

A Transcultural Approach to Cross-cultural Studies: Towards an Alternative to a National Culture Model

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Introduction

Processes of globalization and international migration are changing societies across the world. Cultural formations and identities are less frequently bound to geographic and national communities. Rather, cross-border relationships and experiences help to shape cultural identities that are plural and dynamic. According to Steven Vertovec, these dynamic cultural identities could be framed as a “transnational” development; for Vertovec, this term refers to the multiple relationships and practices connecting people, organizations, and institutions across national borders.¹ Improved communication, transportation, telecommunication, and technology have increased global interrelations across a broad range of domains. The result is what Vertovec calls a context of super-diversity in which cultural traditions travel and transcend traditional borders, allowing individuals and groups to retain multiple forms of affiliation to their national heritage.² For Vertovec, transnationalism describes the evolution of such interconnections and relationships, which challenges conventional notions of cultural diversity as something stable, organized, and clearly identifiable as related to distinct cultural communities or national borders.

In spite of Vertovec’s approach to social complexity and change, cross-cultural studies in disciplines such as psychology, international management, and communication have depended heavily upon a national culture model. This framework recognizes a level of cultural diversity within the borders of nation states, yet seeks to identify common traits shared broadly across the inhabitants of a nation. A leading figure within this field is the Dutch scholar

1 Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism: Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 2009).

2 Steven Vertovec, “Super-Diversity and Its Implications,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (2007): 1024–1054, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701599465>; Fran Meissner and Steven Vertovec, “Comparing Super-Diversity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 4 (2015): 541–555, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.980295>.

Geert Hofstede,³ whose research team has developed an influential and widely-used framework with which to identify and compare cultural differences and similarities between people from different countries.⁴ Hofstede defines six distinct dimensions of culture, which are identifiable on both a national and organizational level. These are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, long/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint.⁵ On a national level, Hofstede's six-dimension model provides a tool for identifying a nation's culture, which allows for comparison between nations. Similarly, on an organizational level, the cultural dimensions make it possible to analyze an organization's main characteristics. For example, in a culture with a tendency to avoid uncertainty, firms or public organizations would be less encouraged to undertake risky projects. According to Hofstede, individuals are collectively mentally programmed in a way that "distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from others."⁶ Each member of a community therefore carries a "software of the mind,"⁷ a distinctive pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting that culturally programs the individual. For Hofstede, such cultural programming makes nations and national affiliation the most effective units by which to examine cultural difference.

In this paper, I critically question the suitability of a framework that is grounded in the classification of cultures for studying cultural interactions in the twenty-first century. As discussed above, contemporary understandings of culture view it as dynamic and interrelated, while Hofstede's understanding emphasizes categorization and stability. Drawing attention to the potential conflict between these two views, I propose an alternative framework, arguing for a transcultural approach to cross-cultural studies based on

3 Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010); Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989).

4 Klaes Eringa, Laura N. Caudron, Fei Xie Rieck, and Tobias Gerhardt, "How Relevant are Hofstede's Dimensions for Inter-cultural Studies? A Replication of Hofstede's Research Among Current International Business Students," *Research in Hospitality Management* 5, no. 2 (2015): 187–198, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22243534.2015.11828344>; Chrysovalantis Gaganis, Iftekhar Hasan, Panagiota Papadimitri, and Menelaos Tasiou, "National Culture and Risk-Taking: Evidence from the Insurance Industry," *Journal of Business Research* 97 (2019): 104–116, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.12.037>.

5 Hofstede, "Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2011): 1–26; 19, <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>.

6 Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences*, 21.

7 Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 5.

Wolfgang Welsch's transcultural model.⁸ Using examples from an educational context, I illustrate how a transcultural approach to teaching may counteract a conventional conception of culture in school that runs the risk of reifying the identities and practices of students with minority backgrounds. Although many schools now contain students from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, issues of diversity are often reduced to superficial celebrations and single happenings, without much consideration of the cultural complexity of individual students.⁹ Asking how a transcultural approach could be beneficial in an educational setting may help teachers to recognize complexity as a common feature in today's schools. In this way, teachers may critically challenge practices where minority students are expected to adapt to and perform in school settings that replicate mainstream and dominant pedagogical practices. My research question is thus: How can Welsch's transcultural framework form an adequate alternative to Hofstede's conventional model of national cultures, and in which ways could such a framework be beneficial when applied to a pedagogical context?

I first clarify the characteristics of Hofstede's approach to cross-cultural analysis, and critically assess its implications for understanding and interacting with people from other cultures. I then present Welsch's work on cultural transformation and demonstrate how Welsch's concept of transculturality thus offers a convincing alternative to Hofstede's model. Central to this approach is a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of the dynamic space in which cross-border social formation and identity construction operate. I conclude the article with a discussion of the importance of a transcultural perspective for teachers working in increasingly diverse classrooms.

