Towards a posthumanist interculturality

Theory development in intercultural communication research

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Abstract *Intercultural communication research has sometimes been criticised for being under-theorised, and particularly in the 1980s there were several attempts to strengthen what could be called 'intercultural theory'. But just as these efforts were beginning, the discipline's core premises were coming under increasing scrutiny: What is culture? Can there be any analysis at all of a phenomenon that is so abstract from the outset? If we have to admit from the start that culture is a man-made black box, will we not always be going round in circles? How is it possible for us to find out anything new at all? Theorising the issue seemed to bring out even more contradictions. This chapter is an attempt to trace the development of this dilemma. Accordingly, the concept of culture has been navigated into a situation of epistemological crisis. In order to escape this impasse, theories have been put forward that attempt to widen the epistemological scope of human perception: human beings and cultural researchers can only grasp the world by interpreting it. Our perceptions of the world are discursively constructed, and we participate in cultural discourses. While this approach may have placed intercultural communication research on a more solid theoretical footing, findings based on these approaches could no longer be said to be new, and empirical approaches very often seemed much more fruitful. The recent awakening of poststructuralist and, more precisely, posthumanist thought in social theory seems to address exactly these weaknesses by reintroducing and reconstructing the role of ontology in social and cultural theorising. Theorising in this way supports research to find bases on which exploring the radical new is supposed to be possible. This chapter attempts to trace and explain these stages, periods, and perspectives within intercultural research.*

Keywords *Posthumanism; Cultural Theory; Circularity; Epistemic Violence; Ontology*

1. A theory perspective on intercultural communication research

More than ten years ago, I wrote a book chapter, the title of which might translate as 'How does the theoretical concept of diversity affect social action?' (Busch, 2011). Of course, this was meant to be a provocative and rhetorical question, to which my chapter would answer that such a relationship is complicated and that different answers compete in research. But if we ask ourselves what kind of theory is behind something like a research field of intercultural communication, then perhaps this title could already provide a core statement: In our language, we have terms for phenomena such as culture and diversity that are themselves somehow based on the assumption that, firstly, they exist, secondly, that their relevance lies in the fact that they have an impact on people's social behaviour, and, thirdly, that the task of research is to explore this relationship in more detail.

A discourse-theoretical perspective may soon deflect this question in a complicated way, but for the purposes of this initial observation it can be summarised as follows: Humanity has created concepts such as culture and diversity and all the presumed effects associated with them over a long period of time—mostly in order to consolidate and strengthen strategically desired, powerful structures. The discursive construct of culture that has been created in this way is such that even attempts to mitigate the negative social consequences of it only serve to reinforce its existence. It is thus guaranteed to continue to exist indefinitely (Busch, 2021). This would be an example of a theoretical explanation of the phenomenon of intercultural communication with the help of a (neighbouring) (social) theory, in this case, discourse theory. Such an approach could also be described as deductive, because in this case an existing theory is applied to intercultural communication as a concrete individual case.

In contrast, this article will make a reverse, inductive, attempt to determine the role of theories in the field of intercultural communication. It will ask what role, in the ongoing development of the field of intercultural communication, the study of theories and theoretical foundations has played. This exploration will reveal an epoch around the 1980s when authors even within the discipline warned against the neglect of theory-building in intercultural communication research and therefore called for more efforts in this area. At the same time, however, social theory from both within and outside the discipline was increasingly questioning the role of culture in theorising. This chapter will trace this debate and prepare for a more in-depth reflection on it, also

considering fundamental questions about what social theories are and what their roles and functions are. A disentangling of epistemological and ontological aspects of intercultural theorising may show that the concept of culture has long been used as a kind of gap filler between what theories claim and what empirical perception can produce—a gap that has at the same time been considered inaccessible to human perception. Poststructuralist thought, in short, claims that this gap does not actually exist, and that we are actually always living in the world we are studying. Posthumanist approaches also relativise the role of human beings in their world in relation to their material and organic surroundings. Taken together, intercultural communication research seems to have recently rediscovered a way of thinking and theorising that even helps and encourages the perception of the radically new. This chapter will trace this long and complex journey from the supposed crux of cultural theory to a recent form of more inclusive theorising that may help to open up new horizons in intercultural communication research.

2. What is a theory, and what is the purpose of a theory in intercultural research?

Especially in the 1980s, a number of arguments for theories in intercultural research are found in the literature, as well as works that are described as theories by their authors. William B. Gudykunst, in particular, argues for the urgent need to develop theories for studying intercultural communication. In his view, there have already been a number of approaches to the conceptualisation of culture, but these have had little to do with communication (Gudykunst, 1983, p. 13). Specifically, Gudykunst notes a prevailing "'antitheory' perspective" (1983, p. 14) in intercultural research, which favours more empirical research. Indeed, Gudykunst concludes that de facto many fields of research were at best just beginning to translate their findings into theories. If we look at the discipline of communication from the perspective of Kuhn's model of paradigm shifts (1962), communication can at best be described as being in a 'preparadigmatic' stage, that is, the discipline still hosts more than one general competing theory. By comparison, research on intercultural communication was even less developed, according to Gudykunst (1983, p. 14). It was still in an 'aparadigmatic' stage, where any form of paradigm would have to be developed. A general definition of theory can be found in Georg Ritzer's (2005a) *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. In it, Markovsky (2005) writes about "theory construction":

> Theories are repositories of general knowledge. Through testing and refinement, scientific theories change over time in ways that lead them to provide increasingly accurate explanations for ever-widening ranges of phenomena. Their accumulated wisdom far exceeds the ability of common sense to explain the complex world around us. (p. 830)

Markovsky points out, however, that in the social sciences, for example, many approaches are labelled as theories that in fact do not meet these requirements. They should rather be described as "quasi-theories" (Markovsky, 2005, p. 831). These are typically just loose ideas, propositions, concepts, or observations. For intercultural research, Gudykunst (1993) takes a pragmatic stance, arguing that theories should be logically consistent, that they should provide a plausible explanation for a given phenomenon, that all levels of analysis should be addressed, and that they should ultimately be able to be applied (p. 34). In a similar vein, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) stress that researchers should not "lose the proverbial forest in the trees" (p. 5) when developing theories. Theories should at least have the core concepts in place, and they should have something like a logical proposition at the heart of them.

