently, a student sent me an email, because I had set a book to read which was 93 pages long. And he had counted the number of credits. There’s a calculator for the students where they can put the number of credits and check the number of pages you can set for the given credit points. And it tells them, depending on the language, how many pages they’re allowed to read. And he noticed that he was only allowed to read 89 pages. And he was wondering if he had to read the extra pages, because that was not compulsory. *Is this autonomy?* I don’t know. Of course, that doesn’t mean that all students would behave the same way in Finland.

So basically, when I think about culture and the intercultural, I’m not really interested in behaviours, but a lot more in the meta-level of discussions. Because, of course, there are rules, and there are things you can do, you can’t do. Although, of course, sometimes we change these rules depending on the context, (in-)direct pressure from others and the impression(s) we want to make. And we behave in different ways, because we’re not “robots.” I’m more interested in the ontological side of culture: how culture helps people to talk about their realities, the nature of their being and becoming.

So, for instance, some of the questions that we would ask in relation to critical interculturality would be: *Who has the power and the authority to define someone’s culture? Who is allowed to question these definitions? Are discourses on culture representative of a group of people? What do people try to do when they talk about their culture and the others? Who do they include and exclude? What do they do to others when they talk about their culture?* For instance, the typical comment, “*You can’t understand—you’re not from my culture.*” What’s really hiding behind that comment? Or: “*sorry, it can’t be translated in other languages, because there’s no equivalent.*” This is in a sense patronizing because I believe that if we take the time, we can explain things. But also, if we have the right linguistic competencies.

There’s a word in Finnish, for example, that we always put forward to say that we are different from other nations. It’s the word “*sisu*.” *Sisu* is something that was created during the Second World War to motivate the Finnish troops. We were being invaded by Russia. So we invented the idea



that Finnish people are very resistant, very persevering—you know, that they fight against all odds. So we use this term “*sisu*” to describe Finns. And today, it is used by nation branding—Finnish nation branders—to determine how Finnish people are. Now, if you speak to a lot of Finns, they would say, you can’t translate it into English. You can’t explain it. It’s something typically Finnish... This is self-aggrandising and untrue... And you’ve probably all heard of “*keep calm and carry on*.” We’ve seen it everywhere. *Keep calm and drink coffee. Keep calm and whatever, whatever, and go abroad, and so on and so forth.* It’s the same idea. And interestingly, this was coined at the very same time as *sisu* during the Second World War, because people were being bombed in England. So it was like, “*OK, you guys, it’s tricky, but go on. Just carry on with your life.*” We always want to look at these things from different perspectives.

### Where do we go from here?

After all this, you’re probably wondering, so where do we go from here? What is intercultural competence? I don’t know what intercultural competence is, but I have some ideas. Based—again—on my own ideologies, my own beliefs, my research, but also, my life experience. And that’s something that we need to recognize. There are too many scholars who go up there, they throw Hofstede, Bennett, et cetera but they’re not part of what they saying. I’m sorry—I have experienced a lot of stuff, like all of you here. And I can’t just leave it behind and pretend that that does not have an impact on my research.

Something interesting is *intersectionality* although it is becoming a cliché these days. I mean, it’s got a not so long history. But in intercultural education and study abroad it is still unexplored. The idea that when we look at intercultural encounters, of course, we can look at race, the impact of race, ethnicity, or culture. But we also need to look at other aspects, such as the socioeconomics, power relations, politico-historical categories, the linguistic background of the people. You know that depending on your accent, depending on your origins, you might be treated very differently from others.

I think it is thus important to look for undertones and nuances, rather than generalizations when it comes to interculturality. But we’re also interested in what the postmodern sociologist Maffesoli (1996) calls—I love this term—*the collective ego/individualism*. A lot of approaches to intercultural competence are very individualistic in the sense that we only look at one individual. But what the individual does is related very much to what they do in a given context with specific people and with the

different voices—and I’m not mad, hopefully—different voices that they have in their heads about what’s happening when they meet other people. So intercultural competence is really about *I + others*, but also *Is*—the different *Is* that are in myself and that are intervening in the interaction that I’m having with the other.