Hofstede's model of national cultures

Hofstede has been a leading scholar in cross-cultural studies for over forty years. He and his research team have conducted a number of comprehensive studies on the influence of culture on workplace values. Conducting his first research in the late 1960s, Hofstede used a sample of 116,000 IBM engineers, representing a wide spectrum of nationalities, to identify cultural characteristics as related to national affiliation.¹⁰ Hofstede first developed four categories within which to map cultural characteristics: uncertainty

8 Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality: The Changing Form of Cultures Today," *Filozofski vestnik* 22, no. 2 (2001): 59–86; Wolfgang Welsch, *Transkulturalität: Realität, Geschichte, Aufgabe* (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017).

9 Stephen May and Christine E. Sleeter, ed., *Critical Multiculturalism: Theory and Praxis* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

10 Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences*; Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*.

avoidance, masculinity, power distance, and individualism. He later added two new categories to include characteristics not covered by the previous four, namely long/short-term orientation and indulgence/restraint.¹¹ He calls the resulting model “the dimensional paradigm.”¹² According to Hofstede, these six categories are independent but closely related, simultaneously stable and distinct, and they differ significantly between employees from different countries. On this basis, Hofstede concludes that most countries share a particular national character. He calls this “the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one human group from another.”¹³ Further, he has asserted that globalization does not affect the applicability of this model; rather, these six dimensions can help researchers to understand the internal logic and the implications of these changes.

The first category, power distance, describes the extent to which “the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.”¹⁴ The second, uncertainty avoidance, refers to “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” or aim to avoid such situations.¹⁵ Societies that score high on individualism, the third category, prize individual achievements over collective values such as identifying with and caring for the extended family and the larger community. The fourth category is masculinity, which specifies to what degree a society is characterized by “masculine” values such as competitiveness, performance, and success, rather than “feminine” values such as solidarity, care for the weak, and warm personal relationships. In the 1980s, Hofstede added a fifth category, long/short-term orientation. While the values found along the long-term pole are “perseverance, thrift, ordering relationships by status, and having a sense of shame,” those along the short-term pole involve “reciprocating social obligations, respect for tradition, protecting one’s ‘face,’ and personal steadiness and stability.”¹⁶ Hofstede later added a sixth category, indulgence/restraint, to refer to the extent to which a society allows “free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun.”¹⁷

11 Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*.

12 Hofstede, “Dimensionalizing Cultures,” 21.

13 Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences*, 21.

14 Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 61.

15 Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 191.

16 Hofstede, “Dimensionalizing Cultures,” 13.

17 Hofstede, “Dimensionalizing Cultures,” 15.

Hofstede's model is partially grounded in a critique of cultural universalism and partly in the need for organizations and companies to boost their competitive advantage by utilizing international relationships.¹⁸ In developing his model, Hofstede drew inspiration from cultural relativism, which criticizes the view that culture can be interpreted and judged according to a universal standard. For Hofstede and other cultural relativists, to embrace this viewpoint would be to repeat the mistakes of colonial times, where "foreigners often wielded absolute power in other societies and imposed their rules on those societies."¹⁹

Hofstede built on anthropological and sociological traditions that emphasize unique national cultures. An example of such traditions can be found in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).²⁰ Faced with an expanding and dominating French state, Herder vigorously argued for the existence of a distinctively German cultural essence: That is, a specific history and set of characteristics that distinguish Germany and German culture from France and French culture. In a similar vein, Hofstede claimed that "cultural differences cannot be understood without the study of history."²¹ From this perspective, to understand the origins of cultural difference, one must conduct a comparative study of the history and seemingly distinct features of national cultures.²²

Hofstede's model corresponds with the need for greater international communication and interaction across national borders, and a widespread interest in gaining a competitive advantage that emerged in the years following World War II. As communication and international relations increased in the postwar period, businesspeople, health workers, and immigrant workers required tools and cultural guidelines to help them perform their work in new and foreign cultural contexts. A number of diversity management programs were developed in response, including Hofstede's theory on the comparison of national cultures.²³ Like Hofstede's theory, much of this work has been focused on deciphering cultural codes and identifying the different

18 Anastasia Gaspay, Shana Dardan, and Leonardo Legorreta, "'Software of the Mind'—A Review of Applications of Hofstede's Theory to IT Research," *Journal of Information Technology Theory and Application* 9, no. 3 (2008): 1–37.

19 Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2001), 15.

20 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

21 Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values*, 12.

22 Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values*, 15.

23 See also Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday, 1959); Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, Edwin R. McDaniel, and Carolyn S. Roy, *Communication between Cultures*, 9th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017).

deep structures of cultures in order to facilitate effective communication and fruitful interaction.

In an increasingly globalized business environment, there remains a need for people from different cultural backgrounds to work together, meaning that improved interactions with other national business cultures is often a key factor for success. As companies enter new markets, and international cooperation between project teams or within production processes becomes increasingly common, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and faulty communication become more and more likely. From a corporate perspective, Markus Hofelich notes that to act as if one is above national cultural differences is to give the impression that one is systematically working against them.²⁴ Hofstede sought to mitigate against these issues, writing that “the study of national cultures is stimulated by a need for better international understanding and cooperation and is made possible by the availability of more systematic and more objective information.”²⁵ Thus, according to Hofstede’s model of national cultures, international financial and professional success can be achieved by acquiring in-depth cultural knowledge about the distinct customs, practices, and worldviews of the cooperating nations.