Halualani and Nakayama point out that theories, especially in the field of intercultural research, are always themselves both culture-specific and positioned in an intercultural perspective. However, the specific context studied and the theorising done within that context are interdependent and influence each other (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010, p. 9).

From a philosophy of science perspective, these contextual factors can also be described as 'meta-theoretical assumptions' that guide theory building. For Gudykunst (1993), for example, the classical components of epistemology and ontology are part of these assumptions (p. 35). Kim (1988) adds that these meta-theoretical assumptions also provide guidance as to whether a theory is more concerned with understanding or prediction (p. 15). The more familiar term 'paradigm' is also used to refer to such meta-theoretical assumptions, although there are many different definitions as well. Ritzer (2005b) writes about them:

> A paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained. (p. 543)

Gudykunst and Nishida note that the classics in this regard, Burrell and Morgan (1979), distinguish between subjectivist, i.e., interpretive, and objectivist, i.e., positivist understandings (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989, p. 18). Lincoln and Guba (2011) also list epistemology, ontology, and methodology as components of paradigms, which they refer to as "basic beliefs" (p. 168). They later add that axiology is actually part of it as well (Lincoln & Guba, 2011, pp. 167–169). Arneson (2009a, 2009b) defines epistemology and ontology for the *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Epistemologists ask "whether and to what extent knowledge is based on the existence of phenomena and/or on human perceptions. Their goal is to provide a general basis that would ensure the possibility of knowledge" (Arneson, 2009a, p. 349). This includes the question of whether people are assumed to be able to access and perceive their environment directly, or whether this can only be done through reconstruction and interpretation. Culture is often understood to be precisely this process of perceiving and constructing the world (Demerath, 2002). And Arneson (2009b) writes about how "[o]ntology […] considers the nature of being, the philosophical investigation of being. […] With respect to human communication theory, ontology is the study of what it means to be human" (p. 695).

Indeed, ontology was originally concerned with naming entities. As examples of common ontologies in communication studies, Arneson (2009b) cites "realism, nominalism, and social constructionism" (p. 695). According to Mendoza, ontological assumptions in intercultural contexts are often explained as belonging to (cultural) identities. And these are ultimately essentialising, political, and often constructed as unquestionable, which is precisely what should be confronted with "radical suspicion" (Mendoza, 2005, p. 238). From the perspective of intercultural research, ontological reasoning emerges first and foremost as "naming", as Jackson II and Moshin (2010, p. 348) resume with reference to Fanon (1967). Thinking about ontological foundations therefore always runs the risk of essentialising and fixing phenomena that are in fact artificial constructs. Seen from this angle, talking about ontologies runs the risk of laying the groundwork for cementing difference and discrimination (Jackson II & Moshin, 2010, pp. 348–349).

An intercultural comparative perspective relativises these assumptions about the concepts of epistemology and ontology. Chen and An (2009, p. 204) present a schema in which Western and Eastern assumptions about epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology are juxtaposed, and all these components of paradigms can themselves be relativised for their cultural specificity (Miike, 2010, p. 193). As with theories, intercultural research also

assumes that the discipline's self-image of diversity must also apply to dealing with different paradigms "by encouraging interculturalists to understand the diverse lines of our history in an intercultural way" (Kulich et al., 2020, p. 62).

3. Predictions or openness for something new?

As noted earlier, Kim suggested that theories—and, by extension, all research—can serve different purposes, which can basically be divided into predicting and understanding. Research can be designed to anticipate what will happen in the future, with these options for future outcomes grounded in a study's theory. Alternatively, research can be designed to be as open as possible to whatever may be discovered—in the present observation or in future developments. In other words, as an alternative to predicting, research can also be designed to find out something completely new and unforeseen.

The call for more theories was certainly also motivated by research policy. Kim (1984) argues that "there have yet to emerge coherent conceptual paradigms of intercultural communication" (p. 13). For her, part of theorising is "using common terminological currencies" (Kim, 1984, p. 13). Wiseman and Van Horn (1995) go further, arguing that without theories it would not be clear what to study at all (p. 2), a position that, as we shall see, was later explicitly rejected. From the point of view of the time, however, Gudykunst (1983) in particular was not only interested in explanations but above all in predictions (pp. 14–15). Kim (1984) also confirms that the aim was to "describe, explain, and/or predict intercultural communication phenomena in a number of social contexts" (p. 14).

In fact, at that time there were several prominent approaches that were primarily concerned with the prediction of people's behaviour in different cultures and in intercultural contact situations. These include, for example, Ting-Toomey's face negotiation theory (1988, p. 231), but also models with cultural dimensions such as individualism-collectivism (Gudykunst & Lee, 2002, pp. 26–27). At the turn of the millennium, Gudykunst (2000) still affirms the goal of testing "theoretical predictions about […] behavior across cultures" (p. 295). Even in cases where intercultural research draws on the findings of neighbouring disciplines that have a wide range of exploratory and descriptive approaches in their portfolios, intercultural research tends to cherry-pick the predictive ones. For example, intercultural research has drawn on linguistic approaches in its models for predicting differences in speaking behaviour, em-

phasising, for example, categories such as indirectness (Bond et al., 2000) that Edward T. Hall had earlier rooted in intercultural communication research.

On the other hand, the field of intercultural communication has always identified with a self-image of discovering something new. This has helped the field in its strategy to set itself apart from the existing disciplines. Terence Jackson, for example, writing for the field of cross-cultural management, argues that Hofstede has indeed created something radically new by exposing the cultural roots of Western positivist management research and thus its limited scope. Hofstede has created a counter-narrative so to speak, and Jackson (2021) calls for this to continue in the field and for the discipline to find its role in constantly creating new narratives (p. 175). As Jackson (2021) writes: "Good social science scholarship does not relate to the status quo. In producing new knowledge it disrupts what we previously 'know' about what we know about" (p. 178).

However, finding the new is not without its challenges, and on closer inspection it becomes clear that intercultural research, like classical social research, has usually seen the new in terms of difference, i.e., something is identified as 'new' in that it is described as being different from something that already exists. In the strongest sense, however, something truly new should be new and autonomous in itself, not referring to or comparable with something that already exists. Gudykunst seems to have already identified the dilemma or challenge. In his early discussion and plea for more theories in intercultural research, he states that there are three ways to create new theories: either develop the theory from the subject matter of the discipline itself, import it from a neighbouring discipline, or break down a theory from a more general superdiscipline to the specific subject area (Gudykunst, 1983, p. 16).

