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Artikel

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Transculturality – of course, a Relational Paradigm!

Abstract

This article presents a written "conversation" between Julika Baumann Montecinos, Milton Bennett, Tobias Grünfelder and Josef Wieland, building on the results of an international and interdisciplinary Delphi study on transcultural competence. The conversation explores the conceptual and practical implications of adopting a relational paradigm in intercultural communication, management, and leadership. Central to the discussion is the idea that cultural complexity, increasingly characteristic of global organizations and societies, should be approached not merely as a challenge but as a valuable resource for cooperation, innovation, and mutual learning. The authors emphasize the development of commonalities, e.g., shared meanings and actions, while maintaining cultural diversity, thereby defining transcultural competence as a relational process rather than an individual skill. The relational paradigm underscores that culture is not a fixed entity but a dynamic, co-constructed process of meaning-making. The article concludes by discussing the implications for organizational learning, leadership, and intercultural training, advocating for context-specific, practice-based and commonality-focused approaches that strengthen cooperation in culturally complex environments.

Keywords: Relationality, Transculturality, Cultural Complexity, Intercultural Communication, Relational Roots, Intercultural Training

Dieser Beitrag besteht aus einem schriftlichen Austausch zwischen Julika Baumann Montecinos, Milton Bennett, Tobias Grünfelder und Josef Wieland, die auf den Ergebnissen einer internationalen und interdisziplinären Delphi-Studie zu transkultureller Kompetenz aufbaut. Im Mittelpunkt steht die Frage nach den konzeptionellen und praktischen Implikationen eines relationalen Paradigmas für interkulturelle Kommunikation, Management und Führung. Zentrale These der Diskussion ist, dass kulturelle Komplexität – zunehmend kennzeichnend für globale Organisationen und Gesellschaften – nicht vordergründig als Herausforderung, sondern als wertvolle Ressource für Zusammenarbeit, Innovation und gemeinsames Lernen betrachtet werden sollte. Die Autor*innen betonen dabei die Entwicklung von Gemeinsamkeiten, etwa geteilten Bedeutungen und Handlungen, bei gleichzeitiger Wahrung kultureller Vielfalt. Transkulturelle Kompetenz wird dabei nicht als individuelle Eigenschaft, sondern als relationaler Prozess verstanden. Das relationale Paradigma verdeutlicht, dass Kultur kein statisches Gebilde ist, sondern ein dynamischer, ko-konstruierter Prozess der Schaffung von Bedeutung. Der Beitrag schließt mit Überlegungen zu den Implikationen für organisationales Lernen, Führung und interkulturelles Training und plädiert für kontextspezifische, praxisorientierte und auf Gemeinsamkeiten abzielende Ansätze, die Kooperation in kulturell komplexen Settings stärken.

Schlüsselwörter: Relationalität, Transkulturalität, Kulturelle Komplexität, Interkulturelle Kommunikation, Relationale Wurzeln, Interkulturelles Training

Introduction

In this collaborative work, Julika Baumann Montecinos, Milton Bennett, Tobias Grünfelder and Josef Wieland engage in a written dialogue that synthesizes and reflects on insights from an international and interdisciplinary Delphi study on transcultural competence (Baumann Montecinos and Grünfelder 2022). Along selected guiding questions and headings, the exchange explores conceptual l foundations as well as practical implications of a relational and transcultural perspective in intercultural communication and management. Rather than treating cultural complexity as an obstacle, the conversation highlights its potential as a resource for cooperation and mutual learning. By focusing on the quality of relationships and the co-construction of shared meaning, the authors point toward a relational paradigm that can foster more effective collaboration in culturally complex contexts and indicates promising directions for future research.

The relational view on cultural complexity – what is it all about? And how did our research on transcultural competence begin?

Julika Baumann Montecinos and Tobias Grünfelder: The term *cultural complexity* captures the realities of today's global organizations and interconnected networks of value creation. It arises from the interplay of various cultural dimensions, such as regional, national, organizational, industry-specific, professional, generational, gender-based, and even religious. In this context, cultural diversity and the resulting cultural complexity are no longer the exception but the norm. It presents individuals and organizations with a mix of challenges, opportunities, and valuable moments of learning. Between 2020 and 2022, we conducted a Delphi study with the aim of exploring what a *transcultural* approach could contribute to fields like intercultural communication, intercultural management, and international business. Over three rounds, we engaged a group of 50 experts – both practitioners and academics – in a structured dialogue to conceptualize transcultural competence (Baumann Montecinos and Grünfelder 2022). Instead of focusing on how to *handle cultural differences*, we posed four interrelated questions about how to *develop commonalities* in culturally complex environments. This sparked a highly engaging and thought-provoking discussion. Through this collaborative process, we arrived at the following definition of transcultural competence as

> "the willingness and ability to develop new commonalities – new shared meanings and actions – beyond existing practices, through shared experiences and mutual learning, while respecting and maintaining cultural diversity." (Grünfelder and Baumann Montecinos 2023, 25f.)