The strength of Hofstede’s model therefore lies in the practical applicability of its framework, which supposedly allows anyone who works within international relations to comprehend the cultural etiquette of different countries. For example, individuals may become aware that some cultures have no place for small talk within business negotiations, while in other societies it may be impossible to get into business without first building a good relationship.²⁶

Hofstede’s framework has also proved itself useful for a number of studies within the financial sector. For example, and as emphasized by Chrysovalantis Gaganis et al., it is highly important to investigate the cultural factors that drive risk-taking in this domain, especially considering the revelations of the last decade’s global financial crises.²⁷ However, Gaganis et al. note that research within finance, particularly that which focuses on risk-taking, has paid considerably less attention to the influence of national culture in comparison to other domains.²⁸ While acknowledging the influence that culture exerts

24 Markus Hofelich, “International Business Culture 101: Corporate Etiquette on a Global Scale,” *Experteer Magazine*, October 16, 2016, accessed January 18, 2022, <https://us.experteer.com/magazine/international-business-culture/>.

25 Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values*, 15.

26 Hofelich, “International Business Culture 101.”

27 Gaganis et al., “National Culture and Risk-Taking.”

28 Gaganis et al., “National Culture and Risk-Taking.”

on financial decision-making, studies have tended to focus on firm-specific determinants, which means that culture itself receives little attention in spite of its importance.²⁹ In a study of the interplay between national culture and the willingness of insurance firms to take risks, Gaganis et al. found evidence to support a positive relationship between individualism and risk-taking along with a negative relationship between uncertainty avoidance or power distance and risk-taking.³⁰ In this way, their study draws attention to the relation between values, attitudes, and behaviors in the form of managerial decisions. The study also strengthens the premises of Hofstede's model, which is to question the idea that there exists a common standard of values, thought, and behavior that all societies supposedly accept or act in accordance with.

Limitations of a national culture model

Although Hofstede's model of national cultures is a widely used framework for cross-cultural studies,³¹ it can be problematized in several ways.³² Firstly, it bears asking how a person's "software of the mind" and "mental programming"³³ might relate to their national culture. Hofstede et al. assert that there will always be a certain level of cultural variation within a society, and that the national culture framework allows for a variety of individual practices, habits, and worldviews.³⁴ However, the national culture model suggests that people from different countries living within the same nation still share certain national characteristics related to their nation of residence. For example, Hofstede writes that "even if a society contains different cultural

29 See also George Andrew Karolyi, "The Gravity of Culture for Finance," *Journal of Corporate Finance* 41 (2016): 610–625, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcorpfin.2016.07.003>.

30 Gaganis et al., "National Culture and Risk-Taking," 114.

31 Eringa et al., "How Relevant are Hofstede's Dimensions for Inter-cultural Studies?"; Donald J. Lund, Lisa K. Scheer, and Irina V. Kozlenkova, "Culture's Impact on the Importance of Fairness in Interorganizational Relationships," *Journal of International Marketing* 21, no. 4 (2013): 21–43, <https://doi.org/10.1509/jim.13.0020>; Nigel Holden, "Why Marketers Need a New Concept of Culture for the Global Knowledge Economy," *International Marketing Review* 21, no. 6 (2004): 563–572, <https://doi.org/10.1108/02651330410568015>.

32 Søren Askegaard, Dannie Kjeldgaard, and Eric J. Arnould, "Reflexive Culture's Consequences," in *Beyond Hofstede: Culture Frameworks for Global Marketing and Management*, ed. Cheryl Nakata (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 101–121; Susan Forquer Gupta, "Integrating National Cultural Measures in the Context of Business Decision Making: An Initial Measurement Development Test of a Mid-level Model," *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal* 19, no. 4 (2012): 455–506, <https://doi.org/10.1108/13527601211269987>; Peter Nynäs, "Interpretative Models of Estrangement and Identification," in *Bridges of Understanding: Perspectives on Intercultural Communication*, ed. Øyvind Dahl, Iben Jensen, and Peter Nynäs (Oslo: Unipub forlag, 2006), 23–37.

33 Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 5.

34 Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 7.

groups ... they usually share certain cultural traits with one another that make their members recognizable to foreigners as belonging to that society.”³⁵ These cultural traits consist of patterns of thought in the form of values, so-called “deep structures,” that are formed early in childhood as part of processes of socialization into society.³⁶ The deep structure of culture refers to elements that “have been part of every culture for thousands of years,”³⁷ such as views on the relation between God and man, the citizen and the state, and equality and hierarchy in a society. Consequently, within a national-culture paradigm, individuals are perceived as products of their societies. The values of the individual affect their society’s attitudes, which in turn affects the behavior of its members. Therefore, people are first and foremost seen as representatives of cultural communities, and can be explained and understood in light of their presumed cultural background. Amartya Sen and Vertovec, however, have cautioned that even within a given culture, myriad subcultures exist that could be very different from the majority culture.³⁸ Moreover, a person’s cultural identity is seldom bound to a particular community, but is continuously produced and reproduced in transformative processes of cultural exchange. This understanding underlines the fact that an individual’s cultural identity is therefore more dynamic and difficult to classify than a national culture framework seems to assume. By emphasizing a strong connection between the individual and the national culture, Hofstede’s model runs the risk of trapping people in schematic formulations about cultural beliefs and practices.