Gudykunst argues that the best strategy for advancing the discipline would be to develop theories from within. On the other hand, as Ting-Toomey (1984, p. 230) later criticises Gudykunst's volume, most intercultural theories are in fact imports from neighbouring disciplines. Kim (1984, p. 14) confirms this for the field as a whole.

Indeed, this is still the case today with the classic intercultural theories that describe themselves as such. For example, the best-known approaches are imported from psychology, such as Gudykunst's uncertainty reduction theory (1985), which he later developed into anxiety-uncertainty management theory (1993). Other examples of imports from psychology include Tajfel's social identity theory (1982), Ting-Toomey's face negotiation theory (1988), or Stephan

and Stephan's integrated thread theory (2000). Sociology is another potential provider of theories, such as Bourdieu's theory of social capital (1984).

4. The difference approach

The hypothesis of this chapter is that intercultural research has long understood its search for the new in 'foreign cultures' as a search for something that is new in the sense of being different from one's own or from what is already known. This may be because intercultural research, as a discipline, was still strongly tied to the traditional understandings of the nature and purpose of theories discussed above. It may also be that this view of the new as nothing more than different has hindered intercultural research from producing more convincing results—an effect that may have cast a less than promising light on theorising as an approach to intercultural research in the past. This section will therefore explore these pitfalls and subsume them under the rubric of what here will be termed the 'difference approach'. In a subsequent section (Section 5), this difference approach will be contrasted with what can consequently be referred to here as the 'newness approach': Recent applications of theories from poststructuralism, and posthumanism in particular, to intercultural research may have opened up new perspectives and new ways of exploring something genuinely new beyond difference. This may ultimately return theorising to a more promising position and role in intercultural research.

While theory fulfils its traditional and stable role in the difference approach, designed to make predictions rather than to discover something radically new, imported theories remain more or less outside the core concepts of intercultural research, leaving this core open to be filled with something new. The notion of culture could therefore still be defined as something open and changeable, fuzzy, and in flux. In fact, the concept of culture occupies a somewhat undefined middle position between a given field of empirical observation on the one hand and a stable theory on the other. In this constellation, culture even incorporated the new and the open—but still somewhat confined by theories.

In this strategy, culture is defined by and defines a gap towards external theory. This construct will also be called the 'two-world approach' later on. In order to distinguish more clearly between the two strategies of searching for differences and searching for the new, the difference-oriented approach is analysed in more detail below.

4.1 The functionalist paradigm and circular definitions

Indeed, the first definitions of intercultural communication were often circular. The very first *Communication Yearbook* of the *International Communication Association* included a section on intercultural communication, and Tulsi B. Saral (1977) provided an overview of intercultural communication theory and research, followed by further contributions under similar titles by Prosser (1978) and Saral (1979). Yet the definitions of intercultural communication collected by Saral appear to be tautologies. We are told, for example, that "communication is intercultural when occuring between peoples of different cultures", or that "intercultural communication obtains (*sic*) whenever the parties to a communication act bring with them different experiential backgrounds" (Saral, 1977, p. 389). In other words, the discipline is still very much convinced of the existence of its own basic premises.

After all, from the very beginning, the discipline has talked about theories of intercultural communication without really looking at the phenomenon itself. Instead, it has pursued an application-oriented approach. Authors continue to speak, as a matter of course and without further definition, of intercultural theory (Liu, 2016; Vande Berg & Paige, 2009, p. 419), culture theory (Bhawuk, 1998), theories of intercultural communication (Panocová, 2020), or intercultural communication theory (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020, p. 6).

4.2 External theories were the necessary frameworks for designing 'culture' as intangible

Aside from the problem of congruent theory and object of research, intercultural research is often faced with the problem that culture is defined as something that is itself virtually incomprehensible, or is located within a sphere that is in itself particular by virtue of its incomprehensibility. Examples of this self-referentiality can be found repeatedly in intercultural communication research. For example, Edward T. Hall, under the influence of Sigmund Freud, placed the cultural in the human unconscious and thus has rendered it inaccessible (E. T. Hall, 1959, pp. 59–62, as cited in Rogers et al., 2002, p. 6). The idea of understanding culture as context in the ethnography of communication in the sense of Gumperz and Hymes (1972) can also be interpreted as a strategy in which culture bridges the gap of the intangible. Bourdieu's approach to cultural capital in the truest sense of the word borrows from economics and sociology, and the 'communities of practice'

approach provided by linguistics (e.g., Corder & Meyerhoff, 2007) receives its cemented theoretical pillars from sociological group theory. If we assume that this difference approach always borrows an existing theory and confronts it with a selected empirical setting, this will automatically lead to situations in which the theory does not fit perfectly with the empirical observation—a gap that these approaches have tried to fill with culture as a flexible filler. From a philosophy of science perspective, this scheme would leave and rely on a gap between its assumptions about epistemology and ontology. Difference approaches to intercultural research share epistemological assumptions about human perception and human understanding of the world on the one hand, and they share ontological assumptions about what humans and their world are like on the other. The two assumptions will never fully coincide, leaving a gap that is not even perceived by humans. Again, it is culture that fills the gap in these models, confirming its character as something dynamic, flexible, and in flux. Moreover, the external theories help to avoid the circular definitions mentioned above.

4.3 'Culture' prevents epistemological crises

The difference approach in intercultural research also helps to avoid epistemological crises. The latter term refers to situations in which empirical observations, following a set of given epistemological assumptions, no longer produce the expected results—or provide access to the ontological world at all. The notion of crises in this context was introduced by Thomas Kuhn (1962, pp. 66–91), who said that they occur more or less regularly in academic research, and that they usually lead to a major paradigm shift that will then readjust the epistemological-ontological fit.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre derives an alternative notion of paradigm shift from the work of Michael Polanyi (1966), known for his concept of tacit knowledge. In Polanyi's view, people always have much more knowledge at their disposal than they can consciously articulate. Such tacit knowledge always precedes scientifically validated research and description, according to Polanyi. In other words, we cannot use science to find out more than what we already suspect. We cannot ask or look for anything else. In contrast to Kuhn's view, in which epistemological crises occur almost abruptly or surprisingly, for Polanyi epistemological crises are rooted in academic discourse and emerge as slowly developing processes. Seen in this light, epistemological crises are

even necessary pillars of any academic reflection—and thus rooted in cultural and social traditions (MacIntyre, 2006, p. 16).