A central insight that emerged from the group was the confirmation of the importance of a relational focus. In other words, the idea that individuals or organizations do not simply enter into relationships – but that they are already constituted by their relations, is a central element of such a concept of transcultural competence. Accordingly, relationships are not considered as secondary, but as foundational. This shift in perspective draws attention to the quality of relationships and their transformative potential. Jürgen Bolten, one of the key advocates of the relational paradigm in our field, offers a compelling perspective by viewing culture as a network of reciprocal dynamics between poly-relational collectives and multi-relational individual actors (2014). At this point, we would like to emphasize that the focus should not be on the terms intercultural, cross-cultural, or transcultural competence themselves, but rather on what we actually mean by them. We use the term transcultural competence in the sense of a relational epistemology, enriched by the nuance of the beyond, which highlights its ongoing and open-ended nature. Accordingly, transculturality is not merely a process between people, but something that unfolds and extends beyond them and their reciprocal practices, as an ongoing, dynamic process of co-creating shared meaning and action. This perspective also underscores the need to move beyond merely tolerating or respecting each other, toward actively developing things in common.

We are therefore delighted to see how the results of the Delphi study are now being further discussed by Milton Bennett and Josef Wieland, who were both closely involved in the study.

In this spirit, we believe that a relational perspective can serve as powerful common ground for the further development of our interdisciplinary field, offering both theoretical clarity and practical direction.

An economic perspective on cultural complexity

Josef Wieland: I will use the lens of an economist to have a closer look at cultural complexity and the competences to deal with this complexity. Usually, standard economists do not care much about culture, and if they do, they see it as a source of transactions costs and behavioural opportunism.

In my research on relational economics, this is a perspective which is no longer useful to explain actual behaviour in today's economy. From a relational economics perspective, today's economy is not just a bilateral exchange, for example, between two importing or exporting nations or between employee or employer or between supplier or government or whatever. Rather, I believe that a modern, global economy is, by its very nature, a network of different actors working together: customers, suppliers, financial markets, non-governmental organizations, political parties, and many more. They all have their own interests in different economic transactions, and they all enter into these transactions with their own perspectives derived from their specific,

different decision-making logics. Against this backdrop, I believe that value creation in a modern society is based on the ability to continue the cooperation between all these actors and to make sure that everyone can benefit from the result of this cooperation, what is then called "shared value creation" (Wieland 2024). It is in this context that I am interested in the cultural aspect: Not only because there are different nations involved, but because of the different professional logics and the different organisational cultures – as they become relevant in the cooperative processes of value creation. Actually, when it comes to shared value creation, one of the key problems we face is our struggle to organize effectively within culturally complex environments. Many of today's crises, disasters, challenges, and even global economic and political competition, stem from this inability to cooperate for mutual benefit across cultures. This is the backdrop that inspires my work on relational economics and results in our contributions on transcultural competence and transcultural leadership – as an offer to the field of intercultural communication to strengthen a relational perspective.

Back to the relational roots

Milton Bennett: My original response to the term "transculturality" in the Delphi Study mentioned above was largely negative. Through my professional lens of intercultural communication theory and practice, the term "transcultural" was mostly associated with the Soviet assumption that universal Marxism eclipsed all cultural ("tribal") differences. I had always considered the "inter-" of intercultural communication to indicate some kind of relationship – a parallel usage to, for instance, "interpersonal communication" or "interdisciplinary cooperation." But through the process of the Delphi study, I came to recognize that those relational roots were not so visible to people outside the field – people for whom "inter-" was more indicative of "comparison between" rather than "relationship among." I realized that what we intercultural old-timers (I have one of the first Ph.Ds in intercultural communication) considered annoying deviations of the field – forays into national cultural comparisons – were seen by many others as the primary focus of the field. An example of this is the prevalence of business programs offering communication advice based on national comparisons generated by Geert Hofstede's (1991) "cultural dimensions." I agree with Josef that communication based on such reified contrastive categories is more likely to be transactional than relational, and that the outcome of such transactions is increasingly unlikely to create value in interconnected networks.