Furthermore, the aspect of power is essential. There’s no way we can work on intercultural competence without problematizing power. Because whatever we do on a daily basis... whatever we—I mean, whether it’s things we say, the impressions that we’re giving—is related to power relations between us and the other. I think it’s urgent to move away from very individualistic approaches where, for example, I’m going to assess your intercultural competence, so I’m going to give you an interview. Or I’m going to ask you to talk to someone. I’m going to observe how you behave, and I’m going to give you a grade. No, that doesn’t make sense. I mean, I think that most of us don’t really have intercultural competence. Or sometimes we do, sometimes we don’t. I would give a grade to people who are working together. That would still be unfair, because I’m here, taking part in the interaction by observing them. So, of course, I have an influence on what these people are doing.

To finish. If you asked me to define intercultural competence, I would be tempted to say that I don’t want to do that. But of course, I have to make a proposal. This is my proposal. It’s a work in progress. It will never be finished. And I wish that when we define intercultural competence, we would keep reminding people that we’re going to change it because there’s no end-product for these issues. This is what I would say: *It’s about “becoming aware of, recognizing, pushing through, presenting/defending, and questioning brackets assumptions about one’s identity or identification, and diverse diversity (...).”* Now, the idea of diverse diversities is to counter the use of the word diversity in this very simple way that diversity is only the other. *“(...) as well as those of others. And re-negotiating them in a ‘satisfactory’”*—and note, I put *satisfactory* between inverted commas, because I don’t believe in this. I don’t know what it means, but I can’t seem to find something else—*“manner with and for our interlocutors in specific context, ad infinitum.”*

Thank you.

## Questions & answers

*AUDIENCE:* Thank you. The word “tolerance”—reflect on it with regard—or *vis-à-vis* sensitivity. I also would like you to reflect and talk about—in one of your writings, you mentioned something about

competencies instead of one competence. Could you talk about that please?

*FRED DERVIN:* Sure. Thank you so much. Very good questions. Can I start with the second one, which is the easiest? Competencies—yeah, I've used the idea of competencies as well to reflect on the idea that first of all, sometimes, the idea of intercultural competence gives you the impression that there's a goal that you can reach, and that there's a direction. There's path to follow. And that, in a sense, in many models, you can find it and reach its end. Of course, that's impossible. Because I claim that intercultural competence is very much about—it's very contextual. It's very transactional. So depending on who are we talking to, depending on our mood, depending on the context, et cetera, sometimes, you might have the impression that you are very competent. Sometimes you might have the impression that you're not. So by putting the word in the plural, in a sense, what I wanted to say, or to claim, was that we need to see it from a more pluralistic perspective.

The second question about tolerance and sensitivity. Now, that sounds like a Jane Austen novel, actually. No. I mean, seriously, it's a very tricky question. The problem about sensitivity is that you're still dealing with interactions. And you can't really know—I mean, of course, sometimes we have a good impression—but you can't really know what's happening in the other person's head. So sometimes, you might believe that you were very good at being sensitive to certain issues. But maybe the other, your interlocutor, was actually not very impressed by what you said or did. And, of course, there are things that we can be very sensitive to.

I'm a human being, also. And I know that I am very unpredictable. That I am an actor, like everyone. And the older I get, the less I want to be an actor. The more power I get through my work, through my position, the more I can afford to do this. But of course, there are many people who don't have that sort of power. And who wouldn't dare to question, who wouldn't dare to go that far sometimes, because they don't have the authority. I have some issues with my doctoral students, for example. Because they train through me—so they are “killers,” as you can imagine. But I really have to train them to shut up sometimes. You know, the other day, one of my students sent a long, really aggressive email on a list about something—she was really annoyed, because there was a new position opening in my faculty. And the advertisement was only in Finnish. And we have a lot of doctoral students who do not speak Finnish—so she wrote and said, *“again, that's unfair, blah, blah, blah.”* And I wrote to her and I said, *“please, if you want to get a position one day, just shut up, OK? When you're in a situation of power, please, yeah, you can do it. Or you can go and talk to the dean, face-to-face, but not by email.”* I don't know

if I answered your question...

*AUDIENCE:* Thanks for the presentation. Thank you. I was just wondering if—I took an American Sign Language class—a couple of them actually. And the woman who taught it was deaf. And she said, for the deaf community, traveling in other countries doesn't feel very different than being in their own country. And I wanted to know if this kind of—just by you shaking your head like that—I guess it reinforces what you're saying. But can you expand on that a little bit more?