A second limitation exists on the national level. An increase in mobility means that cultural communities are constantly being renewed and reshaped.³⁹ It is increasingly common for people from various cultural backgrounds to meet, confront, and interact with one another, which also effects the way that they understand themselves as part of a community. The conventional tendency to identify cultures as stable systems of practices, a tendency that Hofstede’s model embraces, is built on the premise that cultures can be described according to a more or less static essence. However, what is taken to be the essence of a culture is always *someone’s* values, norms, or practices, which, through the

35 Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values*, 10.

36 Samovar et al., *Communication between Cultures*, 36.

37 Samovar et al., *Communication between Cultures*, 36.

38 Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: Norton, 2006); Vertovec, *Transnationalism*.

39 Stephen May and Christine E. Sleeter, ed., *Critical Multiculturalism: Theory and Praxis* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

emergence of an “imagined community,”⁴⁰ are then projected onto others who may or may not share them. Claiming to define the essence of a culture always involves power, since some people set the premises while others are subsumed into the definition. Historically, this process is exemplified in what Edward Said describes as “the Oriental discourse.”⁴¹ The Western understanding of the “Orient” was developed “by making statements about the Orient, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.”⁴² The West thus exercised its power by defining the “essence” of the Orient against a constructed image of itself. Another historical example is the Norwegian nation-building process of the 1850s, which aimed to construct the Norwegian nation against Danish and Swedish influences. To cultivate a vision of true “Norwegianness,” the authorities gave schools a key role in promoting and implementing a national cultural “essence” constructed from a selected set of motifs. However, the cultural identities of several groups, such as the Sami, were never considered a part of this common national culture.⁴³ It therefore appears that a national culture framework is not able to recognize cultural complexity within and across groups and societies. Cultural traditions and communities are constantly evolving, and are much more interrelated and hybrid than Hofstede’s model is able to express.

Third, Hofstede’s national culture model inevitably constructs difference as a hindrance to meaningful interaction. According to Hofstede, a business deal can easily fall apart due to cultural misunderstandings.⁴⁴ To succeed in a highly competitive world market, one must navigate the turbulent waters of cultural difference. Within such a perspective, cultural diversity is seen as a problem or an obstacle that prevents the progression of cooperation and partnerships. Though the connection may be unintentional, this view aligns with discourses of deficit in the media and elsewhere. Such discourses send a negative message to people with minority cultural backgrounds or who speak minority languages, by claiming that their cultural, religious, and linguistic resources are hindrances to integration. Communities and groups are positioned as “problems” that need to be solved. Those who represent a difference from the mainstream are seen as culturally, linguistically, and socially deprived and

40 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

41 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 2003 [1978]), 3.

42 Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

43 Thor Ola Engen, “The Recognition of Students’ Origin in Liquid Times,” in *Origins: A Sustainable Concept in Education*, ed. Hanna Ragnarsdóttir and Fred Dervin (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014), 87–100.

44 Hofstede, et al., *Cultures and Organizations*.

in need of repair.⁴⁵ The national culture model can be viewed as compensating for this perspective, in that it seeks to classify so-called “deficiencies” in order to smooth the rough and bumpy road to cross-cultural understanding. If differences are perceived as barriers to effective communication, the national culture model supposedly provides a tool for businesspeople, researchers, and teachers with which to circumvent these obstacles. Hence, the national model seems to reduce cultural interaction to an exercise of controlling and predicting differences, which dismantles “human interpersonal interactions into a mechanistic set of laws.”⁴⁶

Despite the critique discussed above, however, proponents of a national culture model could argue that the model acknowledges the cultural change and hybridization taking place as globalization continues to influence different national cultures. For Hofstede, for example, the difference between national cultures is in itself an indication of cultural change, as national cultures have developed and continue to expand and evolve in interaction with each other.⁴⁷ From this perspective, the model does acknowledge the significance of cultural traditions for understanding people, as it predicts problems or potential misunderstandings that may arise when people with different cultural backgrounds come into contact. Moreover, it follows that the model accounts for the fact that globalization has an impact on cultures; according to Hofstede’s logic, this makes attempts to decipher cultural codes an important and ongoing process. In this regard, it is likely that advocates of the national culture model would oppose my critiques here.

Nevertheless, I still believe that there are grounds to argue that a national culture model is not the most appropriate way of approaching cross-cultural studies in this era of change. Transformations in the relationships between individuals, culture, and society make it difficult to see people as representatives of certain cultures and communities. Claiming the existence of a national “mental programming”⁴⁸ or specific deep cultural traits that characterize a nation presupposes a problematic conception of culture that reinforces borders and risks trapping people within a narrow understanding of cultural identity. For migrant students, for example, being identified with a certain cultural background may be problematic as it can reproduce stereotypes and stigmatization, create a so-called “us versus them” mentality, and ultimately prevent students from reaching their full potential. On this basis, there is good

45 Colin Baker and Wayne E. Wright, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 6th ed. (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Multilingual Matters, 2017), 397.

46 Nynäs, “Interpretative Models of Estrangement and Identification,” 24.

47 Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values*.