While the Delphi process certainly made me less dismissive of "transcultural", it did not (yet) make me a believer. Rather, I was motivated by the (cross-, inter-, trans-) disciplinary exchange in the conversation to prepare an explanation of the relational roots

of intercultural communication along with a criticism of the more transactional applications of that field as it devolved into other disciplinary contexts. The other participants in this conversation kindly included that work, titled "The Relational Roots of Intercultural Communication," into their edited volume, *A Relational View on Cultural Complexity* (Baumann Montecinos et al. 2023). When I talk about the relational foundation of intercultural communication, I am referring back to Edward T. Hall, who first coined the term in his book *The Silent Language* (Hall 1997). His idea was that we should approach culture not as a fixed entity, but as communication itself. Hall was, I believe, one of the early voices warning against the reification of culture – that is, of treating it as a static thing. He was also aware of early constructivist thinking, like Berger and Luckmann's work on social constructionism (1966). Their book came out after Hall's, but the ideas were part of the intellectual climate of the time. In their view, people are socialized into a particular world of institutions, which generates a particular worldview and, through role enactment of that world view, people maintain the institutions that shape their culture. I think Hall and his colleague, George Trager at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute, were influenced by this dialectical perspective in trying to help business people and diplomats be more effective when working across cultures. As reported in *The Silent Language*, first they tried teaching traditional language and ethnography to the prospective sojourners, but the participants pushed back, saying they did not need all that. So, they shifted to something more practical: the idea that what the participants really needed was the ability to participate in another culture's communication system. That shift led Hall to define culture in largely relational terms. In his view, people are constantly in meaningful relationships with one another, generating shared meaning and coordinating their actions. For someone entering that culture from the outside, it was not realistic to become fully socialized into it. Instead, they needed to develop a kind of *meta-level awareness*, an ability to recognize how communication works in that culture and to adapt accordingly. This would allow them to participate meaningfully in an unfamiliar or alternative communication system, even without full immersion.

Ontological remarks about relationality

Josef Wieland: Thank you, Milton, for these important remarks and the historical context. I would like to continue with a brief ontological remark, which I think is especially important from an economist's perspective. And this is that not every relation is truly relational.

We often speak of relations, say, to *coordinate* individual activities or interest between two people or in the exchange of two discrete goods, but these are merely connections. They do not qualify as relational in the sense of *cooperating* for a common

purpose or aim. What I mean by relational is this: It describes an interactive process between two or more agents or events, in which the character of those involved is, to some extent, transformed. That's the key point. Take the example of a simple exchange of goods: nothing changes in the character of the supplier, the customer, or the goods themselves. It's an exchange transaction, not a relational transaction. Yet, some definitions of relational management reduce it to simply coordinating individual aims by managing the relationship between two people. That's too narrow. What we're truly interested in is the process, what is happening in the interaction itself? How does this process affect the people or entities involved? And how can that transformation occur while still allowing each party to maintain their own identity, including cultural distinctiveness? That is why I emphasized this at the beginning. From this understanding, it follows quite naturally that the goal of transcultural competence and transcultural management is to create new commonalities, while preserving the diversity of the actors involved. In other words, this is the lens through which I view the problems we're discussing. We need to be able to explain and respect people's diversity. After all, that's what shapes our identity. But at the same time, we must also be able to build new common ground. Without that, meaningful cooperation simply is not possible.

Transcultural learning in communities of practice

Julika Baumann Montecinos: This recognition of the co-existence and reciprocal dependence of differences and commonalities as an important precondition for successful cooperation is what characterizes the transcultural approach. At the same time, this corresponds to the practical realities of human interaction, which is an aspect I would like to emphasize. From my perspective, one of the reasons why the relational, transcultural approach feels so compelling and plausible might be because it resonates with what actually happens in real life. In our teams and organizations, the creation of shared meaning through shared practice is something we have all experienced over and over again, haven't we? If we take a closer look at these real-life experiences, we can observe that such processes of co-creation of meaning do not happen because we're "celebrating" diversity, but because we acknowledge that it's there, that we carry diverse characteristics, backgrounds, interests and resources - and then, very pragmatically, look for ways to make things work, to get things done together. This is where transcultural processes actually happen: Getting things done together often leads to new commonalities over time, thus creating a sense of belonging without having to give up who we are. We can observe these processes in business teams, in student groups at universities, in multi-stakeholder dialogues on all kinds of topics and in many further settings of doing something together. In other words, re-