As we have seen in the previous considerations, culture per se is also often defined as something that is unconscious to human beings—and yet it is obviously something that exists and is somehow felt, or to which certain perceptions are attributed that cannot be classified in any other way. Accordingly, it seems plausible that culture is used as something unconscious in order to explain or substantiate aspects that are assumed to be unconscious.

It could also be argued that culture has always found its way into the disciplines when it was no longer possible to explain something with one's own theory. But this was not surprising, it was expected. And the solutions, in this case culture, do not come as a surprise either, but can only be what has already been anticipated. In this respect, even with paradigm shifts, we cannot go beyond our existing cultural knowledge of the world. If we find gaps between theories and the empirical world, we will not be surprised and we will fill them with our notions of culture.

This gap between epistemology and ontology has a long tradition. Jessica Moss (2021) has recently traced the distinction between the two worlds of 'episteme' (truth/knowledge) and 'doxa' (beliefs/experiences) in Plato, with Plato distinguishing between the two worlds of thinking and experiencing, which are in dialogue with each other. As Beitz (n.d., p. 21) has recently shown for Kant and Hegel, among others, a distinction between theory and empirical experience—and a natural gap between them—has a long tradition in European philosophy.

To this day, research builds on this tradition when it comes to discovering something new. More precisely, in the gap between theorising and the non-scientific world, the new has its pre-organised place in these models. In some cases, it is 'culture' that incorporates this 'newness' and that is located in this gap. For this approach to work, it is important that this gap for the new between theory and the empirical world is actually maintained. Authors should not, for example, bend theory towards the empirical world to make it fit. It is in this sense that Karl Popper argued that theories must remain open to falsification. For this to happen, however, theories must remain unchanged. They should not simply be changed in their definition and thus supposedly made to fit again if there are signs of falsification (Popper, 1959/2005, pp. 60–61). In this context, the use of methods is to ensure that theories remain what they are, rather than being bent to fit reality.

According to this difference approach, discovering something new is relatively easy and can be done at almost any point and in any place, because whatever you look at, there will always be a gap between theory and the empirical world. For cultural research, this means that 'culture' can be discovered at any point. The only thing is that the results of this approach may be less spectacular and more or less easy to achieve. In this sense, in the field of intercultural management research, Bonache (2021, p. 40) has recently referred to this research strategy as "gap-spotting". Ironically, this seems to be even more valued in the discourse of the field than a courageous and open-minded approach to the world.

Certainly, there are some rhetorical strategies that can be identified in the communication of the field of intercultural communication that have fuelled this image of the identification and filling of gaps. Over several decades, authors in the discipline have repeatedly claimed that intercultural communication is a young and emerging field (Grosskopf & Barmeyer, 2021, p. 182; Jahoda & Krewer, 1998, p. 3; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2014, p. 17; Saral, 1977, p. 389). In spite of this, it has since become a "complex field" (Braithwaite, 2018, p. 47; Snow, 2018, p. 59) which, instead of falling into an epistemological crisis, can actually take pride in having already survived and undergone a number of paradigm shifts. Both diachronic and synchronic overviews of the existing literature continue to reflect these different paradigms. Scollon and Wong Scollon (1997), for example, distinguish between a "utilitarian discourse system" (p. 111) in the discourse of research and their understanding of "interdiscourse communication" (p. 15). Zhu (2016) alternatively takes a more epistemological stance and lists a "positivist paradigm" starting a row of an "interpretive paradigm", a "critical paradigm" up to a "constructivist paradigm", and a "realist paradigm" (pp. 6–16). While these authors argue that intercultural research has so far survived almost every paradigm shift, it could also be argued that these are still paradigm shifts and that cultural research under one paradigm no longer has much in common with cultural research under other paradigms. Leaving that aside, it is still remarkable that the notion of culture is still included. From the perspective of the 'difference approach', this pertinence of culture is not surprising. Since all these paradigms operate on the basis of providing a gap between theory and empirical experience, 'culture' can easily continue to fulfil its role—and is even urgently needed—in filling the epistemological gap.

4.4 Challenges for the notion of culture under the difference approach

Let us assume that these paradigm shifts mentioned above did not challenge or bring the concept of culture into crisis anyway, then we may ask: Are there any other challenges anywhere in social theory that did so? And if so, what were they?

4.4.1 Moving to the macro level: politics and identities

Originally, intercultural research was limited to and focused on interpersonal, face-to-face interactions. The aim was "to study interpersonal interactions" (Sarbaugh & Asunción-Lande, 1983, p. 54) and "interpersonal relations" (Rogers & Hart, 2002, p. 2; Spencer-Oatey, 2000). For culture to become something that people perceived as part of their identity, and thus to move from Edward T. Hall's understanding of culture as something that people were unconscious of to a notion of culture as part of people's conscious identity, social discourses and individuals had to begin to perceive aspects such as ethnicity, race, gender, and class as something uniquely their own (Zaretsky, 1995, p. 245).

This allowed national movements around race and ethnicity on the one hand, and movements around sexuality and gender on the other, that had previously been separate, to come together.[1] This also led to a repositioning of the spheres that previously were considered private such as culture but also the family. What had previously been a private matter was now becoming a public and political issue—and not in the form of persons but in the form of identities (Zaretsky, 1995, p. 246). This new notion of culture as (public) identities was difficult to accept and integrate into cultural research within its existing epistemological assumptions, which still assumed that culture was the traditional unconscious gap-filler, by definition beyond what people could epistemologically perceive.

