

## **Integrating multi-cultural experience – A research proposal**

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### Rationale

With the present-day possibilities of travel, world-wide communication and international cultural and educational exchange we might assume that intercultural understanding and competence were as widespread as never before, and that the enormous potentials that persons with multi-cultural experience carry within themselves would contribute in a decisive way to the progress and development of national and regional societies. However, the many obstacles faced by persons with patchwork-identities cannot be overlooked; by "patchwork-identity" I mean that some important steps in the acquisition of cultural competence in one specific national, regional or social context have not been taken, and instead a person's values and abilities have been shaped by a variety of experiences in different contexts. It is thus essential to reflect on the difficulties persons with multi-cultural experience face in specific societies, as well as the reasons for these difficulties, which can be both ideological and practical. We need proposals for the development of frameworks where multi-cultural experience can be more adequately integrated – and not wasted.

For historical as well as conceptual reasons there are great differences from country to country and region to region, and usually also from social context to social context, with regard to the handicaps faced by persons socialized in a culturally complex way. Typical immigrant societies can be expected to differ vastly from societies focused on long-term social contacts, stable interpersonal relationships and complex rituals for the integration of outsiders. Also, overarching integrative systems of language communication may be found in some parts of the world, particularly where English or French is spoken and used as a lingua franca, while other places prefer to link communication patterns to specifically local cultural competence, expressed through a regional language or dialect. In many ways, German and Japanese may be compared along these

lines, as both languages represent major global economic powers yet may not be truly open for "global" persons with complex cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The complexities brought about by a multi-cultural background can have many causes, and if we take these together the situation we are facing seems alarming, particularly where the corresponding potentials are wasted. However, it is necessary to differentiate between various types of "patchwork identity", and we also need to draw a line as to what we include to mean multi-cultural background and experience. After all, on a very basic level every human being is "multi-cultural", socialized in the different "cultures" of mother and father and often also of different regions within a country. Moreover, it must not be overlooked that one and the same language does not necessarily imply a common understanding of central values, which may be more dominantly formed by a shared awareness of belonging, or by history within a specific region or social group. A typical example for the latter point is the deep cleavage between German speaking former East Germany, former West Germany, and other German speaking parts of Europe.

### Fields of research

With regard to various types of "patchwork identity" it seems sensible first to look at the potentials – possibly the wasted potentials – of persons who spend a period of time abroad that is long enough to profoundly influence their patterns of conceiving social and natural order and make it difficult to readapt to a previous pattern without questioning it. ("Abroad" should here be taken to mean "in a different structural system and intellectual or value tradition, and in a context shaped by unaccustomed lines of discourse and argument," but attention should be given to specific regional and possibly social contexts too, so as not to automatically link everything perceived to be strange merely to a foreign language.) In view of our aim to increase student and educational exchange as a first step in an anthropologically designed curriculum to deepen an emic

understanding of cultural processes, looking at the mechanisms of cultural learning at the formative age of 16 to 26 is of basic importance.

The next field to focus on is that of persons educated in a mixture of cultural norms and patterns. Here, two main groups can be made out, namely children from mixed-cultured marriages, and persons who have moved between different cultures. The number of persons belonging to one or the other (or both) of these two groups is increasing at a very fast rate, and although they continue to form minorities in the existing systems of education and socialization, it is urgent that their contributions be put to constructive use and the specific problems they face as minorities be better understood.

As a third point, the question of immigrants (or long-term foreign residents) can no longer be ignored. Societies whose identity is basically defined by national norms formulated in national educational curricula and usually emphasizing the use of a national language create considerable disadvantages for persons from outside, as they deny them the type of social participation they need to maintain the level of self-esteem that corresponds to their age-level, that is, to the level of competence expected within a nationally defined set of values. It is a given fact, whether we like it or not, that national norms and national languages are used as the reference level for the forming of socially acceptable individuals.

In our view, the teaching and learning of foreign languages is merely one step that leads to heightened awareness of the difficulties faced by non-linear patterns of socialization. Increased insistence on cost and efficiency leads to standardized patterns of education that will guarantee survival as "winners" (the Japanese sometimes speak of *kachi-gumi*, as opposed to losers, *make-gumi*), but such well-meant yet often merely mechanical calls for "international studies experience" in no way consider deeper implications. What does it mean to leave the normative structures of one dominant culture, cross cultural borders and develop a multi-layered cultural

personality? What does it mean to found culturally complex family units in the process? What does it mean, for instance, to master the language of one's mother at the same time as mastering the values of one's father? Or the tonal level of one language at the same time as the grammatical or morphological level of another language? In the face of such complexities we consider it essential to systematically reconsider the educational and integrational frameworks necessary for multi-cultural experience to be put to positive use.

### Methods

The methods to be employed for a first step in the project are to a certain extent defined by the fields in which prospective participants have already conducted research. In a second step at a later point in time additional necessary research areas can be added.

Four perspectives are envisaged in a first stage of cooperative, international research, namely a conceptual, an educational, a cultural-anthropological, and a language-teaching one. The conceptual approach focuses on what establishes essential aspects of identity on a micro (individual), meso (communal and regional) and macro (national, trans-national) level, on the interrelationships between these three levels, and on how identities and concepts of an acceptable self are continuously created and reshaped through the impact of national education, regional or group-specific socialization patterns, or language specific discourse, topics and taboos. The conceptual approach, in other words, looks at what creates the cultural delimitations that make integration of multi-cultural experience so difficult, and it stresses the workings of the long-term processes through which collective memory is created and with it the very normative rules and values that multi-cultural experience makes hard or impossible to adhere to.

The educational approach looks at the development of specifically educational concepts that have sought to bring together and

integrate norms and values as they come into contact – and often conflict – with each other in pedagogically defined fields, which by definition are characterized by the setting of goals, the establishment of steps, a selective choice of materials and methods, and a system of evaluation.

The anthropological approach looks at actual "fields", trying to discover the subjective responses, interpretations and accounts people give of a state concerning themselves or their context. It pursues the lines of reasoning people give and the "worlds" they build in order to maintain a sense of self and face the tasks they are set, or they set for themselves.

Finally, the language-teaching approach focuses on one of the primary methods employed to bridge the gaps representatives of a majority or norm-setting cultural group (either in the place of teaching or outside it, i.e. in a foreign country) perceive to be standing in the way of smooth integration. The language-teaching approach needs to be sensitive both to the use of actual language as well as to questions of communicative style and content. It therefore also covers questions of social, regional and national variants of one and the same language, particularly as they are dealt with in the framework of school education's efforts to maintain communicative norms. Moreover, language teaching that guides learners into the usage of non-worldwide languages (like Japanese or German) must pay particular attention to how specific social, regional, national or other entities reward what they see as "proper" adaptation, and to how they sanction "improper" adaptation. Such patterns of reward and sanction may, if they are strong enough, consistently block the development and potentials of persons with a non-standard, multi-faceted cultural and communicative background.