al-life cooperation provides us with manifold evidence of how shared practices can serve as a breeding ground for developing new commonalities. Once the actors involved, with all their diverse backgrounds, have found a starting point together, however small, the transcultural learning process can develop almost naturally. This is where we can point to another interesting concept, which is the concept of "communities of practice" as introduced by Wenger (1999): The transcultural learning processes described above enable communities of practice to emerge over time and, at the same time, take them as a starting point for further processes of transcultural learning – in a continuous spiral that unfolds dynamically and time- and context-specifically. Further exploring the potentials of transcultural learning in communities of practice, for example, for management and team development, seems promising, because it addresses the core of what shapes successful cooperation in contexts of cultural complexity. To summarize, perhaps this is why our approach is receiving so much attention: because it offers to help understand and navigate the real conditions of cross-cultural collaboration. And those conditions are, above all, *relational*. That's also how I understand your concept of culture, isn't it, Milton?

Milton Bennett: Yes indeed! I would like to highlight my earlier comment that intercultural communication was originally born out of a deeply *relational* mindset. At its core, it aimed to understand culture itself as something that emerges through interaction, something dynamic and co-created. But over time, especially in business and training contexts, the field drifted toward a more *comparative* approach. Culture became something to categorize and list, reduced to national traits and dimensions. Hofstede's work is a prime example of that shift. I actually discussed this with him once. He was in the audience when I gave a lecture where I gently criticized this approach. I pointed out that intercultural communication, as originally conceived, was built on different principles such as *interaction*, not just comparison. Afterwards, he came up to me and agreed. He said his intention had never been to teach people how to communicate across cultures, or to treat culture as communication. His goal was to link cultural behavior with economic behavior. That's a valid aim, but it's a different one from what intercultural communication originally set out to do.

Outside of intercultural communication, tools like Hofstede's dimensions and similar systems have often been used to support cultural comparison more than cultural interaction, turning interaction into a *comparative* rather than a *relational* process. That deviation from the original formulation of intercultural communication treated culture in a more taxonomic as opposed to developmental way. In contrast, intercultural communication theory has always treated "culture" as a co-created, interactive event. In some other work, Josef refers to this as "structural coupling" – a

term I also use, inspired by the constructivist biologist Humberto Maturana (Maturana and Varela 1979). It describes how systems, including cultural ones, generate meaning through interaction. If we hold onto this idea of culture as structural coupling, we stay grounded in the *relational* nature of intercultural work. And while we might now call it "transcultural communication," the foundation remains the same: culture is not something we *have*, it is something we *do*. To borrow from the physicist Carlo Rovelli, "events are not things – they are nodes in a relational process." (2021) Everything exists in relationships. Meaning emerges through the interaction of the observer and the observed, not from isolated entities. That perspective, I believe, is essential for understanding culture in today's complex world.

The importance of culture and shared meaning

Josef Wieland: This brings us to a closer look at the idea of cultural complexity. I see culture as a process of *signifying events* (Hall 1997), a process of creating meaning. And cultural complexity is a defining feature of today's global production networks, not just global value chains. In networks such as the ASEAN region, you find a rich mix of regional, religious, professional, organizational, linguistic, and decision-making cultures all interacting. The challenge isn't just the number of cultures involved; it's the *ongoing interaction* between them. That's what creates complexity, not the variety itself, but the dynamic process of constantly generating new events and meanings. So, the key to success in these economic and social value creation networks lies in managing this: not just to overcome cultural *challenges*, but to understand and work with the *interactive nature* of cultural meaning-making. To borrow from you, Milton, we need a *cooperation of meaning*. That is, we need to manage how meaning is socially organized across and between diverse actors. That's where I align with cultural theory. I view culture as something that helps us *make sense* of other events. In network theory terms, this means ensuring that the *social organization of meaning* (Hannerz 1992) is not only understood but governable. This leads to some clear economic implications. From my perspective, *transcultural competence* is not only an individual trait but also an *organizational capability*. Both are *relational assets of shared value creation*. It's not enough for leaders alone to possess it, organizations themselves must develop it as a strategic asset if they are to navigate cultural complexity effectively. And frankly, not many business or political organizations are fully equipped for this yet.