4.4.2 Power, postcolonial theory, and culture as conflict

Building on poststructuralist and power theories, postcolonial theory argued that it was not cultural differences that determined social relations, but power imbalances that were only argumentatively disguised and legitimised by cultural differences. This kind of consideration was also only made possible by thinking on a more general level than the purely interpersonal level that had previously prevailed (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Within cultural

1 Zaretsky (1995) would later describe how, together, they had become quite powerful.

studies, culture was at best seen as a social conflict (S. Hall, 1992). The move away from the micro-level suddenly brought into view dimensions and influences that challenged the interpretive primacy of the concept of culture.

Approaches from cultural studies with Stuart Hall's understanding of culture as conflict are taken up in intercultural research by Halualani and Nakayama (2010), for example. Approaches to intercultural research based on a power-critical paradigm (Chuang, 2003) see its origins as relevant to their own discipline, for example, in van Dijk's (1993) critique of racism. Writers within the power-critical paradigm have often argued that the notion of culture has often been used in both social and academic discourse as nothing more than a disguise for differences that are in fact power differences. This logic adopts Kuhn's understanding of paradigm shifts, according to which a new paradigm completely replaces an older one, with no chance of more than one paradigm existing in parallel (e.g., Tanno & Jandt, 1993)—a line of argument that had clearly challenged the role and persistence of culture as a concept.

4.4.3 Critical Realism

For a long time, the two-world approach between epistemology and ontology meant that research was limited to acknowledging that researchers can only ever interpret the world but never directly access it. For the social sciences, this insight could even be seen as an achievement, as it was a significant step forward from positivism, a paradigm that had assumed that people had direct access to their world, i.e., that they could measure and describe it in an objective and neutral way. Accepting that what people see will always be subject to their interpretation was, by contrast, a paradigm shift that Bachmann-Medick (2008, pp. 86–87), for example, has called the 'anthropological turn', because it was in anthropology that this insight was first recognised and from where it spread to other disciplines.

Ejnavarzala (2019) provides a summary on the assumed relationship between epistemology and ontology and its development in the history of science. There is a long tradition of positivist-empiricist theories of knowledge as well as interpretive approaches (Ejnavarzala, 2019, p. 96). In the paradigm of critical realism, which goes back to Roy Bashkar (1989), Ejnavarzala (2019) identifies a third way that has recently emancipated itself from this (p. 97). This approach involves an epistemological middle ground that assumes, on the one hand, that people are indeed trapped and limited in their perceptions, but that, on the other hand, there is a fixed reality that is independent of them.

Karin Zotzmann (2016) explains why this matters when it comes to intercultural research. Critical realism recognises that people interpret their world and make these interpretations the basis of their actions. At the same time, there is a real world of given structures, and these structures may differ from what people interpret. Zotzmann argues that recent intercultural research has been dominated by de-essentialising approaches, i.e., attempts to avoid the idea of clear and fixed structures and cultural boundaries. Instead, culture should be seen as something that is in constant flux and not confined to borders. According to Zotzmann, this leads to the paradoxical situation that writers who want to argue against cultural essentialist approaches are in fact those who need to talk about them even more. Zotzmann (2016, pp. 80–81) concludes that structural boundaries do exist—even if they are man-made—and also that a completely de-essentialised understanding of culture is not really helpful, because then the term would only signify something that it should deny. In other words, the concept of culture itself is experiencing an epistemological crisis: It still points to something that researchers do not really want to see. This is where critical realism accepts both perspectives, it "decouples ontological and epistemological questions" (Zotzmann, 2016, p. 82) and thus also avoids an epistemological crisis—a task that 'culture' has so far been used to help with as a gap-filler.

Critical realism supports the insight that culture is always both structure and agency. Among other things, this is how concepts such as Spivak's strategic essentialism work (Jones, 2013, p. 241). As a result, culture can no longer be seen as the mysterious gap-filler that bridges the space between theory and human experience of reality. Apart from this, critical realism brings with it a strong handicap for earlier notions of intercultural competence, since the realist structural side of critical realism claims that people will not be able to fully understand and even change their worlds anyway. In other words, even the management of culture is no longer fully in people's hands. Later intercultural research has indeed found a way out of this dilemma by moving the locus of 'culture' from interpersonal interaction to people's heads and minds. If we see 'culture' as a mindset inside each individual, we no longer have to wrestle with the dilemma of whether and how culture is the invisible buffer between our theoretical assumptions and the real world. Examples of this strategy in intercultural research include Kim's (2015) concept of intercultural personhood, where interculturality is seen as a certain mindset, and Holliday and Amadasi's (2020) concept of decentring, where people are advised to take a sideways po-

sition in the face of cultural essentialisations in the real world—creating their own new notion of culture in their minds.

4.4.4 Epistemic violence

The 'writing culture' debate, and the subsequent accusation of cultural researchers of epistemic violence, is another way—alongside the critical realist approach—of demonstrating how easily the epistemic gap for culture can collapse in intercultural theorising. The 'writing culture' debate in cultural anthropology in the 1980s (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) epitomised the insight that what is said to be culture in research is still a deliberate human choice. In other words: It may be that there would be no such thing as culture at all if researchers did not keep writing about it and thus cementing it. For our two-world-difference approach, in which culture is placed as a gap-filler between epistemological reasoning and ontological perception, this would mean that this gap-filler is also nothing but a human construct, and therefore part of theory-building prior to empirical observation.

The notion of epistemic violence casts another, power-critical, light on the fact that cultural researchers create their own object of study: By writing about people who are presumably from other cultures, writers claim the right to define who these people are without giving them a chance to define themselves or speak for themselves. This is seen as a violent act, as the people observed have no chance of changing this relationship. As late as 2020, Bernadette Calafell warns that intercultural studies—a discipline that should know better—still seems to be comfortable with the continued practice of epistemic violence (Calafell, 2020).

The concept of epistemic violence was first introduced by Spivak (1988, p. 280) when she discussed Foucault's concept of 'episteme' in *Madness and Civilisation* (Foucault, 1988, pp. 251, 262, 269; Spivak, 2008, p. 310). Spivak (1988, p. 281) points out that Foucault, in *Power/Knowledge* (Gordon & Foucault, 1980, p. 82), spoke of episteme as including "subjugated knowledge", i.e., the knowledge of peripheral and marginalised groups, which was repressed. Spivak argues that Foucault should apply this to the postcolonial context but does not. Thus, he remains Eurocentric in his understanding of 'epistemes'. What happens in colonial and postcolonial contexts could also be called epistemic violence in this sense. Indigenous knowledge does not stand a chance and is systematically denied in a science based purely on Western epistemes. As far as qualitative research is concerned, this means de facto that it is no longer possible to carry out simple interpretive research (Marker, 2003). Authors

such as Smith (1999) and Mignolo (2012) therefore argue that there is a need for decolonisation of scientific methods.