48 Hofstede et al., *Cultures and Organizations*, 5.

reason to seek an alternative way to approach cultural interaction and so avoid classifying cultural behavior. The following section does just that: Drawing on Welsch's work on cultural transformation and dynamics,⁴⁹ I discuss how a transcultural understanding of cultural interaction may form a critical alternative to Hofstede's model.

Transculturality: An alternative approach

The intermingling of human cultures through international migration and diaspora is not a new phenomenon. In the European context, for example, the historical narratives of migration within the Roman Empire under the Pax Romana, the Jewish diaspora in the Jewish-Roman War of AD 66–73, and the flight of the French Huguenots in the early modern period offer important perspectives for contemporary movement. Nevertheless, increasing processes of globalization and changing patterns of mobility are bringing cultures and people closer to each other than ever before. Multinational corporations sell to consumers all over the world, while technology, money, and labor travel ever more swiftly across national borders, bringing people into contact with each other in new ways. Different biographies, practices, ideas, and beliefs meet and interact, making societies highly culturally complex.

Welsch, too, found that conventional concepts of single cultures, including the national culture model, are no longer suited to their object.⁵⁰ Rather, he argues, we need a concept that accounts for hybridity and change, or, as he puts it, “a new conceptualization of culture.”⁵¹ Welsch therefore developed a concept that may be helpful when reflecting on new ways of approaching cross-cultural studies. He called this new perspective “transculturality” and advocated for a transcultural lens to be applied to both the macro and micro levels of cross-cultural analysis.⁵² At the macro level, cultural communities are extremely interconnected and entangled. Interactions and the exchange of ideas, products, and materials across borders generate what Welsch characterized as a state of hybridity,⁵³ or what Ulf Hannerz has described as “creole”⁵⁴ cultures. This exchange implies that, at the macro-level, culture is characterized by a dynamic interplay among variables, including ethnic, linguistic, and religious

49 Welsch, “Transculturality”; Welsch, *Transkulturalität*.

50 Welsch, “Transculturality”; Welsch, *Transkulturalität*.

51 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 59.

52 Welsch, “Transculturality”; Welsch, *Transkulturalität*.

53 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 68.

54 Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991).

backgrounds, as well as socioeconomic status. A transcultural perspective thus highlights inner differentiation as well as the “mixtures, fusions, synergies and exchange processes” taking place between different cultures.⁵⁵ Unlike essentialist models, it does not fall into the trap of overlooking the extent of internal diversity within cultures,⁵⁶ nor does it attempt to locate the “essence” of a cultural community. Instead, it captures how cultural ideas and practices interact, travel, and become recontextualized in new settings.

Similarly, at the micro level, cultural identity is dynamic and embedded in ongoing processes of cultural negotiation and exchange.⁵⁷ With reference to Peter Berger et al., Welsch has suggested that life in the twenty-first century could be understood as “a migration through different social worlds and as the successive realization of a number of possible identities.”⁵⁸ Most people belong to many different cultures and see themselves as members of a variety of communities and groups.⁵⁹ As a result, cultural practices and life views are continuously developing and transforming as people from different backgrounds communicate and engage with each other. On this basis, Welsch argued that cultural identities are not categorically determined, but are rather relational and dynamic: existing, developing, and transforming within a changing social context.⁶⁰

As part of the Nordic research project “Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice—A Study of Successful Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries,” I arrived at a more nuanced and fuller understanding of the complex situations which many migrant students navigate. These situations are a result of the transcultural and super-diverse conditions of change in contemporary society. During the study, Joke Dewilde, one of the researchers, followed a group of students newly-arrived in an upper secondary school in east Norway.⁶¹ One of these students was Bahar, a 16-year-old girl who had moved to Norway as a teenager from Afghanistan

55 See also Sigurd Bergmann, “Transculturality and Tradition: Renewing the Continuous in Late Modernity,” *Studia Theologica* 58, no. 2 (2004): 140–156; 143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393380410012736>.

56 Welsch, “Transculturality”; Welsch, *Transkulturalität*.

57 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 71.

58 Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1974), 77.

59 Sen, *Identity and Violence*.

60 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 71.

61 Joke Dewilde and Thor-André Skrefsrud, “Including Alternative Stories in the Mainstream: How Transcultural Young People in Norway Perform Creative Cultural Resistance in and outside of School,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 20, no. 10 (2016): 1032–1042, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145263>.

and attended an upper secondary school in the southeast of Norway. Bahar used social networks such as Facebook on a daily basis and operated with different accounts, one for friends and one for family. In this way, she navigated between the roles of a “traditional” Muslim girl at home and a liberal young person on social networks. When talking with friends, she used Dari and Norwegian, as well as Standard English and English internet slang, challenging an understanding of languages as bounded and stable entities.⁶² Moreover, Bahar subscribed to several Facebook communities. One of these communities was for fans of “Afghanistan’s Next Top Model,” a show that parallels similar reality television shows in many countries. Another group, “Afghan Culture,” aimed to portray Afghanistan in a positive light by showing sides of the country seldom covered by traditional media.⁶³ It was clearly important to this young migrant girl to present and identify with alternative stories about Afghanistan. She used her cultural knowledge and insight to look beyond dominant media discourses in Norway, which present Afghanistan as a land at war, and position herself in relation to what can be seen as a more nuanced, complex, and multifaceted picture of cultural identity.

