

Abstract 31

Does the emperor need new clothes?- Dilemmas around essentialism in intercultural training

A couple of decades into its' existence, the field of intercultural communication has become a ground for increasing debate. Its' main concept, that of 'culture' itself, is subject to frequent criticism and deconstruction, due to the prevalence of 'essentialistic' renditions of culture. This cultural essentialism is associated with negative side-effects like culturalisation, stereotyping, in-/ outgroup effects and ethical relativism, implicitly confirming an already dominant public discourse that features mutually exclusive or even hostile cultural identities. Globalisation and superdiversity further challenge a traditional concept of culture that emphasizes coherence and stability. Like in the fairytale where close examination of the emperor's clothes leads to the conclusion he has none, the extensive discussion of 'culture' can make one doubt the usefulness of the concept all together.

At the same time, the demand for courses, professional training, and practical guidelines for intercultural communication is probably higher than ever. People operating in highly globalized work environments or 'superdiverse' societies often experience intercultural or interethnic interactions as more challenging than 'regular' interactions, or at least attribute their experienced difficulties to matters of culture and ethnicity. Intercultural trainers and consultants, face a challenge when wanting to respond to clients' questions and needs constructively, while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls and negative side-effects that emphasizing cultural differences can bring about.

Based on observations and experiences from years of intercultural training, this article will explore some of the main dilemmas for intercultural practitioners that want to build their training programs on more nuanced theories of culture and identity, without losing sight of practical applications. It will be argued that a more contextualized and individualized approach will give the most opportunities for successful reconciliation of these dilemmas.

Name: Arjan Arjuna Verdooren

Institution: Royal Tropical Institute (Amsterdam)/ Self-employed