5. The newness approach

If epistemic violence is to be avoided in research, the traditional assumptions of Western epistemologies must be abandoned in favour of a postcolonial approach. Given these basic prerequisites, we must above all abandon the primacy of knowledge over being, the material and the body. Similarly, the assumption, prevalent in both positivist and interpretive approaches, that we can best perceive our world by being there and present in a given situation, needs to be abandoned (Derrida, 1978, pp. 278–79, as cited in St. Pierre, 2019, p. 4). Even more, we will have to give up the assumption that the best way for us to perceive our world is through our immediate presence. Instead, perception may be better achieved through feeling our bodies as they are embedded in our world and nature. This breaking away from epistemological primacy and the exploration of ontological presuppositions is a recent figure of thought for which Rosi Braidotti found the term "new materialism" (Deleuze, 1968, p. 4, as cited in Braidotti, 1991, p. 112). This later became the name of a whole new paradigm that also laid the foundations for new approaches to analysis, such as postqualitative inquiry (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, pp. 629–630).

The new focus on ontological aspects first of all challenges the human-centredness of existing ontologies. Thus, there is a particular openness to the resulting and necessary new direction of research. In the new so-called postqualitative research that builds on this, Lather and St. Pierre (2013, p. 629) find a programmatic description of this direction of research in Spivak, who spoke of the need to research "the new new" (Spivak, 1999, p. 68). Accordingly, researchers have had to rethink what they are looking for (decolonising epistemology) and, at the same time, rethink the ways and methods of approaching this new knowledge.

These considerations have been possible as a result of, and in conjunction with, a general ontological turn in the social sciences. Previously, it was assumed that there are different cultures and perspectives, but only one reality, one nature. There are many cultures, one ontology. The ontological turn wants to break this up and say that there are many cultures, but also many ontologies and realities (Heywood et al., 2017, p. 2). There are even cultures that believe that people all have the same (cultural) perception, but that only the (physical)

condition of people/living beings is different, so they have different perceptions because of their different bodies. The classical view would be that of cultural relativism, i.e., that all people have different cultural perceptions, but that the world is the same. The opposite would be natural relativism: everyone has different bodies and thus different perceptions of different worlds (Heywood et al., 2017, p. 3).

The 'difference approach' discussed in the previous section would therefore be even more complex because there would now be not only one but two terms that would be under research, culture and ontology/the human body. In contrast to what in the upcoming sections will be discussed as the search for the 'new new', this dilemma here could be termed as a search for the 'different different' (thanks to Milene Oliveira for this idea): How can cultures be described in terms of their differences if there are also differences in assumptions about where these differences lie and what constitutes them? Does the difference really lie in the (different) views of the world or somewhere else (Heywood et al., 2017, p. 4)? If cultural researchers must be prepared to encounter not only different cultures but also different ontologies and assumptions about the role of human beings in their material and organic world, then researchers will have to try more than ever to break free of their given assumptions about the world, i.e., they would have to be even more prepared to face the radically new, which can no longer be based on their existing knowledge of the world and then called 'other'. More specifically, this double openness of both culture and ontology as variables would mean that researchers would have to be prepared to experience and to acknowledge phenomena that do not make sense against the background of their own categories (Heywood et al., 2017, p. 5). Heywood et al. (2017) illustrate this with the example of a researcher meeting a subject who points to a tree. It may be that the researcher's view of the tree is that it is a thing, but it may also be that the subject's view of the tree is that it is a ghost. Traditionally, the researcher's conclusion might then have been that this subject has a 'spiritual belief'. After the ontological turn, however, researchers need instead to ask themselves how they can change their own conceptual schemas so that it makes sense for them to think that the tree is a ghost (Heywood et al., 2017, p. 5).

For social research, this means that we need to stop comparing and differentiating, and instead start "registering the 'making indeterminate' out of the 'call of the other'" (Lather, 2022, p. 32). In other words, when we are faced with something that might be new to us, we should not try to figure out how it is different from what we already know. Instead, we should acknowledge that

this newness is actually speaking to us and calling us to perceive it as something that we must acknowledge will remain indeterminate for us. In fact, the ontological turn makes it possible to "make a science out of indeterminacy" (Lather, 2022, p. 32), i.e., we get the chance to integrate the indeterminate as a legitimate variable in our models. Instead of placing ourselves above the world, we as researchers will then meet the world "half-way", in the words of Barad (2007b), Lather (2022, p. 32) resumes. This is a much more direct way than according to the old "two-world approach", which distinguishes between a researcher's world of theories and the world of human experience. The proponents of the postqualitative approach are convinced that, without such a renewed awareness of ontology, nothing new can be discovered: "if you don't have an awareness of the ontological underpinnings of your work, you can't actually engage in the production of the new" (MacLure, 2023, p. 213). The engagement with ontology also sets in motion all the other components of a paradigm (MacLure, 2023, p. 213).

5.1 The new: Deleuze's immanence

French poststructuralism reverses the two-world approach even further. On the one hand, in contrast to the two-world approach of the previous logical-empirical paradigm, we must actually speak of a one-world approach and, at the same time, this includes an endless number of worlds. Nevertheless, researchers and what they perceive will always necessarily have to be part of the same world.

St. Pierre (2019, p. 4) reports that, for Foucault, it is only by talking about themselves that people become what they are. Foucault concludes that there must also be phenomena that have not yet been talked about, and this is what he calls 'immanent'—already there but not yet addressed. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze would also speak of the virtual, of all that is possible. Only a part of it is in fact in existence, which is the actual. But the virtual and the actual have to be thought of as being fundamentally of equal value. The immanent is therefore not the other (because then it would be outside the model, as a contrast, as a comparison). It is simply something new, something radically and individually other, something that cannot be grasped by comparison. Elisabeth Adams St. Pierre (2019, p. 5), among others, derives the concept of immanence from Deleuze's (1997) notion of 'planes of immanence' (French: 'plan d'immanence'; Deleuze, 1995).