*FRED DERVIN:* Thank you so much. It's the sort of work I would love to do. I would love to do that. Please look at the last point I had there. *Training for the intercultural should be out there at home as well.* Because, of course, the phenomena that I'm referring to here they don't just take place when you cross a national border, when you're talking to somebody from the outside, in a sense. But it also happens within our communities. And I think that the hierarchy between what's happening out there and what's happening here is sometimes very problematic. And I'm not surprised by what you say. I know I'm very ignorant, I have to say, about the situation of deaf people. But I don't even know if there's research, actually, about deaf people, or whatever the term is, in study abroad. Some years ago I started a project about LGBTQ students who were going abroad. I stopped very quickly, because, first of all, that was not really acceptable in my context. Because we are a very homophobic country, believe it or not. We're one of the last countries, by the way, that hasn't passed a law for same-sex marriage in Europe yet [*Same-sex marriage has been legal in Finland since March 2017. The talk was given in spring 2016*]. And we're supposed to be open-minded. And it was really interesting to see how—I got to interview some students, so I can't really generalize. But it was interesting to see how they were comparing the experience of interculturality to their experience of negotiating, back at home, their queer identity. And I think there are many examples like this. Think about religion as well. I do believe that we need to look at different populations of people who are moving. And not just to look at the majority, powerful people that we have.

There's research that hasn't been done that should be done on—I think that would be fascinating—sex in study abroad. Sex as interculturality. Because for example, I have done a lot of research on Chinese students in Finland and in England. It's always the same stuff, you know. But once—because I always asked the same question—“*how did you adapt, blah, blah, blah. How do you find...*”—you know. And then one day, just because I was feeling comfortable with a student, I said, “*what about*

*sex?”* She started talking for two hours about what had happened during her study abroad, and how much it had brought her in terms of dealing with otherness, and dealing with the other, et cetera. You don’t usually find this sort of data or the sort of information in research, because, of course, that’s extremely taboo. Maybe by ignoring these aspects and other aspects of the study abroad experience, we are ignoring a lot of learning, a lot of experiences that we don’t have access to, because we are so conservative in a sense. Or because we have pressure from our institutions not to work on certain topics, because they are taboo.

Yeah. But thank you. Thanks. Do you know any research on that?

*AUDIENCE:* No, and I always bring it up.

*FRED DERVIN:* It’s a great point, yeah. Continue bringing it up all the time. Thank you.

*AUDIENCE:* Aloha. This is a personal question just for you as a human being. You mentioned a couple times that you really like America. I’m just curious, what are a couple things you like about America?

*FRED DERVIN:* How long do you have? As you’ve probably noticed, I’m always against what I imagine the majority believes. Before Obama, the Obama administration, I got very tired of the fact that in Europe everybody was spitting on America because of certain political issues. And at the time, I had visited New York—I mean, is New York America? I mean, it’s part of America, but it’s not America, obviously—and I had a certain idea that it was a noisy place. And I was there in the winter—it was as cold as Finland. So when there were all these discussions in Europe, I came to America several times, to different parts of America to see for myself, different kinds of Americas. And that’s when I fell in love with America. I fell in love with the diversity of the landscapes, realizing that actually there’s no such place as America, but there are Americas. And also—I mean, this is based only on my imaginary, but I still have the idea that things can happen in America. You know, especially at the moment in Europe, we’re sort of stuck. The economy’s not doing well. You’re doing a bit better, apparently.

And, you know, there’s still so many hierarchies here as well, but they seem to be quite different. And when I come here—this is my experience—there’s not so much pressure from people trying to find out where you *really* come from. I feel sometimes that people are very uncomfortable about trying to push the question *but where are you really from?* I know it happens to certain people, but it rarely happens to me. I was on a taxi in Arizona a few months ago. And, you know, I hate taxis in Finland or wherever, because there’s always—you have to do small talk.

And I know that at some point, we're going to get to the question, *so where are you really from?* Which is a very normal question, but an irritating one. And I was so surprised. I was talking to this guy, who didn't ask the question. He could hear very clearly that I was not from around there. Of course, maybe that's an exception, and there would be other exceptions in Finland.

And I also like the dynamism in the USA. I even like what people call "trash American films." I mean, I think that they're great! They're not making us stupid or anything. I mean, there's a lot of stuff we produce in Europe that is making us stupid as well. And also, America is a "new" country. I love new countries.

Long live America!