This example illustrates the increasingly complex and multidimensional decisions that many young migrant people face with regard to issues of identity, origin, and belonging. However, processes of globalization and cultural transformation will inevitably have different effects on individuals as well as within and between groups. As Welsch emphasizes, a shift to a transcultural perspective calls for analysis on both the macro and micro levels and indicates that different processes may operate at the same time. Some people may seek to reconstruct and restructure their identities both in relation and in contrast to categories such as Muslim or Afghan (such as in the example above). Others may rediscover and reinterpret traditional perspectives and practices, and in some cases even withdraw from mainstream society and retreat to segregated minority communities. According to Welsch, however, a transcultural awareness of global cultural flows and interdependencies helps us to interpret changes in ways that avoid the suggestion of boundedness and closed identities.⁶⁴ Welsch therefore argues that a transcultural model avoids the cultural essentialism that continues to haunt contemporary understandings of cultural differences.⁶⁵

62 Adrian Blackledge, Angela Creese, and Rachel Hu, “Protean Heritage, Everyday Superdiversity,” *Working Papers in Translation and Translanguaging*, paper 13 (Birmingham: Birmingham University, 2016), <https://tlang754703143.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/protean-heritage-everyday-superdiversity.pdf>.

63 Dewilde and Skrefsrud, “Including Alternative Stories.”

64 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 73.

65 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 61.

The characteristics of transculturality

By introducing the prefix trans- in “transculturality,” Welsch not only moved beyond conventional understandings of culture and nations as bounded autonomous systems, but emphasized the alteration and reconstruction of culture that takes place when cultures meet, which can be seen from the empirical example above.⁶⁶ From a transcultural perspective, culture is both transversal and transformative: transversal in the sense that cultures are becoming more and more cross-cultural, and transformative in the sense that they are constantly developing, restructuring, and changing.

Welsch thus set his transcultural perspective apart from the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturality, which he found to rely on the assumption that cultural communities are static, pure, and uniform.⁶⁷ Multiculturalism and interculturality are both well-intentioned contemporary attempts at understanding cross-cultural interaction. While the concept of multiculturalism aims to address the problems that arise when different cultures exist within the same society,⁶⁸ interculturality addresses interactions and communication between cultures.⁶⁹ Used in a descriptive sense, multiculturalism describes a society as a patchwork of different cultural communities living side by side; in the public discourse, multiculturalism includes a political argument for equality and equity between these different cultures. Interculturality, on the other hand, describes the exchanges and communication that take place between representatives of different cultures. Normatively, it encourages dialogue between cultures in order to promote social cohesion and prevent or avoid social conflict and instability.⁷⁰

Both concepts involve the idea that cultural communities exist in autonomous and distinct spheres. A transcultural perspective therefore asks to what extent these terms really do depart from conventional understandings, since they too tend to frame cultural identities within conventional discourses of essence, categorization, and control.

Similarly, from a transcultural perspective, cultural identity is not equivalent to national identity.⁷¹ In contrast to Hofstede’s claim that an individual’s cultural formation is determined by their nationality or national status, Welsch

66 Welsch, “Transculturality”; Welsch, *Transkulturalität*.

67 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 64.

68 Will Kymlicka, “Multicultural States and Intercultural Citizens,” *Theory and Research in Education* 1, no. 2 (2003): 147–169, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1477878503001002001>.

69 Nynäs, “Interpretative Models of Estrangement and Identification.”

70 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 66.

71 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 73.

argued that the individual also contributes to forming the context and creating society.⁷² In this way, community remains relevant when it comes to shaping a person's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and values, as the individual cannot be understood outside of this context. According to Welsch, this interaction between individual and context implies that cultural beliefs contribute to forming and defining a society, at the same time as the structure and substance of these cultural beliefs are shaped and influenced by the context in which they occur.

These parallel processes reject the notion that "someone who possesses a Japanese, Indian or a German passport must also culturally unequivocally be Japanese, an Indian or a German."⁷³ Cultural identities extend beyond the borders of national cultures, which means that individuals transcend attempts to explain, predict, and determine their thinking and actions. In fact, Welsch notes, "the way of life for an economist, an academic or a journalist is no longer German or French, but rather European or global in tone."⁷⁴ At the same time, transcultural identities involve "a side of local affiliation,"⁷⁵ which indicates the significance that context has for understanding cultural identity. Despite critically questioning the relation between cultural identity and national affinity, a transcultural framework therefore remains sensitive to the significance of the contexts within which individuals think and act. As the following section will show, Welsch's transcultural perspective positions itself against theories of cultural hybridization that tend to deny the important roles context, local affiliation, and cultural traditions play for people across the world.⁷⁶

A critique of hybridization and universalism

Theories of hybridity often describe a person as someone who picks up various cultural influences without any commitments or affinity to the original context from which these elements are derived.⁷⁷ The individual's identity is thus multiple, with frequent and often non-synchronous shifts, placing the hybrid identity within what Homi Bhabha described as "the third space" or "in-