The role of commonalities and their potential

Tobias Grünfelder: This is where the power and potential of *commonalities* come into play. First, it's important to clarify: Commonalities are not the same as similarities. One of the main findings from our Delphi study was the need for a more precise understanding of commonalities, similarities, and differences. *Similarities* refer to being alike and can often lead to homogenization. *Commonalities*, by contrast, refer to the act or process of sharing something – shared interests, challenges, or ways of thinking, feeling, or acting. Striving for commonalities involves connecting and building relationships while maintaining diversity (Baumann Montecinos and Grünfelder 2022). The goal, then, is to develop commonalities *while preserving differences/diversity*. So what are commonalities? Commonalities can take many forms; they emerge through shared experiences, learning, and action. While some may be universal, such as certain cognitive capacities or the ability to have experiences, many are created through interaction.

The philosopher François Jullien (2009) highlights that the "common" is not a fixed foundation we arrive at by stripping away all cultural differences. Rather, it is something infinitely shareable, shapeable, and communicable, a dynamic process of mutual understanding that respects and integrates differences. The *common* consists in the ability to develop connections, not in any pre-existing sameness. Focusing on commonalities also shifts our attention toward *relations*. Commonalities are inherently relational and can serve as both the starting point and the vehicle for transcultural learning. Importantly, this approach does not overlook or replace the value of understanding cultural differences. Instead, it offers a new reference point: moving away from a comparison of cultures toward a relational approach to navigating cultural complexity. Commonalities, in this sense, are an invitation to explore shared meaning, to co-create across cultures, and to engage deeply with others without losing what makes each perspective unique. Transcultural competence, as the ability and willingness to develop commonalities while maintaining diversity, is therefore also a relational process between the different actors involved. So, transcultural competence is not something that resides solely within a single actor. The kind of transcultural competence I'm referring to and most interested in is not merely situated "in the head" of a person but rather embedded in a relational context. Ultimately, transcultural competence plays a crucial role in organizations and fulfils various functions. What do you think, Professor Wieland?

Transcultural competence as a process with two functions

Josef Wieland: Yes, transcultural competence serves two essential functions. First, it helps to deal with contingencies and frictions in cooperative processes, that's the more defensive economizing or "problem-solving" side. Second, and just as important, it can boost the productivity of the resources invested in joint projects, that's the value and business opportunities creating side. Much of the literature in organizational theory tends to highlight the downsides of cultural diversity such as conflict, complexity, and

cost. The positive effects we often hope for, like better innovation through diverse perspectives or lower governance costs due to increased trust, are rarely backed by strong empirical evidence. So, the common response in practice is to ignore cultural complexity because we don't know how to deal with it effectively. I suggest that, instead of ignoring these frictions, we should manage them in a way that turns them into more productive interactions. That's the first function: reducing relational friction. The second function is more forward-looking: seeing cultural complexity not as a burden but as a resource. If we have the ability and the willingness to engage with it, transcultural competence becomes a strategic asset. It allows us to handle not just one cultural difference – for example, between national backgrounds – but to navigate broader and multi-layered complexities across regional or global networks, professions, generations, and more. Now, frictions and contingencies in cooperation generates costs, which I call relational costs. These stem from the very nature of the firm: enabling diverse stakeholders to pool their resources and creating shared value. Relational costs might include stakeholder dialogues, integrity and compliance management, or investments in cultural and organizational learning.

cf. Airbus Industry — At the same time, transcultural competence can help generate value, not just income, but a relational rent, a rent from cooperation. In other words, doing more with the same resources by making cooperation more effective and meaningful. I go into more detail in my article on "Transcultural Competences and Relational Costs" (Wieland 2023), but those are the key points: reduce frictions and unlock potential to generate relational rents.

Milton Bennett: Here, I would like to add my understanding of competence. For me, intercultural or transcultural competence is not a fixed trait or internal quality like open-mindedness that causes competent behavior. Instead, it's an ongoing process rooted in relationships. What we often see as behaviors or skills are just indicators of deeper relational dynamics. To truly engage with and build these competencies, we must understand the underlying relational processes, not just manipulate surface behaviors. Too often, competence is mistaken for something you "have," like intelligence being viewed as a fixed internal condi-

cf. CEFR-CompVol. — tion. But competence is more like riding a bicycle: It is something you do, a skill you perform, not a trait you possess. You cannot rank people by how competent they are, just as you cannot rank them (outside of a race) by how well they ride a bike. The shift we need is to embrace a relational paradigm where competence is about active participation and adaptive behavior within relationships. This means focusing on how people engage, cooperate, and create shared meaning together, especially in intercultural contexts, rather than seeing competence as a static personal attribute.

If competence is something you do rather than something you have, and culture is defined relationally, how can the constructs of culture and competence be distinguished or disentangled from each other?