This immanent 'new' as something that has always been there, at least virtually possible, but never addressed and talked about, will by definition be something that human beings will never be able to grasp with mere reason; they will only be able to experience and feel it. The new comes to people through force, it happens to them, not the other way round. If human beings were to try to grasp it, they would be injuring it and at the same time they would be destroying it. What this means for St. Pierre is that even the methods of qualitative research should no longer be used because they do not fit into the ontology on which the rest of the paradigm is based. Qualitative research is always about categorising, abstracting, coding, and ordering. These are all principles that would require the assumption of a second world. They would no longer be immanent. Human beings are not capable of actively thinking a thought. Instead, it is the thought that comes to the person. The most a person can do is feel it (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 8).

Guiliana Ferri (2020) applies this paradigm to intercultural research. Ferri reads fictional literature and allows herself to be influenced by it. This helps Ferri to take a standpoint from which she can identify points where both authors and the characters they write about experience their worlds in an immanent way. On a third level (after the protagonists and the writers about their protagonists), Ferri (2020) takes care to transmit this immanent newness in her own writing about these literary works. She finds one such example in Audre Lorde's (1982) narration *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In it, the author describes her own biography as a permanent becoming, in which traditional oppositions of majority and minority, gender and political orientation dissolve, and in which becoming is in fact manifested as a "desire" instead of a static rational distinction (Ferri, 2020, p. 413).

The role of language has recently been somewhat marginalised in social theory and thus in intercultural research. Access to the world through language is seen as too indirect and obstructive. Newer paradigms claim that people should be able to experience more of their world if they could access it without going through language. New materialism also rejects a linguistic dimension (Barad, 2007b). In postqualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2019), language is considered to be too anthropocentric and too westernised. In the sense of decolonisation, it is a pre-linguistic approach that should be chosen.

5.2 Foundations for posthumanist research in intercultural communication: The example of Donna Haraway

Donna Haraway criticises the ontological implications of the concept of the Anthropocene epoch proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000). The Anthropocene replaces the previous geological epoch, the Holocene, which began when the last Ice Age ended. The Anthropocene is characterised by the fact that the earth as a planet has been significantly and irreversibly shaped by human impacts, such as industrialisation and the subsequent environmental damaging. However, Haraway argues that the term Anthropocene gives too much prominence to humans and their capabilities. They have done damage to the planet, but they are unable to undo it.

Karen Barad (2007a) therefore claims that we should start a new era as soon as possible that she terms as "posthumanism" (p. 136). Haraway (1997), on the other hand, does not find the term Anthropocene appropriate because, more precisely, it is capitalism that is responsible for humanity's misery (p. 3). She therefore prefers to speak of the "Capitalocene" (Haraway, 2016a, p. 102), which for her should best be followed by the "Chthulucene" (Haraway, 2016b, p. 2), an epoch in which human beings feel and act in a responsible way with regard to the earth that they have damaged. Haraway is therefore looking for terms to describe an ontology that adequately discerns the limits but also the possibilities of humanity within its environment. Haraway is also primarily concerned with overcoming the anthropocentric perspective. However, she is also interested in what the paths to a future worth living might look like.

It is the interconnectedness and biological kinship of everything with everything that, for Haraway, ontologically constitutes the scope of human agency, and which we should therefore make use of. In her chapter "The Camille Stories" (Haraway, 2016c), Haraway takes the metaphor of 'humus' and 'compost' for the embeddedness of humans into their natural environment literally and creates several versions of a fictional narrative in which humans form new life forms with animals, such as butterflies in compost, and in this way shape a future.

All in all, ethnography inspired by new materialism is characterised by a new practice of representing people as embedded in their nature, and thus also by a metaphorical transfer to the nature of human relations. In intercultural research, for example, Vanessa Meng describes the forging of relationships in the sense of Haraway's concept of kinship and makes the activist potential of Haraway's ideas tangible in a project of "grassroots aesthetic education as world-

making within a diaspora Chinese community in the United States" (Meng, 2023, p. 62).

Similarly, Arias Galindo et al. (2023) report on an arts-based community project in Mexico that aimed to bring together different cultural groups and improve social cohesion among them. In this art project, Haraway's idea of 'making kin' explicitly served as the theoretical basis and inspiration for the participants to realise their narratives on film (Galindo et al., 2023, pp. 548–549). Haraway's concept of creating new kinships in a decolonial world of compost also serves here as an ethical orientation and as opening up possible spaces for creating new worlds.

5.3 Foundations for posthumanist research in intercultural communication: The example of Karen Barad

Karen Barad introduces the concept of 'intra-action' as a replacement for the traditional concept of interaction and as a way of fitting individual action into a new ontology of posthumanism and, in particular, Barad's concept of agential realism, described below.

In the 1920s, Danish physicist Niels Bohr gained new insights into theoretical quantum physics that contradicted previous assumptions of scientific epistemology and ontology. Barad (e.g., 2007b, pp. 97–109) reviews Bohr's papers on this topic, published in 1987 in three volumes as *The Philosophical Writings of Niels Bohr* (1987a, 1987b, 1987c). As a particularly vivid example of these findings, the so-called two-slit experiment in its (then only theoretical) experimental set-up shows that electrons are either particles or waves but never both at the same time. The result depends on how the experiment is set up and whether and how the electrons get observed at all. Bohr concludes from this that electrons do not exist as particles or waves before the experiment and without being observed, but that this concretisation into observer and object only occurs during the observation (Barad, 2007b, pp. 97–109; see also de Freitas, 2017, pp. 742–743).

Bohr and Barad believe that these logics are scalable and applicable to all areas of the world. It is therefore also true for social research that subjects and objects of research only emerge through observation and are not pre-existent. Barad refers to this emergence of subject and object in observation as intra-action. In terms of the theory of science, this is where epistemology and ontology merge. They cannot exist without each other. Barad (2007b) uses the concept of "agential realism" (pp. 136–141) to describe the insight that an object to

be observed is inextricably linked to the subject observing it and does not exist without it. Conversely, it also produces and shapes the observer in the first place.