72 Welsch, "Transculturality," 73.

73 Welsch, "Transculturality," 73.

74 Welsch, "Transculturality," 68.

75 Welsch, "Transculturality," 84.

76 Welsch, "Transculturality," 74.

77 Albert R. Lillie and Mariela Páez, "Cultural Hybridity," in *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education*, ed. James A. Banks (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 522–523.

between.”⁷⁸ However, as Stephen May and Christine E. Sleeter have pointed out, this approach to identity is problematic.⁷⁹ Not only does it presuppose the existence of the same boundaries that it purports not to exist, but it also runs the risk of disregarding the fact that people living in a globalized world often do identify with specific historical, cultural, and linguistic communities. Theories of hybridization tend to be neoliberal in their approach and thus are only representative of those with stable economies and sheltered lives.⁸⁰ As Jonathan Friedman has explained, particular groups often self-identify as culturally hybrid; this is not necessarily an ethnographic observation, but rather a claim to cosmopolitanism and a sanctioned form of cultural mixing.⁸¹ In turn, this self-imposed definition becomes a “definition for others via the forces of socialization inherent in the structures of power that such groups occupy: intellectuals close to the media; the media intelligentsia itself; in a certain sense, all those who can afford a cosmopolitan identity.”⁸²

The answer from Welsch would thus be that a transcultural framework is able to cover global and local as well as universalistic and particularistic aspects. The logic of transcultural processes allows the transcultural framework to do this quite naturally, since it acknowledges the mutability of cultures on both the macro and micro level.⁸³ From a transcultural perspective, the individual’s need for cultural roots and belonging is not discharged; rather, tradition is seen as dynamic.

Welsch and Hofstede would however agree that cultural universalism undermines perspectives that recognize power and domination. In an educational context, for example, when a curriculum aimed at the dominant culture is taken for granted, school success may be reduced for those students who represent a difference to the cultural majority. Presenting universal standards as “natural” and “neutral” without taking into account their contextual foundation contributes to mask forms of domination and relations of power that are “elusive, unrecognized, taken for granted, and therefore all

78 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

79 May and Sleeter, *Critical Multiculturalism*.

80 May and Sleeter, *Critical Multiculturalism*.

81 Jonathan Friedman, “Global Crises, the Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans versus Locals, Ethnic and Nationals in an Era of De-hegemonisation,” in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 1997), 70–89.

82 Friedman, “Global Crises,” 81.

83 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 84.

the more powerful and uncontested.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the transcultural model diverges considerably from Hofstede’s national culture model with regard to how universalism is understood and applied.

While Hofstede’s model seeks to pinpoint specific cultural traits and characteristics within the borders of different national communities, a transcultural perspective sees this exercise as simply another form of cultural universalism. According to Welsch, “nations are not something given but are invented and often forcibly established.”⁸⁵ Thus, “folk-bound definitions are highly imaginary and fictional; they must laboriously be brought to prevail against historical evidence of intermingling.”⁸⁶ From a transcultural perspective, Hofstede’s national culture model appears to function as an instrument of power. Hofstede’s model reduces people to a product of their national affiliation, which implies seizing and transforming them “by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their choosing.”⁸⁷ The idea that people can be predicted, understood, and explained through their nationality suggests an internal homogenization that simultaneously excludes those who do not fit neatly within this category.⁸⁸ Welsch’s transcultural framework offers an alternative approach, in that it emphasizes the dynamic and hybrid aspects of culture.

A transcultural approach to the classroom

Across the world, many schools are experiencing an increase in cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity in the classroom, causing new challenges for educators. Many new migrant students have highly complex cultural backgrounds. As migrant routes often pass through various states and territories, with long and formative stays in the countries of transit, their country of affiliation may not necessarily be their country of birth, and their mother tongue is not necessarily the language in which they are most proficient. Teachers must acknowledge and recognize the complex backgrounds of children and young people without relying on simplistic assumptions and cultural stereotypes, and must also ensure their curriculum is free of such assumptions. Teaching in diverse schools also requires the skills to allow students to use their

84 Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner, *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 571.

85 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 62.

86 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 62.

87 Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15.

88 Welsch, “Transculturality,” 63.

previous knowledge and competences in a way that empowers both the student and the learning community as a whole.⁸⁹

Welsch's transcultural model encourages teachers to embrace the freedom and autonomy of students in ways that recognize each student's wide range of cultural and linguistic expertise, rather than impose restrictions on their identities. In contrast to a static conception of cultural identity, in which a student's complex experiences would be reduced to a single category, the transcultural model encourages teachers to take the intricate life stories of their students seriously. Regardless of whether they are first, second, or third generation migrants, it is of critical importance that the identities of migrant students are not restricted to their nation of origin or the cultural backgrounds of their parents or grandparents. By affirming the complexity of students' backgrounds, teachers may enhance the students' sense of belonging and contribute to boosting their academic achievement.⁹⁰ Hence, the transcultural model not only serves as a critique of pedagogical practices and discourses that essentialize cultural backgrounds and treat them as a set of practices that can be described, labeled, and taught; Welsch's work may also inspire teachers to find creative ways of exploring a wider understanding of what it means to be Norwegian, for example. It leads us to examine who "is allowed" to call themselves Norwegian. Welsch's transcultural model may thus lay the foundation for a learning environment that prevents stereotypes from developing and allows students to explore the dynamics and complexity of cultural identity, including negotiations of national belonging and participation.