Milton Bennett: Do we really need to disentangle culture and competence? That's a great question. I think the term "competence" is often overused. George Kelly's idea of the "range of convenience" is helpful here. Every concept works well within a certain range, but outside that, we need new terms.
Competence usually means being able to do something, like riding a bike or doing mathematics, skills we learn, not ones we inherit. But when it comes to intercultural competence, it's not something innate or passed down genetically. In fact, humans are often predisposed to avoid those who are different. So, intercultural competence is more like a skill that we must consciously develop from generation to generation. I would say it is better described as a kind of consciousness, a way of approaching experience, participating fully, and organizing our understanding. It is less about fixed abilities and more about an advanced awareness or meta-cognition.

Josef Wieland: Thank you, Milton, I agree, and it reflects my understanding of competence. From my perspective, transcultural competence is a vital individual and organizational asset that enables regional and global economic cooperation and helps manage cultural complexity. It supports both the willingness and ability to cooperate internationally, which is especially important in times of ongoing global crises, conflicts, and challenges. Some people believe we are entering an era of de-globalization and renationalization, where cultural complexity will become less relevant. I disagree. I think we are facing a new phase of globalization, driven not by the West but by the Global South, which will also be the main beneficiary.
As economists and global actors, we must rise to this challenge by fostering cooperation, particularly with these emerging regions. This makes transcultural competence more important than ever. Having some common ground is not enough; we need to learn new ways of working together by adapting our perceptions, opinions, and behaviors.

Julika Baumann Montecinos: Our initiative, the *Transcultural Caravan*, founded in 2016, offers a unique platform to demonstrate and practice these learning processes, which are needed for effective global cooperation. It provides practitioners, educators, and students from around the world with meaningful, real-world experiences of collaboration. One key insight – also confirmed by our Delphi study – is that *real experience matters*. And these experiences are fundamentally relational. In our workplaces, teams, and classrooms, transcultural competence emerges through the cre-

ation of meaningful interactions. As we mentioned before, these interactions help to nurture commonalities and, over time, foster a sense of belonging within a community of practice. Shifting the focus from fixed concepts of *identity* to more dynamic notions of *belonging* can ease many tensions and debates – and, again, it's convincingly practical. The spirit of the *Transcultural Caravan* and its growing network lies in showcasing that it really works: getting things done together, exploring complex topics from diverse perspectives, and, through these processes, developing new commonalities.

Our learnings from the *Transcultural Caravan* are deeply project- and context-based: Over the years, we've learned that this work requires time, patience, and – most importantly – the willingness and ability to engage in cooperative learning processes by all actors involved. This is why we see transcultural competence not as a fixed trait of one individual actor, but as a *relational process* that emerges between different actors. The outcomes of our work – whether in collaboration with students, universities, companies, or NGOs – are rich and rewarding. They demonstrate that *the relations themselves generate value* for all involved.

Milton Bennett: The great insight of our ongoing conversation is how it links the basic idea of relations with value creation. I have worked with business people for decades, and the common argument is that diversity holds value. As Rosabeth Moss Kantor (1995) from Harvard Business School said, every organization has access to diversity, especially in the 21st century. The real challenge is how to turn that access into an asset. This remains a mystery for many, but in our circle, we understand that the key lies in recognizing the relational dimension of diversity. It is about engaging with "otherness" in a way that can generate both economic and social value.

So, what are the implications of a relational paradigm for practice and intercultural training?

Milton Bennett: I have trained many trainers and thought a lot about this. The question gets to the core of applying the theory clearly. Too often, we start with the idea that diversity is relational, but when training, we fall back on giving fixed tips for "real" events. This creates confusion because it treats events as fixed facts rather than moments in ongoing relationships. People often reject these tips because they don't work universally. The real issue is that these tips come from seeing events as static, not as part of a dynamic relational process. In training, instead of treating cultural information as a window to look through, we should see it as a doorway to step through. When you step through, you engage differently – you adapt and relate in new ways. This is the essence of "cultural empathy." Of course, the real goal of the kind of relational training we are talking about is not just to

make individuals more empathetically competent; it is to nurture a kind of mutual adaptation that can translate into new value. A specific technique that I use to that end in intercultural training is the creation of "Third Culture Space" (Bennett and Castiglioni 2004). It is an advanced activity that demands previous developmental work so that people can already "step through" into other cultural dimensions. When two or more people attempt this kind of empathy simultaneously, it generates a very flexible liminal space that can be used for all kinds of intercultural coordinating purposes – including the creation of new commonalities!