Barad sees the method of reflection, which in a Cartesian sense emphasises human perception and processing, as the traditional epistemological approach to the world of science. Barad's substitute for this humanistic approach is the phenomenon of diffraction. Bohr's experimental apparatus, conceived as an epistemological tool, in this specific case produces a scattering, a diffraction. The matter interacts with the apparatus and with the observer and, through this diffraction, creates a subject and an object that are related to it. A description must therefore focus primarily on relations, which is why Barad also refers to relational ontologies (Barad, 2007b, pp. 71–91, as cited in Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017, p. 112). In one of his essays, Rodney Jones (2013) writes about "[c]ulture as both wave and particle" (p. 241) and draws a parallel with Barad: culture, too, can refer to both structure and human agency in a critical realist sense.

The effect of clothing is a particularly good example of the phenomenon of intra-action with the material. On the one hand, clothes and disguises are made by people. On the other hand, they change the way people perceive themselves and are perceived by others, i.e., only when they are observed. For instance, Dare (2020) highlights this effect and phenomenon at the example of the 2017 Women's Marches in the US. Participants knitted and wore pink woollen hats to protest against Trump's misogynistic statements: From Barad's point of view, not only the knitted hats, but also the bodies of these women did not exist as such before someone observed them during their performance. After all, the whole protest does not come into being, but through observation (Dare, 2020, pp. 178–179). Rodney Jones points out that the example of clothing goes back to Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1905/2003, as cited in Jones, 2013, p. 238). First, people create clothes to express their individuality, and then suddenly the clothes are there, providing a structure for something given (Jones 2013, p. 238). Barad's idea of intra-action thus highlights the conditions and consequences of a critical realist view in all its complexity.

As an example from intercultural research, Allen and Quinlivan (2017, p. 187) describe a situation in a sexuality education class in an Australian school where the didactic goal is the radical recognition of each student as an individual. At first glance, this may seem to be the state of the art in contemporary diversity education, but in its strongest sense it would actually require the children to radically perceive their situation and their co-individuals without interpreting and categorising them. However, Allen and Quinlivan's

empirical example of a culturally homogeneous Australian classroom with a single Afghan student shows that all the protagonists are in a dilemma, that they are not at all able to perceive each other without categorisation, and even more: that the didactic setting and constellation does not even help to support such an attempt. As soon as a single child has an appearance, skin colour and/or clothing that the other children do not associate as familiar with their own experiences, this child will not be able to do anything to prevent being categorised as foreign by the other children. In fact, these majority children will be aided in their categorisation and othering by the fact that they are surrounded by a material world, i.e., their classroom, which fully represents their own familiar and traditional life-world.

6. Posthumanist interculturality

It has only been possible to sketch here in broad strokes the development from theory building on the epistemological basis of logical empiricism to an ontological opening in research on intercultural communication. It is by no means linear and is connected with many facets and debates in the academic discourse. With regard to the ontological turn, Pedersen (2012), for example, suspects that it is nothing more than a rhetorical trick: The ontological turn does not really imply a structural change, but instead a gradual change of a perspective that always has existed. Thus, although its proponents reject this very label, postqualitative research could ultimately be understood simply as a method (Wolgemuth et al., 2022). And the ontological turn would then be, at best, an instrument with which the range of methods used in cultural anthropology could be extended. Moreover, there would be no reason not to equate ontology with culture (Pedersen, 2012). In this way, a new level of insight would by no means be achieved.

Furthermore, social research authors may claim to have a one-world approach to epistemology and ontology, but this does not necessarily mean that they will succeed in putting it into practice. For example, Busch and Franco (2023) have pointed out that many publications in the field of intercultural communication claim to use poststructuralist and posthumanist approaches, but then fail to do so, or only do so partially. One can also question the originality of the results of the studies: Representatives of posthumanist research usually argue that the focus is on relationships. However, relational approaches have existed before, and for them an ontological turn may not

even be necessary. Last but not least, there are doubts about the feasibility of some of the claims of poststructuralist and posthumanist research. For example, MacLure (2023) points out that as soon as we put our observations into words—either in our everyday lives or as writing researchers—we will reframe those observations as interpretations from our own perspectives. Consequently, what would be needed is an approach that operates prior to language or a non-linguistic approach (MacLure, 2023)—which might be challenging to put into practice.

Nevertheless, this review shows a clear paradigmatic development in intercultural communication research. In order to pursue the goal of discovering the new and shaking up classical disciplines, which has been mentioned since the beginning of the discipline, more and more steps towards a conceptual opening have been taken. What was developed in research on intercultural communication based on poststructuralist and posthumanist assumptions can also be described as a theory of posthumanist interculturality.

A theory of posthumanist interculturality describes the perception of a context as new in the sense that the new is not the other or the different, but what is immanent in our worlds. Access to this newness is made possible in both research and practice by perceivers reflecting on and abandoning their epistemological and ontological assumptions and allowing aspects of these dimensions to affect them anew. Interculturality is itself in a permanent state of crisis (Holliday, 2012, p. 45), in which the new can come to us, rather than the earlier assumption that epistemological crises are special cases that need to be repaired quickly.

Cultural research therefore remains possible and useful because it can draw our attention to possible points of entry into this space of the uncertain and the indeterminate in all its stages. The state of crisis, in which there is no horizon on which expectable answers to expectable questions can be found, becomes a fruitful normal state against the background of a posthumanist perspective that questions and opens up both its epistemological and ontological premises in the sense of a new materialism and an ontological turn. In the tradition of Gudykunst, it can be seen here that, until today, debates on theoretical aspects have been the main drivers of change and development in the field. Moreover, the posthumanist turn may have helped to rehabilitate the reputation and perceived use and contribution of theory to intercultural research. This does not mean, however, that this has been a linear process. What has been traced here is one discourse, although many older positions

and perspectives in the discipline exist and are supported by authors. Research is a discourse and it is the discourse that develops it further.

Appendix

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the editors of this book for their critical reading and discussion of this chapter, which helped to clarify many aspects of the text.

Disclosure statement

Use of AI assistance: During the preparation of this paper, the author used the DeepL Write service to check grammar and spelling, and to reformulate sentences for greater clarity, functions previously performed by a human language editor, given the author's non-native English language background. After using this service, the author carefully reviewed the content and made changes where necessary. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the publication. Artificial intelligence was not used to formulate analyses.

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