Training teachers to adopt a transcultural perspective should better equip them to address cultural conflicts among their students. A transcultural approach to teaching should involve critically questioning how and why minority backgrounds are so often undervalued in society. Those who differ from the mainstream are often conceptualized within a discourse of deficit, meaning that cultural variation is constructed as a problem, something that should be removed or repaired in order to enter the mainstream classroom.⁹¹ A transcultural model, however, allows for a more nuanced intervention than is permitted by a national culture model. Teachers are encouraged not to explain conflicts away based on cultural differences, for example through categorical statements such as "that is just how it is with foreigners." By applying a transcultural model, teachers may help students to see how their

89 Jim Cummins and Margaret Early, *Identity Texts: The Collaborative Creation of Power in Multilingual Schools* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 2011); May and Sleeter, *Critical Multiculturalism*.

90 Cummins and Early, *Identity Texts: The Collaborative Creation of Power in Multilingual Schools*.

91 Baker and Wright, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.

biographies overlap and intertwine in society, and how conflicts also relate to other dimensions such as class and socioeconomic status. Teachers trained in a transcultural approach should be able to challenge the idea that some backgrounds are supposedly beneficial to the classroom while others are considered to be hindrances. A transcultural approach to teaching should involve critically questioning how and why minority backgrounds are so often undervalued.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have critically examined Hofstede's influential national culture model, arguing that the model overlooks the dynamic character of cultural interaction. Against this background, I have presented Welsch's work on transculturality as a convincing alternative framework within which to map cultural interactions.⁹² Furthermore, I have imagined the ways in which such a framework could be beneficial when applied to a pedagogical context and argued for its adoption in the classroom. While the national model relies on the classification of cultures and seeks to explain an individual's behavior by analyzing values, beliefs, and attitudes on a national level, a transcultural framework emphasizes culture as a dynamic process. From a transcultural perspective, a person's identity is rarely bound to one particular group or community, but rather reflects a range of communities of which the person is part.⁹³ Moreover, human beings are uniquely self-reflective and self-defining, producing and reproducing identity in transformative processes of cultural interaction and exchange.⁹⁴ Thus, the transcultural framework acknowledges that cultural identities are dynamic and that these identities refuse categorization on both the individual and the social level.⁹⁵

Consequently, a transcultural framework underlines the critiques that deem the national culture model as out-of-date and deterministic. As the paper has shown, a national culture model aims to investigate, discover, and establish an understanding of the cultural other, a project that results in objectifying the other and controlling them through knowledge. Hence, a national culture model could be accused of promoting a positivistic project: that is, a project that, if properly implemented, promises to predict, explain, and control the

92 Welsch, "Transculturality"; Welsch, *Transkulturalität*.

93 Sen, *Identity and Violence*.

94 Nynäs, "Interpretative Models of Estrangement and Identification."

95 Welsch, "Transculturality."

other.⁹⁶ Critically, one could therefore object to a national culture model on the basis that it risks embracing negative stereotypes that encapsulate and label other people in a way that traps them within predefined conceptions and understandings. In light of this critique, a national culture model is not only ethically problematic but dated, in the sense that it does not sufficiently take cultural exchange and complexity into account.

From this perspective, a transcultural framework provides a necessary contribution to cross-cultural research. A transcultural approach may help researchers to conduct a more precise analysis that better corresponds to the cultural intersections that most people experience in their everyday life. This includes a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of the relation between tradition, national culture, and the individual. A transcultural frame of reference does not devalue culture, tradition, or geographic affiliation; rather, it pays attention to what may happen across and within these planes. Furthermore, a transcultural approach may help teachers to become more sensitive to the complex cultural backgrounds of their students, encouraging them to look past stereotypes and to recognize each child as a culturally complex individual. Teachers who adopt a transcultural perspective should develop a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of the relationships between tradition, national culture, and the individual.⁹⁷ This, in turn, may be helpful for students, as they will no longer be identified with a predetermined background that may put restrictions on who they are and what they are capable of achieving in the classroom. When teachers build a transcultural capacity to recognize instances of stereotyping and prejudice, they may help students to see themselves in the curriculum and believe that their competencies matter in the classroom community.⁹⁸ By adopting a transcultural model within a pedagogical context, teachers can enhance students' sense of belonging and validate their potential for academic success. Hopefully, critical scholarship within cross-cultural studies will make increased use of this transcultural framework to recognize cultural complexity, and this in turn will contribute to the reduction of prejudice, categorizations, and stereotyping.

96 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, 1996), 203–235.

97 Heidi A. Smith, "Transculturality in Higher Education," *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in Social Sciences* 13, no. 3 (2020): 41–60, <https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2020.130304>.

98 Niranjana Casinader, "Transnational Learning Experiences and Teacher Transcultural Capacity: The Impact on Professional Practice—A Comparative Study of Three Australian Schools," *Intercultural Education* 29, no. 2 (2018): 258–280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2018.1430284>.