Josef Wieland: Milton gave an excellent answer, blending practical experience with theory, something I really admire. From my side, we developed a transcultural learning model (Wieland and Baumann Montecinos 2018; Grünfelder and Baumann Montecinos 2024) focused on experience, inspired by the philosopher Whitehead's idea that reality is what we experience (1929). Four things are key:

First, adopt an attitude of non-normative observation – do not rush to judge or form fixed opinions. Just observe differences and look for potential common ground.

Second, creating commonality is not just intellectual; it is about doing things together and sharing experiences. Transcultural competence is about joint action, not just knowledge.

Third, we need to stabilize this practice by building communities of practice – groups from different parts of an organization who voluntarily come together to solve problems and learn through shared experience. These communities create a sense of belonging – not necessarily identity but belonging to a shared transaction that requires cooperation.

Finally, this all needs organizational support. Many companies, especially in Germany, are international but not truly global in their operations. Real transcultural competence requires global governance structures and support, including understanding political realities, like dealing with the Communist Party in China. So, it starts with non-judgmental observation, moves to shared action and experience, builds communities, and requires organizational backing. It's a process that takes time but is essential for meaningful global cooperation.

Tobias Grünfelder and Julika Baumann Montecinos: In the light of what we have discussed here so far, this highlights that a relational and transcultural approach can have a huge impact on organizations. With this assumption, we're not alone; the idea of a "relational turn" is gaining momentum across the social sciences, from economics to psychology and sustainability sciences. Against this backdrop, it is time for organizations to take the relational approach seriously and begin shifting their perspectives: Instead of focusing only on individuals, organizations or cultures as separate units, we need to start focusing on the *relations* between them (and even the relations to nature itself). At the same

time, taking on a relational view changes how organizations see themselves. Rather than thinking of themselves as isolated entities, they begin to understand that they are part of a larger web – a nexus of stakeholder interests, resources, and interactions. And that shift matters, as it moves the focus toward cooperation, collaboration, partnerships, and the creation of shared value. In today's complex, fast-paced world, companies simply can't afford to treat topics like diversity, sustainability, or employee well-being as tick boxes or extra costs. And yet, in many companies, diversity is still seen primarily through a cost lens: costs for intercultural training, for example. A relational view of cultural complexity invites us to shift the organizational mindset from "*compliance and cost*" to "*opportunity and value creation*." Transcultural leadership and transcultural management play a key role in enabling and communicating this shift. It's essential for leadership and management to acknowledge that cultural complexity is not a soft topic, a "nice to have," or merely an additional task for Human Resources (HR). Instead, it must be integrated into stakeholder management, strategic planning, risk assessment, innovation processes, knowledge management, and even organizational resilience. The fact that cultural complexity is inherent in shared value creation across cultures, borders, and disciplines makes it a difficult topic to ignore for leadership and management.

This shift also calls for a fresh approach in the field of intercultural training. We need more holistic, context-based, and relationship-focused learning formats, ones that actually support transcultural learning throughout the organization. Taking this aspiration further, we could reflect on some important questions: Why not design training that brings together both internal and external stakeholders? Why stick to generic "How to do business in X country" training, when we could instead bring all the relevant partners on board and build something tailored to a specific project or context? Why not go beyond just recognizing cultural differences and start intentionally developing new *commonalities*? And why focus only on the challenges of diversity, when we could also tap into its *positive potentials*? Summarizing, we suggest intercultural training should evolve into more comprehensive learning journeys. Such training should support HR departments in embedding cultural diversity strategically across the entire organization, not just as a one-off workshop, and even connect it to other important topics such as sustainability and digital transformation. Many past approaches, especially those focused only on the individual, like unconscious bias or leadership training, in many cases have not delivered the expected results. These shortcomings substantiate the call to shift towards *relational learning*.

As we said, the practical implications, particularly for organizational learning, are wide-ranging. What we are discussing here is really just the starting point for applying a relational and transcultural approach. There's also a lot our field can learn from others, like complexity science, facilitation, systems thinking, or sense-making practices (Weick 1995). Ultimately, what we are advocating for is a broader effort to put *relations* at the heart of how we think and act by creating real-world practices that help us not just to work together, not just to get things done together, but then, to come to a place where we can *thrive* together.

What are the roles of emotions in your concepts and intercultural communication?

Josef Wieland: From my perspective, emotions represent a different kind of decision-making, non-rational and non-cognitive. I agree that many hesitate to include emotions in training, likely because they see them as potential sources of conflict that are hard to manage. In my experience with companies, emotions definitely play a positive role. That said, I am not aware of any research that fully integrates emotions into intercultural training models. So, I encourage you to explore this area, but I cannot speak of any validated work on it yet.

