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# Culture Contact and the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity

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## Abstract

The theory exhibited here is rooted in a culture-contact psychology perspective. It gives a central role to interculturalization, transitory psychological reactions and intercultural sensitivity in such a way that the hypothesis investigated is thus expressed: “lasting critical culture-contact experience implies the development of intercultural sensitivity”. The content of this postulate requires that the study focus on distinct cultural areas. This is why the inhabitants of the cities of Buenos Aires (Argentina), Hong Kong (China) and Toulouse (France) were selected to answer a multidimensional questionnaire ( $n = 209$ ), deriving from a theoretical approach and allowing the proposed hypothesis to be tested, through the analysis of culture contact and intercultural sensitivity level. The analysis of these results is combined with an ethnographic approach and demonstrates that critical culture contacts influence the nature of the intercultural sensitivity that can develop. The authors also show that the experienced exteriority differs from the given one. However, it is noted that methodological limitations hamper the relevance of this study.

## Introduction

Globalization, cultural heterogeneity, culture mixing, interculturality... These were some of the buzzwords to characterize the environment in the last twenty years of research in culture-contact psychology. Starting with the assessment of the close imbrication of a person and his environment, in a kind of recursive loop (Morin, 2001), we can ask ourselves what type of personality will develop through the contact of a complex multicultural environment. More precisely, ethnocentrism has always been understood as a basic element of a normal intrapsychic development (Levi-Strauss, 1952; Jahoda, 1999). Hence, here lies a question: can cultural heterogeneity affect the so-called « natural ethnocentrism »? And moreover, can pluriculturality change our intercultural sensitivity? This study focuses on the inhabitants of Buenos Aires, Hong Kong and Toulouse (Teyssier, 2010).

### **Theoretical perspective: from ethnocentrism to transitory psychological reactions.**

We know with Berry (2004), Kim (2008) and Denoux (1994, 2004) that every pluri-cultural situation of rupture, tension, break-up entails an intrapsychic and regulatory movement. These movements have been called: transitory psychological reactions. They are intrapsychic tools, allowing everybody to cope with the difficulty of unification of

significations encountered during the moments of identity stress (Teyssier & Denoux, 2013a). They are not rational strategies, but reactive responses, which answer the need to feel well within ourselves, and in our relationships with others in the new situation. In that way, they allow the perpetual accommodation of personality to exteriority.

We also considered the transitory psychological reactions as a vehicle of transformations that contributes to the development, the reinforcement or the reduction of identity traits (Teyssier, 2010). In other words, when individuals find themselves in a situation of rupture, some Transitory Psychological Reactions occur which allow them to adapt to the situation. And we postulate that these reactions are an important contributory factor in the development of identity traits.

This process is closely linked with Acculturation and Interculturation (Sam, 2006; Hong & al., 2007; Teyssier & Denoux, 2013b).

We should now link the questions of Transitory Psychological Reactions with the theme we wish to discuss: cultural heterogeneity and the development of intercultural sensitivity.

As Levi-Strauss (1952) pointed out, the phenomenon of ethnocentrism is in fact a normal psychological process, which we all share. However, we can say with Bennett (1993), and Marandon (2001) that the development of true ethnorelativism can only develop slowly through the integration of the critical experience of pluriculturalism. More precisely, we will emphasize that the gap generated by any situation of cultural split could lead to a transitory psychological reaction, which draws the shape of our relationship with otherness, permitting the intrapsychic adaptation to the pluricultural environment (Teyssier & Denoux, 2012).

In order to explain this relationship between pluricultural experience and the apprehension of the otherness encounter, we've chosen to work with the concept of intercultural sensitivity developed by Bennett (1986). Intercultural sensitivity can be summarized as the different kind of reactions one person can have when he experiences a pluricultural situation. Bennett created the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) as an explanation of how people construe cultural differences (Bennett, 1998; Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Through six identified orientations (denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, integration) the DMIS describes transition from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism.

To sum up this theoretical approach, we postulate that lasting critical culture-contact experience implies the development of intercultural sensitivity.

## Method

The population ( $n = 209$ ) was composed of Portenos ( $n = 64$ ), Hong-Kongers ( $n = 69$ ), and Toulousains ( $n = 76$ ). The research methodology was based on a questionnaire, which used two kinds of tools:

First the culture-contact level (Teyssier, 2010; Teyssier & Denoux, 2013a) investigating the critical pluricultural experiences, gathers twelve questions like: have you ever lived for six months or more, in a foreign country?

Moreover, intercultural sensitivity was quantitatively assessed by thirteen critical incidents, inspired from Cushner & Brislin (1996) and Brislin (1989). Every critical incident is presented in an anecdotal form, exposing a conflicting situation between a person or a group from the same culture as the interviewee, and a person or a group from another culture. For each anecdote, the participants had two types of responses, which helped them give an explanation of the situation they just read. They were asked to choose the most appropriate. One of the responses expresses systematically a defensive movement or a minimization movement on the DMIS of Bennett, while the other expresses the idea of acceptance and/or adaptation, that's to say a lower vs. higher level of intercultural sensitivity.

Secondly, we also used a qualitative and « ethnographic approach » of the different cities in which the study took place. In this ethnographic approach, many thematics were investigated, which included: the degree of pluriculturality of the population, the feeling of this population regarding culture contact experience... (Teyssier, 2010).

The ethnographic approach was rooted in the idea that even if biased and partial, the local culture knowledge could shed an interesting light on the statistical results. To sum up this mixed methodology: the idea was to analyze the effects of critical pluricultural experiences, on the development of intercultural sensitivity, while using a quantitative statistical analysis and a qualitative ethnographic approach in a complementary perspective. That is to say, two parallels and independent levels of analysis.