Milton Bennett: Emotions are deeply tied to relationships; they are not separate things but manifestations of how we relate to others. The work of Antonio Damasio, particularly in *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999), explores how our behavior and emotions are inseparable manifestations of each other. In research, this is often discussed under the concept of embodiment rather than emotional intelligence – the latter a derivative term that sometimes lacks much substance. Embodiment means fully experiencing and participating in cultural realities, not just following tips. When we enter a new culture, we do not just apply rules; we seek a "feeling of appropriateness", an emotional sense that guides authentic behavior. That term comes from Ida Castiglioni, with whom I've written about this under the title, *Embodied Ethnocentrism* (Bennett and Castiglioni 2004). Different cultures have different emotional cues, so to truly engage, we must connect with these alternative emotional relationships. So yes, emotions are crucial and unavoidable in intercultural work if we want to do it well.

How has the current global context, with multiple cultures interacting simultaneously, changed the way we perceive and approach intercultural cooperation?

Milton Bennett: That is a great question. It reminds me of Park's idea (1928) of the "marginal man" – or better, "marginal person" – someone who lives between cultures. Lifton's concept of "protean man" is similar. It is about being comfortable in liminal spaces, such as the "Third Culture Spaces" generated by mutual adaptation. This "in-betweenness" is really a condition of consciousness. It allows a person to move fluidly among different

cultural realities. So, the doorway isn't just from Culture A to Culture B and done. In today's global context, many people often live in a liminal state, shifting easily among multiple cultural frameworks. This flexibility is key to navigating cultural complexity. But for people who are unprepared to use it effectively, liminality may seem like rootlessness or solipsism – a loss of anchorage in reality. Right now, I think we are seeing a "culture war" on this epistemological battleground.

Josef Wieland: We live in challenging times where economic, political, and cultural differences shape global interactions. My focus is on how we can develop a transcultural, relational approach in global cultural communication and management. Relationality means more than just a connection between two parties. It involves multiple actors interacting in ways that transform the situation and themselves. Without this transformation, no new common ground can be created. Transculturality is about creating these new commonalities through cooperation. A key challenge today is that, while we trade and interact globally, we often resist transforming our identities or building deeper cooperative bonds. To overcome this, we need to ask: What do humans have in common? Philosophers and economists offer different answers, but I believe the foundation is shared human experience. We all face universal facts of life – aging, joy, need, mortality – and common challenges like hunger, discrimination, and health. We also share metaphysical beliefs and values that shape behavior, even if these differ locally. Recognizing that all humans use values to structure life is a starting point for dialogue and cooperation.

Transculturality means embracing these shared experiences and differences to create new commonalities. This mutual transformation and cooperative learning are essential for surviving and thriving in a globalized world.

From my perspective, culture is too often linked to territory, like a nation or organization, and measured by distance. But in today's global context, transcultural competence requires us to see culture as relational spaces, not tied to physical distance or territory. These relational spaces are shaped by cognitive, social behavior, and interactions. For example, economic transactions, like buying a T-shirt associated with child labor or a car associated with environmental concerns, create these spaces and influence how we experience culture. The challenge is that people and events belong to many overlapping relational spaces. We're used to face-to-face, territory-based communities, but now we must develop the competence to create and navigate these relational spaces intellectually and emotionally. It's a difficult task, but a necessary one. The drifting apart of territorial and relational spaces is the most important challenge in the emergence of a world society.

Milton Bennett: I want to highlight what Josef said. It echoes Rovelli's idea from quantum epistemology that space and time are constructs we use to understand the world in three dimensions (Rovelli 2021). But at a deeper level, relationships are not bound by space or time. Particles can be instantly connected, no matter the distance, showing that space and time are essentially fictions. This aligns with the relational networks Josef mentioned. The closer we understand these underlying connections, the better we can grasp how we quickly engage in complex global relationships beyond physical distance.

Julika Baumann Montecinos and Tobias Grünfelder: To better understand these underlying relational processes and to genuinely care about them may be the key to unlocking the kinds of change we hope to see in our societies and organizations. Thank you, Milton and Josef, for this enriching conversation on transculturality and the relational view. The field of intercultural communication and management is evolving, and we hope that our transcultural approach, with its strong relational focus and emphasis on developing commonalities, can offer meaningful contributions and inspiration along the way. The journey continues.

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