## **Results**

The results of the Portenos and Toulousains are statistically significant, and correspond to our postulated theories (cf. Table 1). However, it shows evidence that this analysis is not valid in Honk-Kong, because of the statistical independency. Hence, we pose an interesting question: why is the level of critical cultural contacts an indicator of intercultural sensitivity in certain contexts, and not in others?

**Table 1**

*Chi-square test regarding culture contact level and intercultural sensitivity level*

	<b>Culture Contact Level PORTENOS</b>	<b>Culture Contact Level HONG-KONGERS</b>	<b>Culture Contact Level TOULOUSAINS</b>
Intercultural sensitivity	Dependancy	Independancy	Dependancy
$\chi^2$	17.06	3.78	18,24
$df$	8	8	8
$p$	0.3	0.88	0.02

The response to this question seems profoundly complex. We will limit our explanation to the interest of the ethnographic approach. Here, we will concentrate briefly on the analysis of the pluriculturality of the cities, and on the feeling of the inhabitants in reference to this theme.

### **Buenos Aires and Toulouse**

Currently, 60% of the population of Buenos Aires is not native and the inhabitants of the city either migrated from an area outside the city, or immigrated from overseas. Nowadays, most Porteños are of diverse European origins. Moreover, there still exists a so-called Criollo minority with Guaranis and Chorotis origins.

However, if Buenos-Aires is a priori, a town populated by people of diverse cultural origins, numerous researchers observed that this cultural blending isn't something that occupies the minds of the Portenos, because of efforts made by successive Buenos-Aires political authorities, and also because Porteno identity was developed in a way that made cultural intermixing intrinsic (Reggiani, 2010; Sturzenegger-Benoist, 2008).

In Toulouse, despite the fact that the presence of overseas inhabitants is superior to the national average (Maurin, 2009), the question of cultural heterogeneity is not an issue for the local population. Only few tragic events linked to the current world situation (like murders) have brought certain attitudes to the fore (Chemin, 2010). These events highlighted almost exclusively not cultural and religious differences between people of different nationalities, but between French citizens of different origins.

For most researchers in France, and therefore also in Toulouse, a strong assimilationist attitude combined with a universalist perspective account for the fact that pluricultural contacts, and the implied cultural blending, are rarely questioned (Teyssier, 2010).

### **Hong Kong**

In Hong-Kong, the situation is really different. Although pluriculturality is very high, the topic seems to be omnipresent, in literature, newspapers, art, or on television (Chan

1996). This situation has become even more marked, by political, economic and legislative consequences issuing from the British authority's return of Hong Kong sovereignty to China.

Hong-Kongers seem to be fully aware that they live in a strong cultural heterogeneity. They often take positions vis à vis this question, and tensions surrounding this issue can be seen on the level of daily life. In fact since the retrocession, pluriculturalism seems to be a matter, which either worries or impassions the population, or at least leads them to question their situations.

These three very brief comparative presentations of the relationships the different populations have with multicultural experiences and culture contacts, allow us to assess that this relationship directly depends on the cultural context, and its contingent features. Cultural contacts are not daily preoccupations for Portenos and Toulousains, but it's quite different for Hong Kongers. A priori, the Hong-Konger's intercultural sensitivity is more submitted to the pluricultural context than that of a Porteno or a Toulousain. Moreover, a Hong-Konger would certainly not experience a 6 months stay in a foreign country as a very big shock, because he's already used to experiencing culture contacts in his everyday life. Indeed this contingency could have a strong effect on the development of intercultural sensitivity.

Concerning the question which interests us, all of the previously referred to analysis implies, that the researcher looking at the impact of critical pluricultural experiences on the development of intercultural sensitivity, should develop a clear analysis of the socio-cultural features in which the person's identity has developed.

Hence, based on what we've learned from the ethnographic approach, the statistical independency between the culture contact level and the intercultural sensitivity level cannot be overlooked. In Hong Kong, this can be explained by the kind of cultural heterogeneity experienced, and moreover, by the feeling this heterogeneity entails (whether it's joy, excitement or annoyance...).

## Discussion

This short reflection leads us to consider at least two perspectives:

1. Because of the results in Buenos-Aires and Toulouse: the degree of critical pluricultural experiences lived by one person could be considered as an element of prediction of his intercultural sensitivity level. In other words, the experience of cultural contacts might trigger Transitory Psychological Reactions, which cause the development of intercultural sensitivity (whether it's increasing or decreasing).

2. Thus, the amount of critical pluricultural experiences is not the only indicator of the intercultural sensitivity level. And we can make the hypothesis, that the relationship with cultural heterogeneity has an influence on the development of intercultural sensitivity. To paraphrase Boesch (1995), we can say that because of the contextual differences, it is impossible for the inhabitants of the different cities do develop the same « action

potential ». This is something that would be interesting to study at a later date.

Finally, it appears that mixed methodology, with both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, offers interesting possibilities of analysis. But it entails numerous questions that we will not deal with here.

However, we could also consider that this methodology entails some risks. Indeed, the more the researcher moves on the territory of cultural specificities, the more he is confronted by cultural gaps, and the more the results could appear incomparable. In fact, every comparison is only possible on the basis of transversal and common elements (Jullien, 2009; Teyssier & Denoux, 2013a). The more the cultural specificities are detailed, the greater the risk of not measuring the same items. This is another old and classic question, which we prefer to leave unaddressed for the moment.

## Conclusion

This study can be summarized with the idea that a dynamic overlap between a psychic system and a cultural or rather pluricultural environment, imposes/dictates some complex methodological choices. The pluriculturality in our cities became so large, that we think it's increasingly important for cross-cultural psychologists to consider the effects of culture contact on the psychological landscape of a person; not only that of the migrant and immigrant population, but also of the native inhabitants.

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